

Brief theoretical framework: Tales, Identities and Detachment toward Democracy

Introduction

Across the globe, democracy is in a state of malaise (Graham and Svobik, 2020; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Wuttke et al., 2020). As König, Siewert, and Ackermann (2022, 2016) have recently pointed out, “there are signs of increasing fatigue and widespread superficial adherence to democratic norms and principles as well as democratic backsliding in various countries”. Illiberal and anti-pluralist ideas are now spreading throughout many polities, and this is having an impact on the level of support for and satisfaction with democracy (García-Rivero, 2023, p. 3-4). In the mid- 1990s, a majority of citizens in countries for which there were time-series data—from North America to the Middle East—were satisfied with the performance of their democracies. However, since then, the share of individuals who are “dissatisfied” with democracy has risen by around 10% points, from 47.9 to 57.5% (Foa et al., 2020). The rise in democratic dissatisfaction has been especially sharp since 2005: the proportion of “dissatisfied” citizens has risen by almost one-fifth of the population.

This process is not limited to just a decrease in the standard indicator of satisfaction with democracy. In addition to this indicator, there are other indicators of the erosion of the legitimacy of democracy that accompany what has been called “democratic fatigue” (e.g., García-Rivero 2023). Thus, dissatisfaction with democracy, along with other expressions of discomfort with democracy such as tolerance for democratic backsliding (Gessler and Wunsch, 2023), support for authoritarian forms of rule such as a strong leader (Donovan, 2021) and support for populist parties (Wegscheider et al., 2023), seem to characterize different countries around the world. Regarding the consequences for the stability of democracies as a political regime, exploring the foundations of such democratic malaise at public opinion level is a central challenge for political science.

Latin America has not been an exception in this matter. In our region, along with the increase in dissatisfaction with democracy, democratic fatigue also seems to be expressed in growing support for authoritarianism, support for executive aggrandizement, support for populist alternatives, tolerance to democratic backsliding, and growing violent social mobilization.

As in other regions, several factors seem to be the causes of democratic fatigue in Latin America, from economic mismanagement to certain narratives about politics. The temporal sequence between a contractionary decade with neoliberal policies (i.e., 1990s) during the so-called “Washington Consensus” followed by an

expansive decade as a result of the so-called “Commodity Boom” (i.e., 2000s) that coincided with the coming to power of populist governments seems to be the economic bases of the populist supply and demand in the region.

Consequently, such economic cycles would be at the origins of the demand for populist political options: To the extent that the coming to power of populist governments coincided with the commodities boom (*La década ganada* according to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner), their policies were based on strong redistribution of income and consequently were supported by broad popular sectors. However, more difficult to explain is the link between this process and the increasing disengagement with democracy. After all, populist leaders who came to power did so through elections. In that sense, a certain narrative of populism—and the polarization that it seems to produce—could be the missing link between economic cycles and populism in the region. In this vein, populist rhetoric—defined here as a narrative characterized by a Manichean cosmology that divides the political community between a “people,” conceived as a homogeneously virtuous entity, and an “elite,” conceived as a homogeneously corrupt entity (e.g., Mudde, 2004)—together with the mentioned economic cycles, could have activated discontent with democracy.

In addition, certain new identity policies —incipient in Latin America but with a long presence in other countries and regions (e.g., *Le France Profonde*, the “American people” in US, the “Hungarian heartland”)— make up the discursive mechanisms that also could potentially incite dissatisfaction with democracy. In this vein, an emerging narrative linked to different forms of identity in topics such as religion, immigration, ethnicity, or gender orientations —that accentuate belonging to a group over those ideas specific to liberal democracy on universal individual rights—, seems to deepen the pre-existing divisive cleavages in Latin American societies. Populist rhetoric and so-called “identity politics” seem to share a common trait: they constitute narratives that present the relationships between different types of actors along multiple dimensions as a zero-sum game. The result is a growing polarization that ignores the very legitimacy of different actors and a deep malaise with democracy itself.

Democratic fatigue: a brief account

At this point, it’s needed a conceptual distinction between the notions of *democratic fatigue* and *democratic crisis*. *democratic fatigue* refers to a process that occurs at the level of public opinion: the drops in satisfaction with and support for democracy are its main indicators—although support for a populist party (Wegscheider et al., 2023) and tolerance for democratic backsliding (Wunsch and Gessler, 2023) are others. A *democratic crisis*, analytically different, is a phenomenon that occurs at the level of institutions: the weakening of the independence of the judiciary or the attack on the Congress are indicators of a democratic crisis. Both phenomena

can be causally related, although analytically they are different. Ultimately, the relationship or lack thereof between the two is an empirical problem.

With a focus on democratic fatigue—rather than on democratic crisis (sometimes called “de-democratization”, “democratic failure” or “democratic backsliding”)—, a fundamental question of this research agenda is about the causes of the decline in satisfaction with and support for democracy. With that primary query in mind, the contributions to this special issue explore some of the possible answers to the question about the causes of the democratic fatigue. Within this broad thematic mandate, the articles here focus on questions regarding the relationship between populist narrative, polarization, and democratic fatigue. Although the papers collected in this special issue refer to Latin America, the responses found for our region aim to contribute to comparative politics. In this introduction we briefly summarize some of the clues to address the important problem of democracy fatigue. The objective is not to propose an exhaustive answer but only to expose some of the potential avenues for research into this phenomenon that characterizes a good part of contemporary politics not only in our region but throughout the world.

Having said that, however, it is evident that answering the question about the causes of democratic fatigue is a complex challenge that clearly does not end in exploring its links with populism and polarization. In this research agenda, it does not seem possible to exclude hypotheses that frame democratic fatigue as an outcome of different social crises (such as *El Estallido Social* in Chile). Another avenue for research is the question of how democratic fatigue interacts with the emerging environment of misinformation and social media. For example, when explaining democratic fatigue, we cannot fail to take into account the use of artificial intelligence mechanisms and the management of social networks as a growing means of building a political career (Alcántara, 2023). Related to the previous point, another promising path to studying democratic fatigue could emerge from the study of expectations. Access to greater information about the lifestyle available in other parts of the world (and in the societies to which one belongs) seems to have influenced what citizens demand from politics. Fatigue with democracy could come from increasing expectations that people today—through new technologies—have of politics.

Populist storytelling

A more comprehensive understanding of populism and its effect on democratic fatigue should concentrate on studying the stories that populist leaders employ to appeal to both their constituents and a wider audience (Aslanidis, 2016; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; Halikiopoulou, 2019; Moffitt, 2016; Sarsfield and Abuchanab, 2022; Taş, 2020, p. 218). Populist politicians “tell stories to make claims, enlist support, and defuse opposition” (Taş, 2020, p. 140). Storytelling, in the case of populist leaders, contributes to the development of a perceived body of evidence

that enhances the public credibility of the thin ideology of populism, focused on the Manichean opposition between a “pure people” and a “corrupt elite.” Because it is crucial to ensure that the connection between populist storytelling and the everyday experiences of voters “does not become too artificial” (Nordensvard and Ketola, 2021, p. 5), populist leaders deliberately utilize stories that resonate with the lives of ordinary individuals.

Roughly speaking, storytelling involves creating narratives that “simplify complexity, selectively appropriating characters and events” (Nordensvard and Ketola 2021, p. 4), which are presented as having a causal and temporal relationship with each other (Ewick and Silbey, 1995). There is evidence in the psychological literature that shows the central role stories play in assisting individuals in comprehending their social and political world (Bruner, 1991; Hase, 2021, p. 686; Koschorke, 2018; McAdams, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1988). Storytelling, in this sense, is a “sensemaking tool” that “does not simply consist in adding episodes to one another,” but “also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events” (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018, p. 128). Thus, “[a]cts of storytelling are therefore highly effective in making sense of complex events and facts” (Nordensvard and Ketola, 2021, p. 5), providing certainty to individuals who are confronted with the ambiguous and unclear nature of politics. The power of storytelling lies in its ability to assist individuals in navigating ambiguity and making sense of it (Stenmark, 2015, p. 931).

Consequently, storytelling has a cognitive effect by addressing uncertainty through the use of a clear and believable narrative. This narrative helps individuals understand the complexities of the social, economic, and political aspects of the world. Stories about policies, in particular, influence voters because these stories create cognitive shortcuts that help citizens navigate the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in politics.

What characterizes populist storytelling specifically is its selective recounting of past events and characters. This construction of a sequential order helps audiences make sense of given events, not primarily in causal terms, but rather in moral terms (Monroe, 1996; Taş, 2020). Populist storytelling is primarily focused on drawing moral distinctions rather than presenting factual information. Even more, populist storytelling, as a sort of narrative, is to some extent detached from events (Hase, 2021, p. 786; Koschorke, 2018, p. 7–9 and 202). Although populist storytelling draws on factual events, it is primarily a “moral story with a clear sense of right and wrong, where the actors are located on one side or the other” of different political issues (Nordensvard and Ketola, 2021, p.14). Thus, through this power of moral “meaning-making and simplification (...) contemporary populist leaders gain adherents” (Taş, 2020, p. 130).

Populist storytelling not only appeals to moral absolutes, but also taps into emotions. Its purpose is to emotionally connect citizens with complex policy issues, thereby generating political involvement with populist leaders that may not have otherwise occurred (Rico et al., 2017; Salmela and Von Scheve, 2017). Therefore, the affective drivers underlying populist storytelling highlight its im-

mense power (Skonieczny, 2018). By evoking strong emotions like anger and fear, populist storytelling challenges, weakens, and undermines the existing cognitive and normative frameworks through which citizens comprehend political events (Bronk and Jacoby, 2020).

Polarization

There are different definitions of polarization in political science. The meaning of the concept has become a subject of debate with the rise of research on polarization in recent years. The expansion of polarization processes in different regions of the world and the inherent multidimensionality of the phenomenon (Roberts, 2022) have led to a proliferation of alternative forms or types of the concept. For example, there are several examples of polarization “with adjectives” (Roberts et al., 2023), such as social polarization (McCoy and Rahman, 2016), populist polarization (Enyedi, 2016), affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012), and pernicious polarization (McCoy and Somer, 2018). When these different definitions of the concept are examined, the lack of consensus and the multidimensional nature of polarization become evident.

Within the extensive conceptual debate surrounding polarization, the concepts of affective polarization and ideological polarization play a crucial role in how polarization is understood in the literature. Ideological polarization focuses on the spatial distance in policies preferences between parties or voters (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Roberts, 2022), while affective polarization refers to the level of mutual animosity between these groups. In other words, affective polarization measures the extent to which political or social groups view each other as disliked out-groups (Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012; Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Levendusky, 2009), to the point where one group may not consider the other as legitimate actors within the democratic arena (McCoy and Rahman, 2016).

The definition of affective polarization most commonly used is derived from the classic concept of social distance (Bogardus, 1947). According to this definition, affective polarization involves not only having positive feelings towards one’s own group, but also harboring negative sentiments towards individuals who identify with opposing groups (Iyengar et al., p. 406)

Brief presentation of the papers

The articles included in this special issue consist of two comparative studies on Latin America (the first one by Mona Lyne, Tayla Ingles, Celeste Beesley, Annie Ackerman, and Darren Hawkins; and the second one by Sergio Rivera Magos and González Pureco), as well as two case studies focusing on El Salvador (by Luis Ernesto Montaña Sánchez) and Mexico (by Adalberto López Robles). Regarding

the comparative articles, it is interesting to note that while Rivera Magos and González Pureco study the presence of populism and affective polarization in the political communication of five Latin American presidents, the work of Lyne et al. is interested, in a different -and original way-, in “how populism operates among bureaucrats, a set of actors with a crucial role in democratic governance.”

Hence, on the one hand, Lyne et al. examine the relationship between attitudes about each dimension of populism separately (i.e., anti-elitism, pro-people orientation, and Manicheanism) and satisfaction with and support for democracy among Latin American bureaucrats. Following recent scholarship, which has found that populists are dissatisfied with democracy, they find that “those scoring high on underlying dimensions of populism rate the quality of democracy lower but are not less satisfied with the system in their countries”. In addition, this work finds that “those with pro-people attitudes consistently support democracy, including checks on the executive” and that “those with a Manichean outlook, in contrast, are less supportive of democracy and favor increased executive powers”. Lyne et al. conclude that “these complexities suggest the need for more research on the relationship between attitudes about populism and democracy.”

On the other hand, Rivera Magos and González Pureco conducted a study on the communication styles of five Latin American political leaders, who are often referred to as populists. These leaders include Alberto Fernández from Argentina, Luis Arce from Bolivia, Gustavo Petro from Colombia, Nayib Bukele from El Salvador, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador from Mexico. The researchers found that there is a consistent and significant presence of populism in the communication of these leaders. This is characterized by their frequent references to the “virtuous people” and the “general will,” as well as their repeated use of the dichotomy between the “people” and the “elite.”

Likewise, the authors find “that misinformation is an important characteristic in the communication of these leaders, representing more than 50% of their content.” This disinformation “includes the use of misleading content, false connections, and hate speech, which are often used to validate and spread false information that supports the populist narrative,” as well as appeals to “polarization” (...) “characterized by the constant use of terms such as ‘them’ and ‘us,’ as well as the expression of political emotions such as justice, joy, or anger.”

Presenting the first case study of the special issue and analyzing the speech of the president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, on the social network Twitter (X), based on qualitative analysis techniques, the work of Luis Ernesto Montaña Sánchez finds that “the president exhibits populist traits, with strong authoritarian tendencies,” reaching the conclusion that such discourse, along with the “new governments in Central America,” contributes to democratic fatigue, which “may represent a setback for democracy in the region.”

In the same vein, the work of Adalberto López Robles analyzes the use of Twitter (X) by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 2,673 publications by the president. The objective of the work is,

as the author points out, “to contribute to the conceptualization and measurement of the phenomenon based on data obtained from social networks.” His findings suggest that AMLO’s narrative manifests a populist character in three key aspects: “people-centrism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty”.

The articles collected in this volume provide a complete and complex panorama of the links between the populist narrative, polarization, and the fatigue of democracy. Populism and polarization do not seem to coexist well with satisfaction and support for democracy in Latin America. At the very foundations of the so-called democratic fatigue are narratives such as those analyzed in this special issue and the polarization they produce. Although more research is needed, the articles in this volume provide an overview that will guide future studies. The health of democracy in our region depends on it.

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