

# **The Impact of the Proportional Electoral System on the Democratization of South American Countries**

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## **Abstract**

The paper discusses the impact of a proportional electoral system on the quality of democracy. In the paper, data was collected from Latin American countries in South America. The data of Polity 5, which is one of the most relevant and reliable sources, is used to determine the degree of democracy in the sample countries. The following study did not find a strong causal link between the degree of democracy and the proportional electoral system, although it is noticeable that the change of the electoral system was often accompanied by other democratic processes. This finding is significant in terms of that the electoral system can be an important indicator of democratization.

**Keywords:** Democratization, Electoral Systems, South America, Reforms, Proportional Electoral System;

## **Introduction**

Free and fair elections are the main mechanism for the political will of citizens. It is also the way to form at least two branches of government - the executive and the legislature. That is why elections always matter in every country. However, it is important not only whether citizens express their will or not, but also how they do it. Larry Diamond and Mark Plattner argue that electoral systems may not only determine public will or public policy within the state but also contribute to political stability or vice versa - create a conflicting, polarized environment (Diamond & Plattner, 2006, pp. IX). When talking about the purpose of elections, David Horowitz first focuses on the proportional distribution of representation (Diamond & Plattner, 2006, pp. X). To achieve that proportional electoral system is the best and most effective.

According to French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019, reforms in favour of a proportional electoral system would help consolidate representative democracy in the country (Becher, 2019). This view is not unfamiliar to researchers of electoral systems. In the Proportional Electoral System (PR), seats are distributed among the parties according to the proportional support received by the party on election day. In contrast, majoritarian electoral systems have several major challenges, most importantly, losing votes - even in the case of a simple majority or a qualified majority, it is likely that the will of almost half of voters (less than 50%) who supported a defeated candidate or candidates will not be heard. It is to this issue that Mary Inman addresses the fact that in the Anglo-American Majority Majoritarian Electoral System, the "winner-take-all" is the same as in the case of the qualified majority (Inman, 1993, p. 3), which creates a reality of losing votes.

In the case of proportional elections, the risk of losing votes is less likely because the qualified threshold is seldom so high that a large proportion of voter-backed parties are unable to cross the established margin and incur a massive loss of votes. Even so, the party that crosses the threshold does not experience a crisis of legitimacy, while the holder of a simple majority seat may soon face this problem - based on the election results, there may be at least half of the voters against him who oppose the candidate's political platform or legitimacy.

Another, but no less common problem of the majoritarian electoral system is the so-called Gerrymandering, which is to reduce, increase, and distribute constituencies in favour of

incumbents or a particular party (Vox, 2019). In the presence of proportional representation, this problem is solved by the fact that the votes received across the state or the federal level are evenly distributed among the representatives.

Electoral systems differ in their disadvantages and advantages, although it is important to consider the cultural factor as well. The Anglo-Saxon electoral system is traditionally majoritarian, while that of continental Europe is proportional or mixed (Kvashilava, 2016, p. 12). Consequently, it is important to consider the fact that the former colonies inherited the very systems that their former rulers had. It is important to highlight the second aspect - historically, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the world's most countries were largely majoritarian not proportional.

Arend Lijphart reaffirms various studies that the electoral system determines the structure of political parties, their strength, and the way in which government is formed. The bipartisan parliament mainly formed through a majoritarian system, while the proportional electoral system makes the existence of a multiparty parliament more real (Lijphart, 2006, pp. 73-74). The proportional electoral system developed within heterogeneous societies and between class struggles (Lijphart, 2006, pp. 75-76) - the socially lower class wanted more representation in order to effectively protect their interests, which the majoritarian system could not do. Consequently, societies in which there are many political and social divisions, the proportional electoral system not only provides proportional representation but also fairer, which contributes to the democratic development of the political system.

Lijphart's view on the advantage of the proportional electoral system is rejected by Quentin L. Quade, who observes the political processes in pre-Mussolini Italy, the Weimar Republic, and the Fourth French Republic. He argues that a proportional system creates political destabilization and often promotes extremism and does not lead to democratization (Quade, 2006, p. 94). Quade criticized Lijphart for his generalization and unambiguous conclusion based on his study of a specific geographical area - Scandinavia. This is why in any following study it is important to define and expand the area of study at the expense of those states that are geographically located in the same region but have switched to a proportional electoral system at different times. That is why the study of the states of South America, which experienced mainly Spanish and Portuguese colonization and, consequently, the assimilation of their political systems, is so important that each of them chooses a proportional electoral system at different times. Also, their democratic transition

varies significantly. The aim of the paper is to determine whether there is a connection between successful democratization and the transition to a proportional electoral system.

## **Methodology**

In order to establish the connection between the adoption of a proportional electoral system and democratization, it is necessary to carry out data analysis. To do this, we will use data from Polity 5, research that has been collecting data on existing regimes in independent states since the 1800s and reviewing steps towards democratization or authoritarianism from year to year. Polity 5, through its point system, sets out the following condition: States with a score of -10 to -6 are autocracies. Anocracies, or hybrid regimes transitioning from autocracies to democracies, are represented by scores ranging from -5 to +5, while +6 to +10 are reserved for democracies (PolityProject, n.d.). A very important score for the present study is -88, which means points that systemic changes are taking place. This does not reflect the face of the regime itself, but rather indicates the changes that are taking place in the political system of this or that state (Marshall, M. G., 2018, p. 21). The transition may take several years and further data may change towards autocracy or democracy.

This paper investigates the role and relationship of the proportional electoral system in Latin American countries to promoting democratization. To do this, we will single out every South American country, find out when they switched to a proportional electoral system, and then compare it to Polity 5 data. In addition to the examples of the individual country, we also consider domestic political processes in order to exclude the influence of other important political processes on regime change and electoral systems. And if we had other politically significant factors coinciding with the change in the electoral system, it is important to analyze and compare them with similar or identical changes in other South American countries.

It is also important to note that when comparing examples from Latin American countries, we do not consider Suriname and Guyana, as the former was a colony of the Netherlands and the latter the United Kingdom. Their discussion with the rest of the Latin American countries would be irrelevant from a cultural and political point of view.

However, the paper does not cover Panama either, as it is a transcontinental state on the one hand, and it has de facto long been a sphere of US political control on the other, and due to that domestic political processes was less independent. Therefore making the evaluation and analysis of the real political environment in Panama is irrelevant.

### **South America - Overview and Individual Cases**

The colonial heritage of South America significantly influenced the social and political development of individual countries. Because power was concentrated in one center semi-presidential and presidential governments and a mixed or majoritarian system hindered the development and democratization of political representation. Moreover, repeated military coups and regimes, as well as confrontations between the Socialists and the right-wing groups dramatically influenced not only domestic but also foreign policies. However, it is in the wake of these processes that electoral systems have changed in almost all South American states, some of which have evolved more rapidly, while others have relatively slowly transitioned to democratic or autocratic regimes. We review and compare all South American countries in the following research.

### **Argentina**

Argentina was a Spanish colony that, in addition to Spanish economic expansionism and the extraction of resources, was also distinguished by the slave trade. From 1810 to 1818, Argentina waged a war for independence and was able to gain it and also establish partial control over states such as Uruguay and Paraguay. Independence was followed by civil war. The two forces - the Centralists and the Confederates - opposed each other. The form of governing the state and redistributing power was a key problem in Argentina. Despite the victory of the Confederates, the country has chosen the institution of a strong president.

The Argentine Parliament - the National Congress - is bicameral. Like basically all former colonies that gained independence before 1899, the electoral system in Argentina was majoritarian from

1900 to 1962. In 1963, Argentina adopted a proportional electoral system (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 38).

Polity 5 data on Argentina's democratization and transition to a proportional electoral system is complex but significant. As a result of the 1963 presidential and parliamentary elections - which were held through a proportional system - Argentina was given 6 points, thus making it a democracy. Unfortunately, the data can not be limited by the time dimension, because in three years, in 1966, a military coup takes place, which overthrows the democratically elected government and establishes a dictatorship. In 1973, the military regime again replaces the democratically elected government, as a result of which Argentina regains 6 points and got back to the list of democracies. After that, in 1976-1982, Argentina was ruled by the military. These were troublesome years for democracy in the country. Only since 1983 has a democratically elected government finally returned in Argentina and Polity 5 then gives Argentina 8 points. As of today, it has 9 points.

Argentina switched to democracies for the first time since the transition to a proportional electoral system in 1963. The system is more transparent and representative. The latter is particularly noticeable because in 1963 the smaller parties were able to win more seats by a number of seats than in previous elections, and in the case of some parties were able to enter into the legislature for the first time (Nohlen, 2005, pp. 80-88). Despite several different military regimes, Argentina still manages to return to the principle of democratic representation, improve the rate of democracy, and reassess the damage caused by military regimes. All this, to some extent, can be attributed to the change of the electoral system and, consequently, the emergence of more different representations. In terms of democracy, Argentina is currently one of the leaders in Latin America.

## **Bolivia**

Bolivia was the first state to revolt against Spanish colonial rule in 1809. At the same time, this country is named after Simon Bolivar - a South American revolutionary and fighter for independence. Despite the country's initial successful attempts to gain independence, it still had long-standing foreign confrontations with neighbouring states, which also hindered the achievement of internal political stability. Bolivia had a semi-proportional electoral system until

1955, and a proportional electoral system from 1956 to 1966 (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 38). The country was ruled by Victor Paz Estenssoro from 1952-1956 and then from 1960-1964, who was a supporter of universal suffrage until he was overthrown by the junta on November 4, 1964. According to Polity 5, Bolivia had 4 points in 1952-1964 and was in the hybrid regime category. After the military coup, democratic elections in Bolivia were not held until 1985, so these data are insufficient to determine whether the transition to a proportional electoral system had a significant impact on the country's democratization process. It is noteworthy, however, that the introduction of the proportional electoral system took place after the reforms of Victor Paz Estenssoro and was marked by an exceptionally high, 85% turnout (Nohlen, 2005, p. 134).

## **Brazil**

The Portuguese colony of Brazil revolted in 1822 and gained independence within three years. Until 1889 there was a monarchy in the country, and then a republic. The latter was distinguished by the rule of the oligarchy until the rule of Getúlio Vargas, backed by the military in 1930-1945. Throughout this period, Brazil remains an autocracy and has a majoritarian electoral system. (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 38). Brazil has had a proportional electoral system since 1945 (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 38). After the 1945 elections, a multi-party parliament was formed in which no party was able to achieve even a simple majority (Nohlen, 2005, p. 190). Polity 5 Gives Brazil 7 points after the 1945 elections, but during this period the Cold War begins and the Soviet government tries to strengthen the Communist Party in Brazil, which is compounded by the confrontation between the left and right forces. Vargas returns to power in 1951 but commits suicide amid economic crisis and internal destabilization.

1945-1964 is a period of reforms, most of which was of an economic nature. The confrontation between left and right forces reached a critical point in the early 1960s. In 1963, the presidency became even stronger, and left-wing President João Goulart began to move closer to the Eastern bloc against US interests. This year, Polity 5 scores 3 points, indicating the existence of a hybrid regime compared to 7 points in 1945 and 6 points in 1958.

A military coup took place in Brazil in 1964, which lasted until 1985. From this year, democratic elections will be held again and the country will return 7 points and will be on the list of democratic countries.

It is important to note that the transition to a proportional electoral system in Brazil was followed by the creation of a multi-party representation.

The overthrow of military rule in 1945 and the introduction of democratic reforms were followed by a change in the electoral system, which contributed to the multiparty composition of the House of Representatives and the relatively high degree of democracy. The negative changes that existed before 1964 were related to significant foreign shifts, which were also reflected in domestic political processes. Accordingly, the case of Brazil is significant in that the proportional democratic elections of 1986 not only created a multi-party representation in the Brazilian legislature but also gave way to new parties (Nohlen, 2005, p. 194).

## **Chile**

Chile, which became independent in 1819 and relatively soon became a republic, switched to a proportional electoral system relatively early, in 1925. Even before that, Chile had a semi-proportional electoral system and a fairly strong parliament. Despite the transition to a proportional system, Chilean politics was chaotic, with several juntas and military coups taking place. All this makes the connection between proportional representation and the quality of democracy quite vague. That is why Polity 5 scores -88 points in 1925 and the following decade -3 points, indicating the destabilizing political environment in the country following the coups.

Chile has had a multi-party parliament in 1925, but instability was present as well as growing radical movements. An attempted coup d'état by the National Socialist Party of Chile in 1938 indicates the feeble institutions in the country and partial consent on the idea of one-party rule from the society.

Although Chile was multi-party even before the 1920s, the tendency for new parties to win seats in parliament became tangible since 1925. This period, despite political upheavals, was an important experience for developing political culture. Prior to 1958, Polity 5 gave Chile 2 points,



in 1958-1963, 5 points, and from 1963 to the 1973 military coup, 6 points, indicating that Chile became a democracy. This was a gradual and troublesome process.

While the transition to a proportional electoral system in Chile has not had an immediate effect on the country's politics, it has long contributed to the formation of a multi-party political space, which in turn is important for the existence of democratic processes. However, this analysis of the Chilean example is insufficient to establish a causal link between democracy and a proportional electoral system.

## **Colombia**

Colombia has a relatively complex history of political controversy and infighting. In the country in 1899-1902, there was a civil war between the left-wing Liberal Party and the right-wing Conservatives, and in the 1940s and 1950s the so-called "Violence Period" (La Violencia), the confrontation between them was violent and bloody.

In 1931, a proportional electoral system was introduced, which lasted until 1957. During 1904-1929 Polity 5 rated Colombia -5 points. From 1930 it gained 5 points, which the country maintained until 1948. Even though political destabilization was a widespread proportional system help to curb the chaos at first but since 1948, instability in Columbia has intensified and became violent (Nohlen, 2005, p. 294).

Colombia switched to a proportional electoral system for the second time in 1978. Since 1974, Polity 5 has rated it at 7 points, which it maintained until 1991. Consequently, the introduction of a proportional electoral system for the second time has not brought significant changes in favour of democratic processes.

## **Ecuador**

In the first half of the twentieth century, Ecuador's internal political processes were significantly related to foreign challenges, one of which was the war with Peru in 1941-42, during which Ecuador was not only defeated but also part of its territory temporarily occupied. President José María Velasco Ibarra has tried to carry out reforms to pull the country out of a political crisis. It

was in 1946 that Ecuador switched to a proportional electoral system (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 38), and the first proportional elections were held in 1947. Polity 5 scores Ecuador by 1 point in 1925-1947 and 1 point in 1948, which is noticeable progress, especially in the backdrop of political instability and war in the country.

## **Peru**

Peru is the most striking and sheer case between the relationship proportional electoral system and democracy. In 1963, Peru switched to a proportional electoral system (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 39) and held parliamentary elections. Until 1963, elections were held on a majoritarian system, however, the election results in 1962, annulled by the military intervention (Walter, 2010, pp. 17-18). Polity 5 is very clear in this case: It gives Peru -5 points in 1962 but gave 5 points in 1963-1968. This is significant progress that directly coincides with the 1963 introduction to the proportional electoral system.

## **Uruguay**

Uruguay is a small country located between two South American giants - Brazil and Argentina. Because of its political and economic development, Uruguay is even referred to as South American Switzerland (Goñi, 2016). Uruguay is one of the first countries in the world to use the proportional electoral system since 1918 (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 39). Beyond that, Uruguay is the least corrupt state in South America (Goñi, 2016). Liberal and democratic reforms in Uruguay were carried out during the presidency of José Batlle y Ordóñez (1903-1907 and 1911-1915) (Nohlen, 2005, p. 488), which has a significant impact on the formation of democratic traditions. Proportionally democratic elections were held in 1919 (Nohlen, 2005, p. 501). Polity 5 evaluates 1910-1918 with 2 points, and the next, in 1919 with 3 points, which is a small difference in favour of democracy, though quite early and therefore, quite important.

## **Venezuela**

Venezuela, which was a Spanish colony, declared independence in 1811, although until 1958 the country never had a stable democracy (Nohlen, 2005, p. 535). Polity 5 data rates period between 1938 and 1941 at -3 points - the highest score before 1958. Venezuela used a proportional electoral system year of 1946 to 1992 (Wills-Otero, 2009, p. 39). There was a military coup in the country in 1945, followed by the first democratic and proportional election held in 1947, in which the pro-democratic political party Acción Democrática won (Nohlen, 2005, p. 569). The period of party rule was the first occurrence when Venezuela sought to move to real democracy. This period is called El Trienio Adeco, but the attempt was unsuccessful and in 1948 the government was overthrown by a military coup.

Although Polity 5 does not score the year 1947 any different from previous or following years and gives the country -3 points, it is still important to note that this period is the beginning of democratic processes in Venezuela, which coincides with the imposition of a proportional electoral system.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the study was to find the existence of a causal link between the transition to a proportional electoral system and the process of democratization. The research data was collected from the Latin countries of South America. An analysis of these cases shows that changes in electoral systems in Latin American countries have not had a noticeable effect on democratization in all cases. It is true that except in Bolivia and Venezuela in all the cases we have reviewed and studied, the degree of democracy has increased in individual cases over the next four years after the establishment of the proportional electoral system, but alongside the imposition of the proportional electoral system, other democratic reforms or the replacement of military regimes or oligarchies were noticeable too. All of this indicating that in most cases the proportional electoral system was not a cause of democracy but a part of political change. Dates are also important: Democratic reforms and the transition to a proportional electoral system In the case of Venezuela, Uruguay, Ecuador, Paraguay and Brazil, coincides with global changes related to either the end of World War I and World War II or the collapse of the Soviet Union. All these cases have led to political and economic upheavals in the world. Of course, it does not rule out the possibility that the increase in representations and the proportional redistribution of seats in legislature may have

been a significant democratic impetus and even slightly increased the rate of democracy in South American countries, but its effect is still limited and less indicative of a strong causal link.

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