

Laboratories for institutional change: electoral systems and their reforms in Latin America

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Abstract

This article maps electoral reforms in Latin America as a laboratory for institutional change, examining the electoral systems of 18 countries between 1977 and 2025. The study proposes a multidimensional perspective that overcomes the limitations of the restrictive classic definition of an electoral system, incorporating dimensions such as affirmative action for gender representation, candidate selection, political financing, and direct democracy mechanisms. The study identifies a “reformist hyperactivism” in countries such as Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, contrasting with more stable countries such as Uruguay and Paraguay. The study discusses seven reform agendas in the region, including: increased presidential inclusiveness, personalization of executive power, more proportional legislative systems, transformation of the voter-party relationship, representation of excluded groups, expansion of citizen rights, and greater state intervention in financing. It also reveals a fundamental tension between institutional stability and democratic adaptability, where reforms can both democratize and serve as instruments of political manipulation. The paper concludes that the quality of the reform process determines its effects: participatory and well-founded reforms strengthen democracy, while short-term strategic changes weaken it. The research proposes greater citizen participation, rigorous impact assessment, and basic consensus on reform principles as key elements for improving these processes.

Keywords: Electoral reforms, multidimensional electoral systems, Democratization, Institutional stability, Latin America

I. Introduction¹

Latin America has become a laboratory of institutional change for those who study democracy from a legal or political science perspective. When changes are promoted in various aspects of electoral systems, “electoral reforms” are implemented. These modifications can be proposed by an executive branch—which enjoys the legitimacy of legislative majorities—by a coalition of partisan actors—seeking to maximize their preferences—or by social movements demanding legal transformations to expand rights. Various studies have identified the gaps in knowledge on the subject, the factors that explain its functioning, and the consequences of these changes on political stability (Freidenberg & Došek, 2016a and 2016b; Colomer 2004).

Despite significant reformist activism in the region, the study of electoral systems and their reforms has been scarce. Unlike European countries, which present themselves as quite conservative in their electoral systems (Lijphart, 1995; Katz, 2005; Gallagher and Mitchell, 2005; Rahat, 2011; Norris,

1. This article is a part of the research carried out within the framework of the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America. It belongs to the Research Group on Electoral Reforms in Latin America and is part of the research project “Building Effective Political Reforms in Latin America” [DGPO Registration No.: 101976], directed by Dr. Flavia Freidenberg.

2011; Freidenberg and Došek, 2016a), Latin American political elites have been active in modifying the conditions under which power is accessed, maintained, and/or exercised. The constant changes to electoral systems also raise fundamental questions about the nature of democratic stability. Are electoral reforms a sign of institutional vitality and adaptability, or do they rather reveal a worrying instability that weakens institutional strength? Are these reforms genuine instruments for democratization or, instead, tools of strategic manipulation in the hands of political elites? How has this connection between democratic stability and institutional reforms emerged in Latin American countries, and what lessons have they taught us? Despite the progress made in recent decades in the knowledge of the electoral systems and their reforms, several of these questions remain unanswered in comparative literature.

The objective is to systematize the research conducted on electoral systems in comparative politics and discuss some of the questions that underlie this research agenda, drawing on different approaches to electoral systems, their reforms, and their effects on democratic stability. The strategy for defining the electoral system will be key to delimiting the object of study and identifying the dimensions to be considered, as well as the reforms considered relevant to explore. This means that, despite the relevant research conducted to date on electoral systems and their reforms, there are still conceptual controversies regarding the attributes and dimensions that define a change in the electoral system, and there is also no consensus regarding when a change is significant and when it is not (Freidenberg & Došek, 2016b).²

The central argument is that the countries of the region constitute a unique laboratory of democratic experimentation through constant electoral reforms, but this reformist dynamic presents a fundamental paradox: while it can democratize and improve political representation, it can also weaken institutional stability when it becomes a tool for strategic manipulation. Reforms need to be addressed from a multidimensional approach, going beyond the classical restrictive definitions that were developed for stable European contexts. The empirical evidence comes mainly from the databases elaborated by the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America on 19 Latin American countries between 1977 and 2025.³

The article is divided into five parts. First, there is a conceptual discussion on what is understood by electoral system and what the distinctions are to identify reforms to the regulatory system. Second, it examines the main theoretical and methodological challenges of studying electoral systems and their reforms. Third, it proposes an extension of the concept of an electoral system toward a multidimensional perspective. Fourth, the reformist trends in Latin America and their implications for institutional strength are analyzed. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for strengthening this research agenda are presented.

II. Theoretical and methodological discussion

The literature on electoral systems and their reforms has experienced a notable conceptual and methodological evolution in recent decades. The pioneering work of Douglas Rae, Dieter Nohlen, Rein Taagepera, Pippa Norris, Giovanni Sartori, and Arend Lijphart established the theoretical foundations for understanding electoral systems, defining their core components and their effects on representation and political competition. This classical European tradition, however, assumed relatively stable electoral systems, where reforms were exceptional events rather than recurring practices.

This field of research on electoral systems has also experienced notable academic consolidation in recent decades in Latin America, characterized by the development of increasingly sophisticated methodological approaches and the construction of comprehensive longitudinal databases (Došek *et al.*, 2024; Armendariz *et al.*, 2023; Freidenberg *et al.*, 2022; Marengo, 2009; Wills-Otero and Pérez-

2. Comparative work on electoral reforms in Latin America has increased significantly in recent decades. Notable among others are those of Thompson (2015); Negretto (2010); Marengo (2009); Remmer (2008); Zovatto and Orozco Henríquez (2008) and Nohlen (2007).

3. From the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America, a democratic innovation project of the Organization of American States and the Institute of Legal Research of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, we have been studying these changes in a comparative manner for ten years, as well as their consequences on the functioning of political systems. We have explored the origins, motivations, contents, causes and effects of electoral reforms, being able to record at least 297 changes in eleven dimensions of legal and/or constitutional rules in 19 Latin American countries from 1977 to 2025 [see Observatory of Electoral Reforms in Latin America Database].

Liñan, 2005). This contemporary research distinguishes itself from the classic tradition of studies on the region's electoral systems by its capacity to overcome the conceptual and empirical limitations that characterized most previous studies, abandoning the parochialism of case studies and thus adopting comparative approaches that integrate both synchronic and diachronic analyses.

The studies still face several challenges that limit our capacity to generate robust causal knowledge, mid-range theories and reliable theoretical generalizations. This is further compounded in contexts where countries are constantly changing the rules, given that theoretical assumptions were made based on the experience of naturally stable European systems, from which we have sought to observe the reality of newly democratizing countries (for a critical discussion, see Leyenaar and Hazan, 2011).

The challenges are not merely technical. They reflect deep epistemological tensions on how to study institutional change in complex contexts — and even with a significant presence and social acceptance of informal institutionalization — and on the consequences that these reforms have on the dynamics of the political system. Hence, at least four crucial issues can be identified: a) the conceptual problem, b) causal identification, c) tensions in methods, and d) problems of temporality and long-term effects.

The conceptual problem

The conceptual and operational discussion of electoral system reforms in democratizing countries has challenged many of the classic assumptions of European and Anglo-Saxon studies. The development of Latin American electoral studies has shown that reforms can be every day, strategic and multidimensional phenomena, which has made it necessary to rethink both the conceptual frameworks and the methodological approaches for their analysis (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016a and 2016b; Leyenaar and Hazan, 2011). The decision on the concept is not a minor one. Depending on the definition used, the evaluation of an electoral system will change (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016a and 2016b).

Formal rules are defined as the standards and procedures that restrict, condition and facilitate the behavior of politicians and the electorate in a system (North, 1990; O'Donnell, 1996). In contrast to informal rules, these are written in documents that have legal validity, grant legitimacy to the system and are usually respected by the actors or strategically employed when trying to harm the political adversary (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016a). The expectations that these reforms generate in different dimensions, processes and dynamics of political systems mean that political elites trust in the capacity of formal rules to regulate the incentives and behaviors of political actors (Freidenberg, 2022). This idea is rather naive because — as evidenced in law and comparative politics — there is a strong distance between what the rule says (the formal) and what happens in political practice (Saba, 2016; Helmke and Levitsky, 2014).

The definition of electoral system — which is usually considered “broad” — contributed significantly to the delimitation of a shifting field, but it also generated some dependence on those visions in the evaluations of electoral systems in other regions. This first meaning of electoral system as: “the set of electoral laws and the skills that people employ when using them” (Taagepera, 2007, p.678) treats these processes in a vague and ambiguous way, which represents a barrier in the understanding of electoral systems and their reforms. In a context such as the European one, where reform is the exception, since the foundational rules are considered quasi-stony.

To overcome these limitations, a new, more operative and strict definition was sought, which considers the electoral system as the rules (electoral formula) for converting votes into seats (Norris, 1995). In this more limited conceptualization, the components of the electoral system are clearly specified, and five key dimensions are included: the electoral formula, the voting structure, the district size, the legal barrier and the ballot structure (Bowler, 2006; Reynolds *et al*, 2006; Lijphart 1995). While this made the definition gain specificity, it also limited the number of changes that are considered significant. For example, Lijphart (1995) argued that any reform referred to the change of the elements of the electoral system in an operational sense (the five basic dimensions) and, therefore, anything that did not have to do with it was left out.

The literature has not yet established which are the central elements that should be included in the concepts of electoral system and electoral reform for an adequate delimitation of the same. Moreover, many research studies on electoral reforms find it difficult to define the electoral system and, in some

cases, do not even mention it explicitly (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016b). The problem lies in delimiting which are elements of electoral systems, and which are elements of other electoral laws (electoral regime). In this line, in recent years, based on the experience of recently democratized countries, Freidenberg and Došek (2016a and 2016b) discussed the classical view of the definition of electoral systems, seeking to incorporate a whole range of dimensions that used to be excluded from the concept of electoral system, but without which it would be very difficult to understand political competition.

Changes considered “minor” or “technical”, which in a traditional view are not usually considered, can be central to be able to identify what happens in the electoral scenario (Leyenaar and Hazan, 2011; Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011; Celis *et al.*, 2011). These types of reforms can have important consequences on the distribution of incentives, which impact the behavior of the actors, or on the dynamics of inter-party competition. For example, the change in the rules for creating parties (Ecuador), the introduction of Open Primaries (Argentina) and the incorporation of gender quotas and parity on political representation (Mexico) are two concrete dimensions that are not incorporated in the classic definition of electoral system, but that turn out to be key for the functioning (and our understanding) of the political system.⁴

The issue of causal identification

The causal identification of the effects of electoral reforms also faces complex methodological problems. The endogeneity problem is particularly acute: electoral reforms rarely occur randomly; they are usually driven by specific political actors in response to configurations of power and opportunity. This endogeneity complicates any attempt to identify causal effects. Reforms often occur in contexts of broader political change, where there are also multiple institutional, social and economic transformations that overlap temporally. Isolating the specific effects of changes in these contextual factors requires sophisticated identification strategies that often exceed the possibilities of available research designs.

Moreover, the heterogeneity of the effects presents an additional challenge. The effects of seemingly similar reforms, promoted by different countries, or by the same country at different times, can vary dramatically across contexts due to cultural, partisan, party system or socioeconomic differences. This contextual heterogeneity limits the possibility of robust causal generalizations and complicates replication and external validation efforts. This has also made opportunities to generate mid-range theories, which facilitate a better understanding of the functioning of electoral systems in comparative perspective, not arise as quickly.

There are also causal inference issues in contexts of multiple reforms. Many countries often push for “reform packages,” in which multiple institutional changes occur simultaneously or sequentially. This complicates causal identification efforts, as the observed effects may result from complex interactions between different reforms rather than from the additive effects of individual changes. The challenge of pinpointing institutional interactions requires analytical frameworks that can capture synergistic, antagonistic, and threshold effects between different components of electoral systems. The effects of these interactions may be nonlinear and context-dependent, complicating both the prediction and explanation of reform outcomes.

Tensions between quantitative and qualitative methods

The field has experienced significant methodological tensions between quantitative and qualitative approaches, reflecting broader debates about the relative merits of different research strategies. Quantitative methods offer distinct advantages in terms of the capacity to generalize and identify statistical patterns but often require simplifications that can obscure the complex causal mechanisms through which electoral reforms operate. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, allow for deeper analyses of causal mechanisms and contextual dynamics, but face limitations in terms of generalization and systematic comparability. Developing mixed methods as a research strategy - combining the strengths of both approaches - represents an alternative opportunity to overcome these barriers. However, they require more case-specific knowledge and considerable methodological sophistication.

4. The 1994/1995 electoral reform on party registration led to a hyper-fragmentation of the party system in Ecuador, generating problems of coordination of political elites. The gradual introduction of quotas and gender parity in Mexico had a positive impact on the descriptive representation of women and generated other important changes, even increasing physical violence against female candidates, who became a “competitive threat” to male candidates (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016b). As for the Open and Simultaneous Primaries, their introduction in the Argentine case strengthened, on the one hand, the power of political party leaderships and, on the other hand, the rise of new political structures (Buquet and Gallo, 2024).

Transience issues and long-term effects

The temporal dimension of the effects of electoral reforms also presents methodological challenges. Many reforms have short-term effects that may differ substantially from their long-term effects. Affirmative action measures (such as quotas and gender parity), for example, may initially generate resistance, simulations and mechanical compliance due to legal enforceability, but transform political cultures, social expectations and the symbolic dimension of representation in the long run. This temporal dynamic requires longitudinal research designs, which are often complicated for a single team to carry out.

Long-term effects may be mediated by learning, adaptation and counter-adaptation processes by political actors, which are difficult to model and predict. Along these lines, the issue of electoral periodicity adds an additional complexity, since these effects may manifest themselves differently between electoral cycles and depending on factors such as the competitiveness of elections, political leadership, polarization, parties' adaptive strategies and changes in public opinion.

III. Expanding the concept of an electoral system: toward a multidimensional perspective

Recent theoretical developments have challenged the traditional, restrictive definition of an electoral system, limited to the five classic dimensions (electoral formula, voting structure, district magnitude, legal barrier, and ballot structure). The pioneering work of Jacobs and Leyenaar (2011) and Leyenaar and Hazan (2011) has convincingly argued that this conceptualization systematically underestimates the impact of changes in "peripheral" dimensions of the electoral system, without which the political process cannot be understood.

The proposal for an expanded multidimensional framework (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016b) included not only the core attributes and dimensions of an electoral system, but also aspects such as candidate selection procedures, mechanisms for including underrepresented groups (quotas and gender parity), and electoral administration systems, among others. This means defining electoral systems as part of the electoral regime (the integrative view between the operational definition and the inclusion of technical or minor changes) and electoral reform as a reform of the electoral regime. The multidimensional approach, then, suggests that electoral reforms should be understood as complex systemic interventions, where the effects of specific changes are mediated by the interactions between multiple institutional dimensions.

This interactive complexity partially explains why similar reforms can have different effects in different contexts, and why the effects of reforms frequently diverge from the expectations of their promoters (leaderships, parties, or coalitions). This conceptual expansion is not merely taxonomic; it has profound theoretical implications for understanding the causal mechanisms through which electoral reforms affect political behavior, institutions, and the dynamics of representation.⁵

The multidimensional view seeks to overcome the theoretical challenges and methodological, causal inference, data use and temporality measurement problems. These make investigating electoral systems and their reforms complex. This is necessary because of the high pace of reform of the elements of the electoral regime that accompany the heart of the system in countries in democratization processes (internal democracy, rights of underrepresented groups, non-partisan candidacies, among others). These reforms expand the rights of historically excluded sectors and involve including lenses of equality in the observation of political processes. Therefore, they require attention from comparative research.

IV. A critical assessment of Latin American reformism and its impact on democratic stability

Reform agendas in comparative perspective

Research on electoral systems and their reforms in Latin America has revealed differences in reform levels and reform agendas among Latin American countries. A specific group of issues have been the

5. The multidimensional perspective reveals that electoral reforms operate through multiple simultaneous causal channels. Changes in political financing, for example, not only alter the resources available to candidates, but also modify the incentive structures for coalition formation, levels of internal democracy, candidate selection or campaign strategies. Similarly, changes in registration procedures can have threshold effects that significantly alter the level of electoral competition, regardless of modifications in the electoral formula.

most reformed in the countries of the region regarding the political representation of underrepresented groups: party registration, voting structure, political financing and citizen participation mechanisms. While laws alone do not explain increases in political representation or the inclusion of new practices, this regulatory revolution in inclusion rights is an excellent example of the positive use of institutional change to deepen the democratization of political systems.

First, reforms aimed at expanding the rights of underrepresented groups, such as women, have been among the most active reforms (Freidenberg, 2020; Franceschet *et al.*, 2012; Jones, 2009). According to the databases of the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America (#ObservatorioReformas) 17 countries have carried out more than 45 reforms to the gender electoral system between 1991-2024. These reforms have had an impact on the levels of descriptive representation of women on a national legislative level, since the participation of women has increased from 9% to 35.8% in this period (ECLAC, 2025).⁶

Second, the rules that establish how parties obtain their registration have been another of the most reformed areas. Since 1978, 46 changes have been made to party registration rules in 17 countries. Two opposing directions can be identified for these reforms: one is aimed at defending parties as private entities (such as Brazil, Colombia and Peru) and the other emphasizes the State's role as regulator of their internal life. Another one of the most reformed areas has been the voting structure of the electoral systems for the Lower House. Under the assumption that opening the lists improved political representation and the link between voters and representatives, some countries changed their rules for organizing the vote (Ames, 1995). Between 1990 and 2025, 20 reforms were made to the voting mechanisms in 17 Latin American countries (Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America, 2024).⁷

Third, the political financing has been one of the most controversial issues of the last decades. Reforms have been predominantly oriented towards mixed models (Muñoz-Pogossian and Freidenberg, 2023). According to the databases of the Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America, out of 18 countries in the region, 15 have public financing mechanisms through which the State grants resources to political parties for their activities. Only Bolivia and Venezuela still have eminently private systems, while the rest have moved to mixed models (Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America, 2024). Private financing is allowed in all Latin American countries, but it is subject to certain regulations, which vary from country to country (Ferreira Rubio, 2004, p.45).

Finally, the incorporation of direct democracy mechanisms has been another one of the most reformed areas. During the period from 1978-2020, a total of 13 reforms in direct democracy mechanisms were registered in half of the countries in the region (Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America, 2024). The reformist agendas included different democratic innovation mechanisms - such as popular consultation, referendums or popular legislative initiatives -, seeking to deepen citizen inclusion in representative democracies. However, the results of these inclusions have not been altogether successful.

The seven agendas for institutional change in Latin America

The literature has focused on examining how variations in institutional design (electoral formulas, district size, nomination procedures) affect democratic outcomes such as proportionality, governance, vote personalization and party cohesion (Armendáriz *et al.*, 2023). Simultaneously, the consequences of different presidential election procedures (simple majority, ballot, parliamentary double round, reelection) on the legitimacy of mandates and governance have been addressed (Penfold *et al.*, 2014; Buquet, 2007), as well as how reforms to the gender electoral regime have transformed the descriptive representation of women (Freidenberg, 2020; Caminotti, 2015).

The evaluation carried out since 1977 shows that the cases are differentiated between hyperactive (Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Dominican Republic), moderate (Argentina, Bolivia, Panama, Costa Rica, Brazil, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Colombia) and passive (Uruguay, Paraguay) (Freidenberg *et al.*, 2022). The reforms happened because of different motivations. Some originated as responses to the demands for greater democratization, expansion of political and electoral rights, better

6. In addition, nine countries in the region have approved some form of gender parity in the registration of candidates for popular representation positions in general elections (Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina, Nicaragua and Peru) or only for internal elections (Honduras) (Observatory of Political Reforms in Latin America, 2024).

7. Half of these reforms incorporated modifications aimed at personalization by incorporating preferential voting (Brazil, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Peru), crossover voting (El Salvador) or open lists (Chile, Honduras). Despite this openness, and based on practical experience, some countries have begun a reverse path towards closing the voting structure (Ecuador), —re-approving closed and blocked lists (Gilas, 2020)— or, otherwise, returning to the preferential system (Peru).

representation conditions, professionalization of electoral governance, improved conditions for internal democracy and legitimacy of the political system. In other words, reforms can be responses from the system to improve its operation, enhance its legitimacy and contribute to greater inclusiveness of political systems.

Comparative experience helps identify at least seven institutional change agendas in Latin America (Freidenberg, 2022; Romero Ballivián, 2015; Orozco Henríquez, 2010; Marengo, 2009). The following are among these trends are: the search for greater inclusiveness in presidential elections, the increasing personalization of executive power, the drive towards more proportional and inclusive legislative systems, the transformation of the link between voters and political parties, the promotion of descriptive representation of historically excluded groups, the expansion of citizens' political rights and greater state intervention in political financing.

These transformations have produced ambivalent results in terms of democratic stability. On one hand, these reforms have democratized important aspects of political life, expanding the participation of women and other underrepresented groups, extending voting rights and improving the proportionality of representation. On the other hand, they have often served as instruments of competitive manipulation used by the elite to modify the rules of the game and maximize their chances of gaining access to power, often without genuine citizen consultation and without rigorous impact assessment.

Countries in the region have differences in terms of the number of approved reforms (Freidenberg *et al.*, 2022). The assessment on the changes made during the last decades allows sustaining that such changes do not have just one origin (Freidenberg and Mendoza Uribe, 2018). Most of them, but not all of them, have been a result of a strong bid between the political elite to control the rules of the game, depict their party-centered — even militant — vision on how the power must be distributed and how to maximize the benefits that implementing these new rules can have for their expectations on power. On other occasions, reforms have come from recommendations made by the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE, for the Spanish original), the academy or even by the social activism of citizens that sought to expand rights (for example, the “Direitas Ja” movement in the framework for transition to democracy in Brazil).

Beyond the origin and results, the anxiety to reform demonstrates that legal and constitutional formal rules matter (Freidenberg *et al.*, 2022). There is no single way to assess the results of these reforms. Some reforms have been detrimental to transformations already reached democracy-wise (such as the recent electoral reform in El Salvador or the one in Mexico) and some of them have even responded to the impulse of a leader — or a ruling coalition — to limit or restrict the dynamics of the competition in the party system.

This reformism has also had effects on institutional stability. The use of reforms as a political instrument has been evident in many of the hyperactive countries (such as Ecuador, Peru, Mexico or the Dominican Republic).⁸ In these countries, some of the elite trust their capacity to redesign the political conditions (as well as the incentives that the rules hide), complying with the mechanisms established in constitutional texts themselves to do so (when they have legislative majorities) and using this institutional tool. They do this because they believe these changes can benefit them, nobody would make a reform to hand over or lose power. Moreover, they discern that it gives the processes they promote a certain legitimacy.

In sum, most of the reformist processes in Latin America have been about the elite. Seldomly have citizens been consulted on the contents of these reforms. Sometimes, a referendum, has been used to consult public decisions that imply changes in electoral systems, such as in as in Ecuador, which held a Referendum on February 5, 2023. However, the people have hardly ever actively participated in the proposal, diagnosis and discussion of the contents of these reforms. This is a major issue.

8. The case in Ecuador represents this dynamic perfectly. Ecuador has modified the rule that governs the way legislative seats are assigned more than seven times, moving from the D'Hondt's system to Webster's system, then to the Quota method and finally going back to D'Hondt. Every change addressed more strategic calculations of the dominant political forces rather than the objective deficiencies of the previous system. Peru demonstrates another revealing case of reformist inconsistency. The country has suspended reforms that were already operating (like the open, simultaneous and compulsory primary elections - PASO, for the Spanish original) and has gone back on reforms that meant significant progress in terms of representation and inclusion (such as adopting blocked and closed lists). This regulatory volatility creates uncertainty between political actors and weakens democratic institutionalization. Mexico has experimented a process with contradictory reforms in which, paradoxically, the strength of some electoral institutions has coincided with attempts to weaken others. The recent proposal to reform the Mexican electoral system illustrates how reforms can become instruments of political confrontation rather than of institutional improvement.

The subnational dimension: an emerging agenda

The growing attention to subnational reforms and to the multilevel dynamics in Latin America reflect a change in the way institutional change is understood. This shift responds both to overcoming the national bias in studying electoral systems (Suárez-Cao and Freidenberg, 2014) and to a revision of the federalist approach that historically privileged federal states over unitary ones (Pino-Urbe and Došek, 2024; Suárez-Cao and Freidenberg, 2014). This change is also largely linked to the place decentralization and its counterpart, recentralization, have occupied as objects of dispute in the processes of transition or democratic opening in the region.

These institutional change dynamics affect the distribution of power and — by only observing them at one level — do not allow us to understand the entire system's functioning. Although it is still necessary to deepen our understanding of the logical processes that guide subnational political reforms, as well as their effects and interactions (Došek *et al.*, 2024), the growing interest in these processes reflects the importance that the territorial dimension has acquired for the functioning of democratic systems. Recent production on subnational electoral systems follows similar patterns to studies on national reforms and is organized along three main lines: (a) the descriptive study of subnational electoral systems, including reforms considered “minor” — such as quotas, gender parity or internal democracy processes (Freidenberg and Došek, 2016b), (b) the analysis of interactions between reforms at subnational and national levels, and (c) the assessment of the effects of these reforms on party systems, party dynamics and democratic quality (Došek *et al.*, 2024).

These lines of work have allowed observing that, far from being irrelevant or marginal, subnational reforms can have substantial effects on the configuration of local and national political systems. Reforms in the subnational area have led to relevant transformations: they have modified the type of partisan organizations that compete in elections (Peru, Ecuador, Costa Rica); they have broadened the political representation of women in subnational legislative and executive spaces (Mexico, Bolivia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru); they have limited re-election of local executives (Chile, Peru, Costa Rica and Ecuador); they have been tools in contexts of political violence (Mexico, Peru, Bolivia); they have made an impact on the representation of indigenous communities (Bolivia); and they have led to creating new elective positions (Chile, Uruguay, Peru) (Došek *et al.*, 2024).

These cases show how subnational reforms can anticipate, adapt to specific contexts or even create tensions for contradicting national reforms. Along this line, an aspect that requires greater attention is the existing gap between the reforms promoted from a national level and its effective implementation in the territories. An example of this is the reform of the Opposition Statute in Colombia where, despite its institutional design at a national level, its application faces significant political and administrative barriers on a subnational level, showing the challenges that the multilevel ruling poses for the democratic consolidation (Acuña *et al.*, 2020; Basset, *et al.*, 2022).

V. Conclusions between stability and change; the recommendations to actors and the agenda on future research

The study of electoral systems and its reforms reveals fundamental tensions on the nature of institutional change. The relationship between electoral reforms and institutional strength can imply a trade-off game. On one hand, the stability of the rules shows the level of strength of the institution (Levitsky and Murillo, 2010). On the other hand, their frequent and repeated change indicates the instability of the scenario in which politicians behave, the rotation, alternation or modification of political incentives, and hinders any attempt to institutionalize actors' behaviors, as well as limiting the ability of rules to take root.

The tension between institutional stability and capacity to adapt is cross-cutting throughout the debate on electoral reforms. While the stability of rules is a necessary condition for institutional strength and democratic predictability, excessive rigidity may prevent necessary improvements in the functioning of the system. For example, the political representation crisis that the Andean party systems faced in the 90's was —between other reasons— because of the difficulty to adapt in an anticipated manner the rules of the game to facilitate the introduction of new critical actors and avoid the anti-democratic discourse that later pressured the system (like in Venezuela or Bolivia).

At the other end, reformist hyperactivism — especially when carried out on the same dimension as the electoral system — stresses institutions and actors and raises serious questions about the institutional capacity of these institutional patterns and the possibility of generating predictable behaviors among political actors. This tension creates what could be called an optimal reform dilemma. What is the ideal

level of institutional change that maximizes both the system's adaptability and stability and how do you promote this critical point?

Knowing the level of change or, on the contrary, resistance, provides substantial information on the patterns of institutional change (Levitsky and Murillo, 2012). Both ends can be dangerous to democracy. An excessive rigidity can imply the system's inability to be reformed, be more inclusive and equal and to improve its political dynamics. By contrast, frenetically changing the rules of the game weakens institutions and can lead to a situation of "constant replacement" of actors and incentives (Levitsky and Murillo, 2012, p. 21).

The experiences of some Latin American countries in the past few decades show that the rules have not provided the certainty democracy requires. The strategic manipulation of the standards that establish how, in which way and who can compete (Ecuador, Peru, Dominican Republic), how voting in lists or through preferential votes works (Peru, Ecuador) or how votes are counted (Ecuador, Peru) has become in an opportunity for various actors to influence democratic functioning. These changes often imply a strategic manipulation of the rules for the particular benefit of one elite over another.

These behaviors have also favored uncertainty in the incentives and in the procedures that have been implemented in logistics, electoral governance and in inter-partisan competition. They have even been seen as a source of democratic erosion (Haggard and Kaufmann, 2021; Bermeo, 2016). While the results of elections have often been competitive and been certain, the rules that govern competition have demonstrated more uncertainty than certainty many other times.

Learning about this tension helps guide the agenda of future research, which is at a key moment to overcome methodological problems, based on new alternative strategies to overcome some of the limitations that institutional studies experience.⁹ The systematic implementation of impact assessments of the electoral systems, before and after the reforms, can improve both the quality of the decisions taken regarding said systems. This requires developing technical abilities in the legislative bodies and creating specialized institutions in electoral analysis that are shielded from manipulations from the parties or, in its case, protected for the strategic control between parties. The institutionalization of genuine popular participation mechanisms — beyond formal referendums — can also increase the legitimacy of the reforms and reduce the probability of changes in the future motivated by social dissatisfaction.

The difference in the results of the change processes of electoral systems lies in the quality of those processes: reforms driven by rigorous diagnoses, with genuine citizen participation and systematic impact evaluation, contribute to democratic strengthening. On the contrary, reforms motivated by short-term strategic calculations, implemented without citizen consultation and without evaluating effects, weaken democracy. The challenge is to strike a balance between institutional adaptability and democratic stability. This implies overcoming both the excessive rigidity that prevents necessary improvements, as well as the reformist hyperactivism that weakens institutionalization.

The research agenda on electoral systems and their reforms should continue evolving to offer more sophisticated conceptual and methodological tools to better understand these complex processes. The richness of the reform experience is a lesson in the need to regulate the timing of reforms, generate civic education strategies to explain the various proposals, and promote a more critical spirit (and comparative evaluations) regarding the advantages and disadvantages of each reform. These should be concrete exigences to incorporate in the demands and assessments the citizens, media and the academy make on the way elites change over and over the game rules of the region's democracy.

The commitment to strengthening democracy requires the relevant actors of the political ecosystem to assume specific responsibilities in building a more participatory, transparent and evidence-based reform processes. This is the only way electoral reforms can fulfill their potential as instruments of democratization, instead of becoming tools of political manipulation. First, the citizenry could take a more active role in the critical analysis of electoral systems and their reforms, demanding greater transparency in the processes of institutional change and participating actively and informedly in public deliberation spaces.¹⁰

9. For example, with respect to the problem of endogeneity, research designs could be developed that take advantage of exogenous variations, such as changes in the composition of constitutional courts, external economic crises, or international pressure. Additionally, for issues related to time, longitudinal designs that capture both short- and long-term effects could be implemented, using techniques such as interrupted time series analysis.

10. Although there are Open Parliaments (as in Mexico recently with the electoral reform promoted by the ruling party), the discussions are not usually considered, and much less the criticisms or results of the deliberations, in what is finally presented as a legal reform proposal.

Increased citizen control over reform processes has become an imperative of legitimacy for institutions. The “ citizen involvement ” of the processes is essential for the public to have more information about what the institutions mean and how the reforms may affect the institutions' functioning. Understanding the relevance of the electoral processes and the rules that govern it better can prevent citizens from voting for reforms that can decompose the representation or weaken the controlling institutions of a political system in the long run.

Second, the media could assume a more active role in explaining the functioning of the electoral system and identifying the implications of electoral reforms, beyond the superficial coverage of each political process. Academia could intensify research on the effects of electoral reforms, developing more sophisticated theoretical frameworks and methodologies to generate robust causal knowledge. Interdisciplinary collaboration can significantly enrich this research agenda.

Third, political institutions could implement more rigorous procedures to evaluate electoral systems and approve electoral reforms, including impact analyses, genuine citizen consultations and ex-post evaluation mechanisms. Creating specialized technical agencies can help partially depoliticize these processes. Fourth, international organizations could develop more specific standards on democratic electoral reform processes, including criteria on citizen participation, transparency and impact evaluation. Technical assistance should not focus only on the content of the reforms, but also on the quality of the processes.

Building basic consensus on the principles that should guide electoral reforms - transparency, participation, rigorous evaluation and gradualism — can contribute to improving the quality of these processes. Developing technical and institutional capacities to design, implement and evaluate reforms more sophisticatedly is equally important. The Latin American experience demonstrates that the absence of citizen dialogue and honest diagnoses on the functioning of the electoral systems and reform processes can have dramatic consequences on democratic stability. A better understanding of the relevance of both processes can prevent citizens from accepting reforms that weaken democracy in the long run.

The richness of the Latin American experience can teach other contexts about the need for multidimensional approaches to evaluate electoral systems and their reforms. It is also a lesson in the importance of managing the timing of reforms (as explicitly stated in Panamanian and Guatemalan law).¹¹ It also shows that the absence of citizen dialogue in reform processes has been a constant and that these processes tend to be strategic games between elites. In increasingly polarized contexts and with threats of democratic setbacks, constructive dialogues have been increasingly absent. This absence of knowledge, information and dialogue is an explosive formula for a democracy's functioning.

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DATABASES:

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3. SERIE LA NATURALEZA DE LO SIMPLE

Dibujo sobre tela de toldillo

Tríptico de 90 X 180cm (90 x 60cm c/u)

2024