Political Culture and Democracy in Latin America: Perspectives on Brazil and Colombia

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Andressa Liegi Vieira Costa
Universidade de Lisboa
andressaliegi@hotmail.com

Abstract

There are a few common characteristics when we speak about Latin America. One of them is that the region still faces challenges to improve and strengthen its democracy, such as corruption, distrust in traditional institutions of politics, and political polarization. Since democracy is not just made of formal aspects, this paper analyzes the relationships between political culture and democracy in Brazil and Colombia — countries that show low levels of citizen participation and apathy about politics. We conducted an empirical analysis using the 2015 Latinobarometer database to understand how citizens perceive and act in their democratic systems, comparing both countries. The countries present similarities in their political cultures despite their different historical backgrounds, specifically periods of violence in Colombia and times of the interruption of democracy in Brazil.

Keywords: Brazil; Colombia; Democracy; Latin America; Political Culture

Resumo

Existem algumas características comuns quando falamos sobre a América Latina. Uma delas é que a região ainda enfrenta desafios para melhorar e fortalecer sua democracia, como a corrupção, a desconfiança nas instituições tradicionais de política e a polarização política. Como a democracia não é apenas formada por aspectos formais, o objetivo deste artigo é analisar as relações entre cultura política e democracia no Brasil e na Colômbia — países que mostram baixos níveis de participação cidadã e apatia pela política. Realizamos uma análise empírica usando o banco de dados Latinobarômetro 2015 para entender como os cidadãos percebem e agem em seus sistemas democráticos, comparando os dois países. Os países apresentam semelhanças em suas culturas políticas, apesar de suas diferentes origens históricas, especificamente períodos de violência na Colômbia e tempos de interrupção da democracia no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Brasil; Colômbia; Democracia; América Latina; Cultura Política
1. Introduction

Latin America faces several social and economic problems that restrain the full development and strength of democracy in the region, since the State is not able to solve conflicts through institutional and democratic channels — channels aggravated by problems such as social inequality and corruption. In this context, there is an emergence of patterns of low trust among individuals who do not participate or get involved in collective actions because of the general perception that political institutions do not work and lack social legitimacy (Baquero 2013; Bianchi, León, and Perini 2017). Considering the importance of individuals to politics, Almond and Verba (1963) work with the concept of political culture related to the orientations, postures, and attitudes of citizens regarding the political system — providing a basis for political behavior according to each historical context and political system (Pye 1965).

There is a gap between society and politics. Many citizens feel most political institutions (especially political parties) are illegitimate and do not promote the interests of the people; hence many people feel misrepresented (Bianchi, León, and Perini 2017). In the Latin American frame, we find Brazil and Colombia — countries with similar characteristics regarding political culture, though each has different historical contexts. Brazil shows high levels of institutional distrust and political skepticism as well as a hybrid political culture that values the more formal aspects of democracy (Baquero 2004; Baquero 2008). Colombia shows reduced political participation and elevated institutional distrust with partisan hostility (Ruiz 2012; Ruiz 2013; Ulloa 2015). Brazil’s political culture was influenced by a predominance of the private sphere rather than a public one; this results in strong social and political exclusion despite several non-democratic periods (Holanda 1995; Faoro 2001; Carvalho 2002). Colombia’s political culture is marked by the central role of the Catholic Church and a dichotomy of thought represented by bipartisanship, rivalry, and political intolerance (La Roche 1993; Bushnell 2004; Larosa and Mejía 2011).

Therefore, this paper aims to understand the patterns of political culture in Brazil and Colombia and to verify the relationship of the individuals and democracy. We will compare both countries, always positioning them in the Latin American frame. Thus, we will analyze the 2015 Latinobarometer database to empirically research how the elements of political culture and democracy appear in each society. This paper is divided into four
sections. First, we present the theoretical perspectives that guide this study. Next, we give the historical background for Brazil, Colombia, and Latin America. Third, we provide an empirical analysis of relevant data. In conclusion, we offer some final considerations and results. This study shows the importance of using history to analyze political culture and how it impacts the relationship (or potential relationship) between citizens and democracy.

2. Political Culture and Democracy

The concept of political culture emerged from the belief that people should be active in politics; political culture also refers to political orientations and postures as well as the attitudes associated with each person’s role in the political system (Almond and Verba 1963). Pye (1965) argues that each society presents its own patterns of actions, perceptions, and political behavior since individuals learn and accumulate knowledge and feelings towards politics according to the historical contexts of their communities. Every political system has a different political culture, considering that “[...] a political culture is the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the individuals who currently make up the system; and thus it is rooted equally in public events and private experiences” (Pye 1965: 8).

Therefore, political culture encompasses three different types of orientations: cognitive (related to knowledge and beliefs); affective (feelings); and evaluative (opinions and values) (Almond and Verba 1963). Political systems operate through inputs (political objects or society’s demands) and outputs (administrative objects or the conversion of those demands in policies) (Almond and Verba 1963). At the individual level, political culture provides the core to political behavior; when speaking collectively, it builds a structure of values and rationality to ensure institutional and organizational performances are coherent (Pye 1965). Political culture can be categorized as parochial, subject, or participative; according to this categorization, citizens therefore tend to be more indifferent, passive, or participative towards the political system (Almond and Verba 1963). Nevertheless, Almond and Verba (1963) cited civic culture as an ideal model of political culture based on loyalty to the political system and citizen participation, mixing traditional and modern elements. Hence, a civic society requires people with civic virtues to take an interest in public issues and politics, to become involved in civic associations, and to build relations of reciprocal tolerance based on cooperation and solidarity among individuals (Baquero 2004).
Contemporary studies (Inglehart 1977; Abramson and Inglehart 1994; Inglehart and Welzel 2009; Dalton and Welzel 2014) on political culture seek to understand how values have been changing in modern democracies. Researchers observed that as a result of modernization processes, citizens have been replacing the public loyalty presented on Almond and Verba’s civic culture with new values of more assertiveness and self-expression. These new values are related to greater economic security as well as better education and represent a shift from material to post-material values — which are likely to produce more critical citizens seeking political change, affecting their orientations towards politics and increasing demands for democracy. However, the support for democratic values is not an automatic consequence of better education levels since it also reflects specific historical conditions (Abramson and Inglehart 1994).

Civil society is a fundamental and legitimate component to protect society from the State’s authoritarian tendencies by promoting collaborative and cooperative relations and helping political institutions since “for its good performance, democratic regimes depend on citizens’ support” (Baquero 2013: 53). When democratic procedures are stable but not followed by social achievements, citizens tend to question the regime because of how past negative political experiences have impacted them (Baquero 2013).

3. Latin America in Perspective: The Case of Brazil and Colombia

To understand the Brazilian and Colombian cases, we will briefly depart from the Latin American context. Historically speaking, Latin America was strongly influenced by colonialism which promoted the eradication of people already present on their lands and also promoted the slave trade. Both the Portuguese and the Spanish introduced the Catholic religion, the concept of a mercantilist economy, and an absolutist State structure. The end of colonialism was characterized by the emergence of local oligarchies that controlled the main aspects of economy and politics in most countries in the region (Munck 2003).

In most of Latin America, politics used to be influenced by relationships of clientelism, which subordinated electoral politics to social obligations and in effect defined political behaviors. In authoritarian periods, the elections in most countries were characterized by corruption and fraud — hence individual voting did not have a real impact on poll results. People’s political participation, when motivated by patronage bonds, tend to
develop differently from those they participate in due to a sense of civic responsibility (Seligson and Booth 1976).

Latin America still copes with structural problems that cause uncertainties about the paths of democracy in the region. Socioeconomic conditions restrain conflict resolution through the democratic and institutional paths. Also, political polarization and the weakness of the partisan system have been increasing. The State has been facing difficulties in ensuring a good quality of life and the rule of law for its citizens, partially due to the impact of corruption (Baquero 2013).

“[…] in societies where the citizenship is absent, civil society is not integrated to society as a whole, and social inequalities increase together with social exclusion, democracy bails or can even lose its meaning. This kind of democracy turns to be characterized by permanent instability” (Baquero 2013: 41).

Social policies in Latin America have always been highly selective, representing a strategy of vertical integration to increase benefits to the part of the population whose rights are already ensured rather than expanding it horizontally — hence promoting clientelism and paternalism. Even in periods of prosperity, welfare policies in the region did not reduce social inequality (Burchardt 2010). It can be observed that social hierarchies cause people to accept a subordinate place regarding the State (Baquero 2013). Latin American democracies have been facing signals of fatigue since political institutions’ low levels of social legitimacy and the feeling of crisis permeates the application and concentration of political power (Bianchi, León, and Perini 2017).

Latin American countries have increasing climates of discontent because of the lack of social progress and government support by citizens as part of a “historic legacy of administrative inefficiency and corruption practices” (Baquero 2013: 38) and a lack of “strong democratic roots” (Baquero 2013: 40). There is a general perception that political institutions do not work, impacting citizens’ satisfaction with democracy. Given their heritage of a parochial political culture, people tend to tolerate certain political practices and abuses (Baquero 2013); this ensures the survival of authoritarian politics, which influence people’s perceptions about the role of political leadership as well as the relationships among citizens, governments, and political parties (Moisés 2008: 23).
3.1. The Brazilian Case

Following the general Latin American pattern, Brazil presents high levels of distrust towards the government and its representatives in addition to a negotiated solution of social problems. Democratic regimes coexist with oligarchical forces that strengthen social inequality and exclusion by favoring minorities in power, hence “political elites from the main parties are seen as corrupts, uninterested and dishonest, not working for the good of the country” (Baquero 2004: 175).

Brazil was colonized by Portugal as a purely commercial enterprise between the colonial government and some private parties (Carvalho 2002) in hopes of gaining easy profits, positions, and honor titles, resulting in social injustice (Holanda 1995). This colonization used land distribution for private exploration (a heritage from the feudal system) and gave public delegation of power to particular individuals while the power given to the public was restricted to vigilance and control (Faoro 2001; Duarte 1939). As a consequence, in the countryside landlords were the maximum authority, absorbing part of the State’s roles; this organization later extended to the cities. The patriarchal structure of the family served as a role model to politics, which would become paternalistic (Holanda 1995; Carvalho 2002).

Brazilian independence was pacific (unlike Spanish America), representing a negotiation process among Portugal, the national elite, and England (Carvalho 2002). Hence, it was not followed by the rise of a civic tradition since there was neither a political society nor citizens; most people were excluded from political and social rights and a sense of national belonging and pride was non-existent. Even when people could vote, most of them depended on landlords; consequently, there was pressure to vote a certain way, resulting in no real freedom in choosing a candidate (Carvalho 2002). Also, the Portuguese did not invest in cities’ infrastructure and education like the Spanish did. The Republic also did not change the political scenario and just followed the pattern of a State external from the individual who was an object of the State’s actions rather than someone capable of influence (Carvalho 1987).

During the First Brazilian Republic (1889-1930), some social claim to popular demands started to appear even if these were precarious and reticent (Iglésias 2006). Even though the working class was just starting to organize itself, that represented greater social
and political diversity. However, like in the colonial period, associations (mainly those of a religious nature) handled social rights (Carvalho 2002). The First Republic was marked by the prevalence of agriculture lords’ interests (mainly those of coffee producers), keeping regional balance uneven and national integration weak. The political parties promoted partisan contests over national union, so democracy was in appearance only — because representation was restrained by elements such as the falsification of votes (Fausto 1985).

In 1930, a revolution steered Getúlio Vargas to the presidency, leading to extensive social and political changes in Brazil followed by alternating dictatorships and democratic regimes from 1937 to 1945 (Carvalho 2002). Vargas used social control with a strong State and his charismatic leader image, consolidating a mass policy based on propaganda and nationalism. There was a shift of social issues to the State through “introducing a new political culture, which transformed citizenship in a piece of the power game” (Capelato 2003: 140). The first democratic experience was characterized by populism, implicating an ambiguous relationship with citizens in a dependency position towards the leaders; social rights were viewed as a gift in exchange of gratitude and loyalty, building a passive citizenship (Carvalho 2002).

The 1964 military coup d’état ended populism and suppressed political and civil rights (Fausto 1996). Nevertheless, the military governments repeated the strategy of expanding social rights despite eliminating the political and civil ones, hence “the Brazilian authoritarianism post-1930 had always looked to compensate the lack of political liberty with social paternalism” (Carvalho 2002: 190). Simultaneously, economic prosperity was flattering the urban middle class — compensating for the loss of political rights. The collapse of the military regime caused citizens’ participation in politics to reach new heights (Fausto 1985).

After indirect elections in 1985, the 1988 Constitution centered on assuring citizens’ rights (mainly social ones), expanding the right to vote, and institutionalizing mechanisms for direct popular participation on decision-making processes (particularly those concerning public policies). These measures were a chance to explore the potential to shift the political culture in the country, introducing new democratic values, better transparency, and social control to the State regarding public policies (Rocha 2008).
The first president elected by the people resigned after an impeachment process that had been initiated because of a lack of governability, unpopular measures to combat inflation, and corruption scandals (Carvalho 2002). The next president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), focused on social policies as a responsibility of the State with a liberal slant that became more developmentalist (Sallum Jr. 1999; Draibe 2003). The Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva government (2003-2010) restored the role of the State with a project of national development, resulting in better income distribution with social policy as the central axis (Pochmann 2011). However, the changes were not enough to handle the increased access to consumption, generating a reorganization of the workforce that became more heterogeneous and segmented and made collective actions more difficult. So, even after the promotion of social inclusion, the social structure was still conditioned by the economic and political order (Krein 2014). President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) was impeached in 2016 due the economic crisis in addition to breaking campaign promises to her electoral base; this caused increased public disapproval, aggravated by a strong media and middle class campaign against her party (the Workers’ Party/PT) (Anderson 2016).

Currently, Brazil faces a crisis of representation as the formal structures of democracy have not solved the problems of inequality and social exclusion (Luchmann 2007). The country presents a hybrid political culture, in which despite the discourse of solving problems through formal procedures, political institutions traditionally lack legitimacy and credibility because citizens do not believe their demands are being met. Democracy is not just made of formal elements; other important components such as a political culture that encourages citizens to act on institutional development rather than passively react to situations (Baquero 2008).

Even with some economic advances, inequality and exclusion generate negative attitudes from Brazilians. There are high levels of political skepticism resulting from dissatisfaction with democracy and distrust in institutions (Baquero 2008); once the political system is not attending to the citizens’ expectations, they do not perceive their rights of representation and participation as effective channels to fight problems such as corruption (Moisés 2008). Corruption, one of the main problems in the Brazilian political system, lessens people’s ability to trust both themselves and their government — key elements for a high-quality democracy. Corruption also leads citizens to deviate from the public sphere to focus on their own interests, diminishing collective actions (Power and Taylor 2011).
3.2. The Colombian Case

Electoral behavior in Colombia shows some characteristics of political culture as well as some of the elements that influence it. The legitimization of the political system was based on notions like democracy, electoral processes, and citizen participation. However, the process of constructing and consolidating a nation was originally marked by creating the central political parties: liberals and conservatives (Ruiz 2013). Although elections are still the main scenario of democracy, there is low voter turnout; this leads to gaps between elections, hence citizen participation in different channels is sporadic. Thus, initiatives of informal participation are criminalized because such participation poses a danger to the system’s stability — according to the major political parties and the media (Ruiz 2012). For decades, conservatives used political imaginaries associated with religious values and liberals were victims of stigmatization and moral condemnation (La Roche 1993).

Another trend worth noting is the personalization and deinstitutionalization of the system once citizens do not trust the political system. Therefore, there is a “low level of interest in political issues, a small rate of belonging in political organizations and movements, a high partisan hostility with little identification with ideologies or political frame” (Ruiz 2012: 421). Moreover, politics is usually associated with corruption and injustice — which also explain institutional distrust. The appreciation of democracy is strongly attached to historical variables that cannot be ignored. Therefore, the existing limitation of democracy to formal aspects is not negative once it represents a preservation of the stability of democracy. However, this lack of meaning makes it possible for candidates, parties, and opinion influencers to use the concept according their interests and convictions (Ruiz 2012).

Historically speaking, colonial Colombia was based on the Spanish establishing themselves as the dominant class. Another central characteristic was using the Catholic religion as a colonization mechanism once the Church “performed a role of mediation between the State, the Hispanic Society and the indigenous communities” (Ruiz 1976: 40), counting on a solid institutional base once its position could compete evenly with that of the State (Bushnell 2004).

Independence (formally granted in 1810 after several revolutions) was preceded by monarchy crises in Europe, Bourgeois Revolutions, local economic and demographic
growth, internal rivalries, and the lack of mass representation in the institutional structure. However, independence was not a unified movement due to strong senses of regionalism — this led to civil and regional wars between groups with distinct ideas for the new nation (Larosa and Mejía 2011; Bushnell 2004).

After independence, a strong dichotomy of thought resulted in the main ideological and political division in Colombia (liberals vs. conservatives) that exists in modern times (Jaramillo Uribe 1982). Despite a period of stability, Colombia’s lack of political unity, social and economic inequality, and no articulation among the regions made it impossible to truly build a nation. From 1886 to 1930 (after conflicts and some liberals’ attempts to diminish the power of the Catholic Church), Colombia was established a conservative hegemony (Bushnell 2004). This period — “The Regeneration” — granted the Church a central role in education and the regulation of collective life (La Roche 1993). Until the end of the 19th century, the standard of Colombian political life was the rivalry between liberals and conservatives, leading to several civil wars (Bushnell 2004). The Catholic Church (even nowadays) appears as one of the main actors on national life, given its centrality in the socialization processes of most Colombians. Its role was built on the hierarchical and authoritarian relations of the homogenization of values — condemning diversity (ideological, ethnic, cultural, etc.) (La Roche 1993).

The next period was the Liberal Republic (1930-1946), which advanced modernization and democratization. Populism was rising in Latin America, but it did not find space in Colombia due to the lack of political or discursive nationalism. The only populist candidate was killed before the election — even though he was the favorite. A conservative was elected, but the liberals did not recognize him as a legitimate governor. This led to “The Violence” period (1946-1957) marked by partisan rivalry, mainly in rural areas, which also led to the disarticulation of social movements. Then, the National Front — a partisan coalition between liberals and conservatives — appeared as a solution. Its creation caused those excluded to organize away from the traditional parties’ structure, resulting in insurgent groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELC) (Larosa and Mejía 2011).

In the 1980s, there was the first attempt to dialogue for peace with the insurgent groups; this stopped in 1985 when the April 19th Movement (M-19) took the Justice Palace.
The M-19 was an urban guerrilla movement that emerged after fraudulent elections in 1970. Also in 1985, the Patriotic Union (a party of convergent left-wing forces) was created. However, when the party became popular in elections, its members were systematically murdered — mainly by State agents and paramilitary forces; this was labeled genocide and lasted more than 20 years. The decade was also marked by the *narco*sm, mainly Pablo Escobar, when Colombia became the epicenter of drug exports in South America (Larosa and Mejía 2011).

Therefore, Colombia has a political culture traditionally marked by intolerance and violence, in a way that conflicts between State and guerrillas have polarized public opinion regarding democratic or authoritarian positions. Even if characterized by different political cultures due to regional distinctions, Colombia has a political tradition of bipartisanship, which was strengthened through electoral manipulation and clientelistic relations (La Roche 1993).

The complex conflict structure in Colombia was causing the United States to worry. Hence, in the 21st century the United States approved a help program (Plan Colombia) to help military forces to fight the insurgent and paramilitary groups. However, it was unsuccessful due to human rights violations, murders, and military scandals — resulting in serious economic and social consequences to Colombia. In 2010, Juan Manual Santos became the president of Colombia; he and his staff worked hard to take effective actions to solve the conflicts and achieve national reconciliation. In 2016, a peace accord was signed with FARC, leading to gradual advances in the problem (Larosa and Mejía 2011).

The period called “The Violence” (due to the political persecutions, murders, and aggressions that claimed thousands of people’s lives) was marked by a political intolerance that enhanced partisan divisions in the country. The bipartisan systems, because of its elitist visions of power, only enabled other sectors of society to access power and participation through illegal means (Ruiz 2013). The denial of political and social spaces had a lot of consequences — namely, increased inequality, cultural and religious exclusion, political persecution, poverty, colonialist mentalities, territorial isolation, industrial deficit, a poor public infrastructure and, the most critical, the war (Barrera 2016: 46). Even though the current Constitution (enacted in 1991) has expanded the citizenship, including groups that were once marginalized, it is still limited and often superseded by people with strong electoral
support due to economic or military power, individuals, or institutions (formal or informal) that attend to the population’s immediate needs. This way is a “[…] traditional political culture highlighting the charismatic influence, religious intervention, the low or null participation of society in the public debate and in issues of State” (Ulloa 2015: 6).

4. Data Analysis: Political Culture and Democracy in Brazil and Colombia

This section of the paper aims to empirically analyze aspects of political culture and democracy in Brazil and Colombia through data from the 2015 Latinobarometer database; the data was compared with Latin America’s patterns. The database showed 20,250 people between 16 and 98 years old in Latin America were surveyed. In Brazil, 1,250 people between 16 and 92 years old were polled. In Colombia, 1,200 people between 18 and 94 years old were studied. To start our empirical analysis, we first looked at the main characteristics of the sample for each unit of study: religion, education, and income.

Table 1: Religion (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Latin America</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh-Day Adventist</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afro-American Religions</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


n Latin America = 20,107 / n Brazil = 1,227 / n Colombia = 1,191

As the data shows, Brazil and Colombia, as in the case of Latin America as a whole, are mostly Catholic — following the religious tradition introduced in colonization by both the Spanish and the Portuguese that used the ideals of the Church as a basis to build societies. However, while in Brazil and Latin America there is a rise of the Evangelical religion (by about 20% in each location) and a greater distribution of people who do not believe in any
religion, the Catholic religion remains strong in Colombia — more than 75% follow it. As we previously stated, the Catholic Church has represented a mediating force among the diverse elements of society since the colonial period — even competing with the role of the State. The Church has always had a central role in the country, especially in conservative governments, acting in fundamental aspects of social life such as education (Bushnell 2004) as well as being an essential actor in national life and present in the socialization processes of most Colombians (La Roche 1993).

**Figure 1: Education (%)**


n Latin America = 20,250 / n Brazil = 1,250 / n Colombia = 1,200

Regarding education, we first note that several countries in Latin America, including Colombia, have technical education in their secondary/high school programs. Therefore, this answer applies to these two units of study and not to Brazil. Therefore, according to Figure 1, while Colombia presents a higher level of education in secondary (or technical) studies at 40% of those surveyed, 1.8% do not have any formal education. Brazil has 8.9% without any formal education and 30.8% with 12 years of study. However, in Brazil almost 10% of those surveyed completed higher education and about 9% attended higher education but did not complete it; in Colombia, these figures are 7.7% and 5.5% (respectively). In this sample, Brazil and Colombia are above the Latin American average in secondary education.
In regard to higher education, Brazil is slightly above the average while Colombia’s figure is similar to Latin America’s.

**Figure 2: Income (%)**

![Bar chart showing income distribution in Latin America, Brazil, and Colombia]


n Latin America = 20,250 / n Brasil = 1,250 / n Colombia = 1,200

In relation to the subject of income, we note that Brazil faces better conditions (see Figure 2). More than 20% are in a comfortable situation and can save money and almost 50% can cover their needs, compared to Colombia with 10% and 35% (respectively). Also, more than half of the Colombians interviewed said their income is not enough. Thus, Brazil is in a better situation in comparison to Latin America in general, while Colombia has lower averages than the region.

After seeing the main characteristics of the sample, we analyzed some aspects of its political culture. We started with the thoughts of those interviewed regarding the main problem of their respective countries — which relates to the evaluative sphere of political culture that refers to opinions and evaluations (Almond and Verba 1963).
Figure 3: – What’s the main problem in your country? (%)


n Latin America = 20,250 / n Brazil = 1,250 / n Colombia = 1,200

The main problem cited in Brazil was corruption — representing more than 20% of the answers. However, corruption was not often mentioned in Colombia (7.3%) or in Latin America (6.9%). Corruption is a concerning factor in Brazil because it has the ability to diminish interpersonal and institutional trust, deviate citizens from the public sphere, and reduce collective actions (Power and Taylor 2011). The second most-mentioned problem in Brazil was health at 17.4% in comparison with just 2.8% in Colombia and 3.8% in Latin America. Additional major problems reported in Brazil were public security (9%), the political crisis (8.9%), education (6%), and the economy (5.8%). Since the political system contains inputs and outputs (Almond and Verba 1963), it can be concluded that Brazilians are dissatisfied with the outputs of politics and the services provided by the State — pointing to a political system that does not meet citizens’ expectations (Moisés 2008).

For Colombia, unemployment is the central problem at 23.1%, in contrast to Brazil (5.9%) but close to what was reported in Latin America (17%). In Latin America, 24.1% said public security is the main problem. Violence is a serious problem in Colombia at 17%; this
can be explained by conflicts with armed groups (especially the FARC) and the country’s history of strong political persecution (Larosa and Mejía 2011).

Next, we will analyze citizens’ political understanding; this is related to the cognitive sphere of political culture — the knowledge of the political system (Almond and Verba 1963).

**Table 2: Understanding of politics: “Which statement is closer to the way you think?”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Latin America</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politics is so complicated that it isn’t understood</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics isn’t complicated and can be understood</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


More than 60% of the Brazilians and Colombians polled said politics was too complicated to understand — higher than the Latin American rate of 51%. Thus, we can reasonably conclude that the majority of people in Brazil and Colombia do not understand politics. Since political culture provides the basis for political behavior (Pye 1965), this data is worrisome. Also, a lack of knowledge and understanding of politics can interfere in the building of a civic society that demands interest and engagement from its citizens in politics and public issues (Baquero 2004).

Finally, we analyzed democracy (see Figure 4). The Latinobarometer (2015) studied the difference between the support of democracy and the satisfaction with it. Survey subjects were presented the following options:

a) Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

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4 For the purposes of this paper, Response A was equivalent to supporting democracy.
b) Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one.

c) For people like me, it doesn’t matter whether we have a democratic or non-democratic regime.

Regarding satisfaction, the Latinobarometer survey asked: “In general, would you say you are very satisfied, quite satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the working of the democracy in your country?” We measured satisfaction by calculating the sum of the responses to the first two options.

**Figure 4: Thoughts About Democracy (%)**

![Graph showing thoughts about democracy in Latin America, Brazil, and Colombia.](image)


We saw a major trend of support for democracy (see Figure 4). However, it is important to note that 18.9% of those surveyed in Brazil preferred authoritarian governments under some circumstances; this figure was lower in Colombia at 11.9%. We concluded this is because democracy is related to the stability of the system and was used to legitimize Colombia’s political system (Ruiz 2012; Ruiz 2013); on the other hand, Brazil had several suspensions of democracy by authoritarian regimes that used social paternalism or economic progress as ways to compensate for the people’s lack of rights (Carvalho 2002). Also, Moisés (2008) noted that authoritarian preferences and ambivalent political attitudes fuel the survival of authoritarian political concepts.
Regarding satisfaction, the rates show that few people are satisfied by the outputs of the system in which they live, especially given the background of non-democratic periods for Brazil, non-democratic policies in Colombia, and the survival of authoritarian features in these countries (Moisés 2008). Looking more deeply into the 2015 Latinobarometer data, the situation is even worse — in Brazil only 2% are very satisfied and 20.5% are quite satisfied; the figures for Colombia are 4.6% and 21.6%, respectively. Both countries are below Latin America’s average of 10.7% being very satisfied and 30% being quite satisfied. The low satisfaction rates among Brazilians can be attributed to the lack of legitimacy and credibility of the country’s political institutions since the formal structures of democracy cannot solve social problems (Baquero 2008; Luchmann 2007). In Colombia, citizens also do not trust their country’s political institutions (Ruiz 2012); this mistrust is similar to such sentiments in Brazil and Latin America where socioeconomic conditions restrain the ability for conflict resolution through institutional democracy (Baquero 2008).

5. Final Considerations

We used the concept of political culture to study political orientations, postures, and attitudes regarding the political system (Almond and Verba 1963), which are different depending on the society and its historical context (Pye 1965), in order to better understand the patterns of political culture in Brazil and Colombia. We aimed to verify people’s relationships with democracy in these countries, comparing them with the general frame in Latin America. To achieve this, we first studied the main historical aspects of each country as well as the central characteristics of each political culture. Next, we conducted an empirical analysis of the 2015 Latinobarometer to observe some concrete features of political culture and about the democracy issue.

Our first conclusion is that some historical aspects remain strong in Brazil and Colombia in regard to how people interact and perceive the political system and democracy in general. Latin America faces challenges in strengthening its democracy, including socioeconomic conditions, social inequality and exclusion, and a State that is not capable of solving such problems through democratic and institutional channels — this results in discontent from citizens and a perception that political institutions do not work (Baquero 2013) and lack legitimacy (Bianchi, León, and Perini 2007). This situation is aggravated by the remaining authoritarian attitudes and conceptions regarding politics (Moisés 2008). Brazil
follows this pattern, as its citizens also distrust political institutions. The country is facing a representation crisis, since the formal structures of democracy do not comply with people’s expectations (Baquero 2004; Luchmann 2007) — which are mainly influenced by the predominance of private forces over the public sphere since colonization and the interruptions of democracy throughout its history. Colombia was mainly marked by the remaining central role of Catholic Church in most aspects of national life and the bipartisan polarization between liberals and conservatives; this led to a political culture marked by institutional distrust, intolerance, and violence — a culture where people historically faced repression and did not have space to interact with politics outside of the dominant structure (La Roche 1993; Ruiz 2012).

Through our data analysis, we reached a few additional conclusions. In Brazil and Colombia, citizens still struggle with major issues that represent outputs from the political system. It directly affects their daily lives since they do not have elements such as economic and physical security — this makes it even more difficult for people to develop positive perceptions about the system. The situation is aggravated by the fact that most people in both countries cannot understand politics. We demonstrated how such elements impacted the 2015 Latinobarometer’s data about democracy. First, even if there is a major trend for support, there is still space for authoritarian conceptions. We also observed a strong difference in satisfaction, which confirmed that people are discontent with their country’s political system. These observations both dominate in a scenario where democracy still faces several challenges, especially once citizens retreat even further from the public space.

References


