Democracy Measures and Democratic Backsliding: Latin America in Comparative Perspective" *

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Abstract

How do measures of democratic quality impact empirical results, and in what ways do they shape our understanding of democratic backsliding? The debate surrounding the nature of democracy and its measurement has persisted for a long time, with no clear consensus due to the existence of multiple definitions and empirical measures. Furthermore, recent literature has increasingly focused on episodes of democratic backsliding, facing a similar challenge of lacking consensus on how to define and measure it. Consequently, this article investigates whether different measures of democracy produce similar empirical results and backsliding episodes for 18 Latin American countries starting the Third Wave of democratization. It argues that varying measures of democracy yield different empirical results regarding democratic quality and episodes of democratic backsliding. The paper selects three widely used measures —Freedom House, Polity, and V-Dem (polyarchy)—highlights their theoretical and empirical differences, and estimates multivariate regression models. Additionally, it estimates and exhibits democratic backsliding episodes according to each measure. The findings reveal significant differences between these measures and demonstrate that they influence the identification of some, but not others, backsliding episodes in the region.

Introduction

From the mid-1970s to early 1990s, the number of democratic governments in the world almost doubled (Huntington 1991). Results varied after the beginning of this wave where many countries managed to stabilize their democracies, some returned to authoritarian regimes, yet, others positioned themselves in a blurry middle which has been a topic of interest for the scholarship (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010; Morlino 2008; Wiggel 2008; Gilbert and Mohseni 2011). Consequently, the Third Wave of democratization inaugurated an intense study of regime types, transitions, and the conditions for newly democratic political systems. However, as democracy spread in most of the world, the focus of analysis shifted from explaining regime transitions to evaluating the character of democratic regimes. In this endeavor, several measures

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of democracy were developed with the goal to frame and assess its quality but, at the same time, generated significant controversy. Particularly, the literature has not agreed on what democracy means and what it is not, which has caused doubts when carrying out empirical studies as it addresses issues of norms and legitimacy that some measures do not directly consider (Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Diamond and Morlino 2004). Additionally, the end of the first decade of the 21st century posed a new challenge in the field due to the particular deterioration of democratic systems around the world where new kinds of transitions occurred to regimes that were neither fully democracies nor dictatorships.

Specifically, the momentary equilibrium of what democratic political systems meant took a new direction where different actors adjusted their actions and expectations, and maneuver within democratic systems in order to use these same rules to achieve their ends (Bermeo 2016; Gamboa 2017, 2022; Waldner and Lust 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The scholarship has agreed that these developments endangered democracy by rendering its foundational rules vulnerable to targeted attacks (Przeworski 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Nevertheless, these democratic imbalances have caused a debate that does not have a unique or precise framework or even a unique way to conceptualize and measure them (Little and Meng 2024; Knutsen et al. 2024). Based on these, the measures of democracy that were intended to reflect its quality took considerably longer to adapt to this turnover in the democratic game. Specifically, when definitions, concepts, and measures of democracy are not widely agreed upon, assessing new instances of regime transformations becomes even more challenging. On the one hand, these event are widely regarded as significant hurdles to modern democratic systems which should be studied. On the other hand, it leaves a gap in our ability to assess and analyze its implications, both from an academic perspective and regarding its effects on political systems, regimes, and the very definition of democracy, if we cannot conceptualize and measure them appropriately. Without a thorough understanding of the problem, timely and effective responses cannot be developed.

As a consequence of this dissonance between the study of the quality of democracy and the events that have caused democracy to backslide as a political regime, I argue that different measures of democracy yield different empirical results. Specifically, different measures display some components where the definitions, concepts, and empirical references confound its study and bear no consensus (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Elkins 2000). Furthermore, the introduction of new regime types has taken greater prominence within the field, which makes this analysis even more convoluted (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010; Morlino 2008). Consequently, I contend that the measures yield different episodes of democratic backsliding. There is an unstructured conceptual framework on how democratic backsliding unfolds with some definitions and processes that indicate how these events initiate but no general consensus on how to measure them. This leads to increasing doubts regarding its study and the implications of political systems more generally around the world. This idea is particularly important for the arguments that this essay is making given that if there is no agreement on how to measure democracy, how can scholars make claims about its backsliding episodes?

Consequently, this work aims to compare three of the most widely used measures of democracy in the literature: Freedom House, Polity IV, and V-Dem (polyarchy). These measures are particularly relevant given their use on empirical research and, more recently, their assessment on capturing backsliding episodes. Following the specialized literature (Casper and Tufis 2003; Högström 2013; Vaccaro 2021) I test the empirical results of different measures of democracy starting the Third Wave of democracy in Latin America. I use a multivariate approach with an ARDL(Autoregressive Distributed Lag) specification given the structure of the data and I complement this with an estimation and description of the backsliding episodes that each measure shows. The first analysis intends to demonstrate if the measures expose similar results when employed in empirical work. Additionally, the second seeks to illustrate if these measures predict the same backsliding episodes or if they differ in their estimation. Finally, Latin America is a particular relevant region to study given its varying results in transitions, regime types, and backsliding episodes. Since 1978, the countries in the region have undertaken efforts to transform their political systems, which were historically characterized by weak democracies and autocratic regimes dominated by personalistic and military leadership. By the beginning of the 21st century, however, the 18 countries under study were considered full democracies. Despite this progress, various events have prevented several countries from fully realizing their democratic potential, leading to setbacks and a reversion to other forms of governance.

This paper is organized as follows: the next section presents the main consideration when studying regime types, and transitions with special attention to Latin America. Then, section 3 shows the indices of the quality of democracy, the criticisms around those, and tentative implications for their empirical impact and understanding of democratic backsliding. Section 4 presents data corresponding to the 18 countries in study, compares the two indices showing empirical results of a regression analysis, and exposes the cases for backsliding with a comparison between each measure. Finally, the last section presents the conclusions of the paper and agenda to further the research.

Regime Types and Transitions

Political Science has devoted insurmountable efforts to the study of regime types and transitions. Classical work shows that what determines the type of regime is, on the one hand, access to governmental positions, who is included in this access, and how they can get into office regarding their strategies or resources (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Schmitter and Karl 1991) and, on the other hand, the set of rules and procedures, formal and informal, to select political leaders and policies (Geddes 1999). Thus, there could be differences between regimes given the way of organizing political life by selecting leaders, processing conflict, and making public decisions (Przeworski et al. 2000). In addition, others have focused on changes in the type of regimes and how countries have transitioned from one to another (Lipset 1959; Moore 1966; Rustow 1970; Skocpol 1979; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Huntington 1991; Mainwaring 1992; Geddes 1999; Przeworski et al. 2000; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010; Haggard and Kaufman 1997, 2016; Flores and Nooruddin 2016; Riedl et al. 2020). This scholarship is concerned

with the timing, processes, actors, and features that show a change usually from dictatorship to democracy. Explanations about legitimacy, liberalization, elections, international context, and uncertainty have plagued this literature (Mainwaring 1992) with a focus on top-down and bottom-up theories.[1] Nevertheless, something that the field has less agreement on is in the definitions of different regimes, which, as I argue, is paramount to understanding their *quality* and *backsliding* episodes.

A substantial body of literature has dedicated to study democracy where questions about non-democracies and hybrid regimes have manifested. The literature has focused on what democracies are, what are not, and the emergence of regimes that belong to neither of these.[2] In the study of democracy, the scholarship has largely concentrated on its minimal definition, with particular emphasis on contestation and inclusion as key foundations for defining the concept (Schumpeter 1942; Dahl 1971). The work has expanded with an understanding of democracy as a political system in which offices are filled by contested elections (Przeworski 1991; Alvarez et al. 1996; Przeworski et al. 2000; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010; Svolik 2012). Even though, concerns about the components of the definition have raised (Bollen 1990; Schmitter and Karl 1991; Collier and Levitsky 1997). In contrast, dictatorships have been studied as regimes characterized by the ever-present potential for violence and the absence of independent institutions that enforce agreements (Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012).[3] Finally, "hybrid" or competitive regimes have surged showing the importance to study regimes trapped in the middle.[4] Something worth mentioning is that elections are held often in these regimes but suffer from pitfalls such as curb opposition, manipulation, control over the media, etc., (Lehoucq 2003; Donno 2013), which questions one of the constitutive components of the minimal definition of democracy.

Notwithstanding, as the complexity and challenges of this topic grow, concerns arise regarding the use of different measures due to their theoretical and empirical implications for the study of regime types, transitions, processes, and, more recently, democratic backsliding. Particularly, the definitions, concepts, and empirical references confound its study and bear no consensus in an already tangled literature (Treisman 2023; Little and Meng 2024; Knutsen et al. 2024). Furthermore, on the one hand, issues with measurement have increased the salience to study these different regimes arguing about the "quality of democracy" and their graded measures (Elkins 2000; Schmitter 2004; Levine and Molina 2011; Munck 2013). On the other hand, the introduction of regimes that are in the middle has taken greater prominence within the field which

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[1]The former explaining pacts from elites and soft- and hard-liner actors, meanwhile the latter entails mass mobilization with collective action problems (Olson 1965; Clark, Golder, and Golder 2018).

[2]As an illustration, a significant amount of literature has focused on what democracies are (Sartori 1987; Huntington 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996; Diamond and Morlino 2004; Przeworski 2010); what are not (Magaloni 2006; Svolik 2012; Pepinsky 2014; Meng 2021); and the emergence of regimes that belong to neither of these categories (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010; Morlino 2008; Wiggel 2008; Gilbert and Mohseni 2011; Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021).

[3]Dictatorship has even been defined as a residual category where the executive or legislature are *not* elected in free and competitive elections (Alvarez et al. 1996).

[4]This strand examines regimes characterized by violations of democratic rules by the government to gain leverage over the opposition without undermining democracy entirely (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010; Bermeo 2016; Laebens 2023). Others have used this template to indicate how some but not other democracies have gone through a process until becoming dictatorships (Gamboa 2017; Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021).

makes this analysis more convoluted (Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010). In light of the growing focus on explaining democratic backsliding, it is crucial to theoretically understand its implications specifically for democracy, but for regime types, changes, and transitions more broadly, as well as how the chosen measures influence the conclusions drawn by scholars. This idea is particularly important for the arguments that this essay makes given that if there is no agreement on how to measure democracy, how can scholars make claims about its *quality* and *backsliding* episodes?

What explains *Quality* and *Backsliding*? The paradox of Measures

This study compares and contrasts three of the most widely measures of democracy in the literature: Freedom House, Polity, and V-dem (polyarchy)[5]. The objective is two-fold: first, the goal is to analyze if the measures produce similar empirical results and, second, how do different measures shape our understanding and operationalization of democratic backsliding. Consequently, the first part of this section is devoted to analyze what has the literature indicated about the quality of democracy in terms of these measures. Particularly, it exposes the key differences in the definitions and its components. Additionally, the second part investigates how the shift towards the study backsliding has taken place highlighting areas of predominant study of the scholarship and the principal relationships to the measures of the first section. Finally, it links the three measures to empirical studies that have estimated episodes of backsliding showing the rationale behind its use.

On the Quality of Democracy

The Third Wave of democratization shifted the focus of political regime studies from assessing and explaining transitions to a deeper emphasis on evaluating the quality of democracy (Diamond and Morlino 2004). During the 1990s as political democracy survived, scholars turned their attention to other issues such as the institutional characteristics of new democracies where quality of democratic life took a central stage and was the factor that varies from one country to another (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002). This has been a fruitful and valuable endeavor but at the same time it has created a lot of controversy given that it takes into consideration questions of norms and legitimacy that some of the measures do not contemplate directly. The most commonly asked questions pertain to the definition of "good democracy", "the best models of democracy", "the value of studying the quality of democracy", etc. (Diamond and Morlino 2004, 18). Moreover, the influence of Dahl (1971) on decisions to create indexes of democracy based on competition and inclusion has helped to ensure that the measurements are focused on attributes that are theoretically relevant (Munck and Verkuilen 2002).

Diamond and Morlino (2004) supported the development of this branch, both of methodological innovation and empirical research, for three reasons: 1) the deepening of the study of democracy that was imperative for political science; 2) reforms to increase the quality of democ-

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[5]Also known as the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI).

racy were essential if the goal was to achieve a legitimate and consolidated democracy; and 3) democracies established for a long time must also be reformed in order to solve the problems that arise. These ideas gained significant momentum in the first decade of the 21st century, influencing both academic research and the dynamics of various regions worldwide. For instance, Latin America showed some signs of the durability of democracy by the end of the 20th century. The interest of its study was focused on the quality of new or re-established democracies, and on the articulation of electoral systems, judicial power, institutions, public opinion, etc. The transition for the region meant changes such as respect for human rights, non-military governments, etc., (Levine and Molina 2011). Although there were some countries that were democracies previous to the Third Wave —Colombia, Venezuela and Costa Rica (Munck and Luna 2022)—, it was at the end of the 1980s when most of the region found their path into democratic regimes (Pérez-Liñán and Mainwaring 2013).

This scholarship understood the quality of democracy in a similar manner, yet with distinct components. On the hand, the quality of democracy was understood aggregating aspects of the regime as in terms of polyarchy and its degree to "actualize its potential" (Altman and Pérez-Liñán 2002, 86) or as a "the process of participation and political influence of citizens" (Levine and Molina 2011, 18). On the other hand, it expanded on its attributes with conditions to citizens such as participation, influence and accountability; and elected leaders decisions in favor of people's will (Diamond and Morlino 2004). Consequently, indexes and measures of democracy were employed to capture these considerations where the aim was to provide measurements of several democratic aspects such as governance, functioning and quality itself (Mainwaring, Scully, and Vargas Cullell 2010; Morlino 2013). For instance, Casper and Tufis (2003) mention that democracy, like power or representation, is a basic concept of political science that is difficult to measure. Moreover, they indicate that over the last 40 years, political scientists have studied why some countries are democratic and others are not, and that to carry out these studies, different measures of democracy have been considered. These measures usually show a high correlation between them, so, the indistinct use of each one could be justified. However, their empirical tests and results show some discrepancies agreeing that different measures do not provide the same results in broader contexts not focused particularly in Latin America (Casper and Tufis 2002; Högström 2013; Vaccaro 2021). Therefore, the next step is to analyze the three measures of democracy chosen for this study.

Measures of the Quality of Democracy

This paper selects Freedom House, Polity, and V-dem (polyarchy) as the most widely used measures of democracy in the literature. Freedom House starts in the 1970s and creates a measure of democracy that is composed of scores for political rights and civil liberties. The measure comes from a scale of 1 (greatest degree) and 7 (smallest degree), meaning that lower values show a "better" democracy. The scores are composed of 10 and 15 components, respectively, which can be analyzed individually and has ratings that determine if a country is Free, Partial Free, or Not Free (Freedom House 2024). Additionally, the second measure of democracy is Polity which

starts in 1810 and goes up until 2018. This measure considers three elements: 1) the presence of institutions and procedures that account for citizens' preferences regarding leaders and policies, 2) constraints to executives coming from institutions, and 3) the guarantee of civil liberties. This score ranges from -10 (strongly autocratic) to +10 (strongly democratic). Moreover, some intervals correspond to categories where from 6 to 10 are considered "democracies", from -5 to 5 are considered "anocracies", and from -6 to -10 are considered "autocracies"(Regan and Bell 2010; Marshall and Gurr 2020). As a consequence, both are at the ordinal level of measurement. The third measure comes from the Varieties of Democracy project with the electoral measure called polyarchy in the dataset. These data start in the 1780s to 2024 and are comprehensive regarding the number of countries they include. This measure resembles Dahl's (1971) idea of polyarchy and has been widely used throughout the scholarship (Coppedge et al. 2024).

Table 1: Features and Differences of Measures of Democracy

Measure	Attribute/ Element	Components	Quantifying Metrics
Freedom House	Political Rights	10	- Electoral Process - Political Pluralism & Participation - Functioning of Government
	Civil Liberties	15	- Freedom of Expression and Belief - Associational & Organizational Rights - Rule of Law - Personal Autonomy & Individual Rights
Polity	Contestation	$5^{\dagger}$	- Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment - Openness of Executive Recruitment - Constraint on Chief Executive - Competitiveness of Political Participation - Regulation of Participation
V-Dem (Polyarchy)[‡]	Dahl's institutions of Polyarchy	7	- Freedom of Association - Clean Elections - Freedom of Expression - Elected Officials - Suffrage

Source: Munck and Verkuilen 2002; Freedom House 2024; Marshall and Gurr 2020; Coppedge et al. 2024
[†] For the quantifying metrics of the Polity measure, "Regulation of Participation" is included only when institutionalized autocracy is estimated.
[‡] Also known as the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI).

Table 1 shows the main differences of each measure building on Munck and Verkuilen (2002) pivotal work where it displays the attributes or elements, the number of components and the quantifying metrics which are used to operationalize each definition. Moreover, there some precisions and new considerations that the table is making and may be central for the empirical results when employing each of the measures. First, the Freedom House measure has been updated with 10 components for political rights and 15 for civil liberties now. As the 2024 report indicates, both attributes consist of subcategories or the quantifying metrics for the case. For the first attribute, electoral process and functioning of government comprise 3 questions each while political pluralism and participation reports 4. Additionally, for the second attribute,

associational and organizational rights groups 3 questions and the rest 4 each. Furthermore, an enhanced level of precision introduced by the table is the attribute for the Polity measure. Munck and Verkuilen (2002) argue that most of the measures they analyze rely on Dahl's (1971) features of contestation and inclusion but did not provide any of these to the Polity measure. However, the literature has shown that the Polity measure focuses just on one of Dahl's (1971) attributes —contestation —creating a validity issue for it but still showing of the defining components (Kellstedt and Whitten 2018).

Finally, for the V-Dem measure, the table considers the polyarchy indicator related to the electoral democracy. This is relevant given the comparison with the other measures and, especially significant for how the literature evaluates and estimates backsliding episodes. First, this measure considers different levels of aggregation, and as its coding suggests, it captures Dahl's seven institutions of polyarchy with the 5 sub-components shown in the table. Second, in contrast to the others, the V-Dem (polyarchy) is an interval measure going from low from low to high (0-1) grasping with some theoretical concerns of gradual change in democratic measures. Finally, these data consist of information available towards the beginning of the 18 [th] until 2024 being the one that provides the greatest reach out of the three. Consequently, the three indexes display particular features of democracy and its measure provided the attributes that these capture. Nevertheless, they present shortcomings that must be considered when employing them in empirical analysis. Thus, if the goal is to align with Dahl's (1971) definition, contestation and inclusion must be present in the measure. This concern is not new, as the literature has shown (Bollen 1990; Munck and Verkuilen 2002). In particular, the goal is to look for reliable and valid measures that transform our concepts into empirical references through operationalization, and that can be employed on empirical testing (Kellstedt and Whitten 2018). If the empirical measure does not capture the concept accurately, theoretical and empirical problems in the findings arise. For all these, the first implication the paper postulates that:

H1: *Different measures of democracy yield varying empirical outcomes of democratic quality.*

On Democratic Backsliding

The second goal of this paper is to compare how different measures of democracy shape our understanding and operationalization of democratic backsliding. Thus, it is worth showing how the scholarship defines these episodes to later exhibit their empirical approaches to capture the concepts. Some of the definitions deal with the debilitation or eradication of political institutions that support democracy with slow-moving process that entails a gradual change across a particular set of institutions (Bermeo 2016). Moreover, it can indicate to small but incremental changes that are characterized by worsening the features of democratic governance (Waldner and Lust 2018) and to a process of gradual erosion of norms and institutions of democracy, particularly with elections (Przeworski 2019). Furthermore, this incremental erosion can be attributed to actions taken from legitimately elected governments, often influenced by an autocratic leader (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Nevertheless, as a consequence of these definitions, episodes of democratic backsliding can be misdocumented and misconceived

depending on the measure chosen where the results and conclusions can deceive the treatment of cases. In that regard, it is imperative to examine the insights provided by the specialized literature on this topic.

Most of the scholarship that investigates democratic backsliding presents some commonalities on what elements take part and what could constitute a backsliding episode. However, I identify three key areas where these studies have predominantly focused: polarization, weak democracies, and political institutions. It is worth mentioning that this classification is non-exhaustive and some features can belong to more than one area, but it reflects how the study of democratic backsliding has developed.[6] Nevertheless, even with some explanations of these events, it is not clear how these concepts translate to how democratic backsliding is being measured. Are the empirical references capturing the essential components of the explanation or are they reflecting diminishes in "subjective" features that may or may not accompanying the theoretical rationale? Thus, it is important to examine the purpose of these explanations to determine whether the measures effectively capture the relevant episodes.

One of the areas where part of the literature has focused on is polarization as its main explanation.[7] The main aspects of this area indicate that the episodes start with elections, involve citizens, and middle-income countries are in danger as well. For instance, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) expose a process for how elected authorities could initiate the overthrow of democracy where the starting point is the election of a "would-be-authoritarian" figure. After that, the leader threatens democracy by taking over institutions, excluding or bribing the media and the private sector, rewriting the rules of the game in their favor. Nevertheless, they assert that two mechanisms could preclude these episodes from occurring, namely mutual toleration and forbearance. Expanding on polarization, Svolik (2020) shows that in highly polarized contexts, the assumption that the public acts as a check and balance against the incumbent does not hold. The author emphasizes that citizens prefer their candidates (not the challenger) at the expense of democracy. Finally, Haggard and Kaufman (2021) argue that not only weak democracies are vulnerable but middle-income countries where the starting point is polarization, adding the identity feature of division to those of policy and ideology. Then, they show that polarization encompasses the electoral system with the control of the legislature. Thus, these procedures help the executive to gain power and to exclude the opposition. Therefore, polarization appears a plausible explanation for cases of democratic backsliding.

Another strand of the scholarship builds on the weakness of democracies to make claims about democratic backsliding. In particular, this area focuses on poor governance that underlies weak democracies where recurrent attacks on contestation, civil and political liberties, participation and even accountability are among the common issues. For example, Haggard and Kaufman

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[6]Part of the literature studies democratic backsliding in international contexts. The scope of this essay is to show the conceptions of democratic backsliding within nations and its competing explanations. For the influence of international factors see Mansfield and Pevehouse (2008); Meyerrose (2020); Hafner-Burton and Schneider (2023). Additionally, this paper does not refer to subnational units. However, as Grumbach (2022) shows for the United States, this is a concern as well.

[7]New scholarship focuses on affective polarization and its relationship with democratic backsliding in the US (Druckman, Green, and Iyengar 2023) and globally (Orhan 2022).

(2016) indicate that democratic backsliding is an action taken by the incumbents to cut down contestation, and civil and political liberties. The authors are more interested in regime change but expose certain characteristics leading to democratic backsliding. They indicate that after the Third Wave of democracy, some democracies "failed" because poor governance that included histories of praetorianism, lower economic performance, and weak institutionalization. In addition, the starting point for the explanation indicates these as "weakly institutionalized new democracies" with a trade-off from the more recurrent military coups in past decades (Waldner and Lust 2018). The authors indicate that democratic backsliding relates to small but incremental changes that are characterized by worsening the features of democratic governance. Consequently, in these kinds of weak environments, is more probable that incumbents abuse office, exclude opposition, with an idea that these reflect poor governance which create episodes of democratic backsliding.

Finally, a third area argues about political institutions as the explanation for the backsliding of democracy. The focus of this area shows the instances of debilitation, change, or eradication of political institutions that support democracy, particularly the electoral rules. Moreover, these incidents originate from the weakening of constraints, horizontal or vertical usually from the incumbent. As an example, Bermeo (2016) distinguishes between slow- and fast-moving democratic backsliding processes. For this matter, the slow-moving process entails a gradual change across a particular set of institutions which constitutes the cases of backsliding. In particular, slow-moving processes imply coups that "will" return the power to the people, strategic manipulations of elections, and executive aggrandizement. Relative newer scholarship has focused on this latter idea contending that executive aggrandizement is prone to weakening horizontal and vertical accountability without making democratic institutions disappear (Laebens 2023). Moreover, focusing on electoral rules, Przeworski (2019) argues that the decline in support for democracy, the erosion of national parties, and attitudes towards nationalism, xenophobia and racism, are the drivers of backsliding. Finally, the behavior of the executive is highlighted by Meng (2020) in her study of autocratic regime institutionalization by considering its implications. In particular, the author argues that "deinstitutionalization" should be studied in all of the cases. Consequently, the weakening of political institutions from incumbents is an explanation for democratic backsliding.

Nevertheless, there are concerns that emerge from these literature in this framework. For instance, Bermeo's (2016) argument overlooks who can defend against this process as the literature suggests could be the judiciary (Gibler and Randazzo 2011). This is particularly important because others have studied judicial involvement where the literature argues that democracies are "stronger" as in the United States (Huq 2022) or the European Union (Blauberger and Kelemen 2017). Moreover, Haggard and Kaufman (2016) and Waldner and Lust (2018) rely heavily on regime transition and democratization literature. We can hypothesize that backsliding may be connected to this strand of the literature but it may entail other patterns. Weak democracies could suffer from attacks on their institutions given poor governance, however, it is arguable that the goal may not be to become a dictatorship but to use these institutions. Additionally,

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) do not necessarily indicate directly what backsliding is. Their first step is to identify a "would-be-authoritarian" figure and from that on, what this figure could do. However, what happens when the figures are not outsiders and have had a history with democratic values? For instance, as much of this literature suggests, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Orbán, had a successful first democratic period in charge of the parliament. Nevertheless, once he returned to office in a later election, his "would-be-authoritarian" features arose. Moreover, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Przeworski (2019) propose that democratic backsliding can be prevented if people can foresee the actions of these leaders. However, it is arguably to be a cumbersome issue for citizens.

Regarding some examples, the literature has studied paramount cases of countries that suffered from these episodes in recent years such as Turkey and Hungary (Bermeo 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Nevertheless, as the focus of the paper indicates, there are some prominent cases in Latin America as well. For instance, the most salient case is Venezuela. The backsliding episode started at the end of the 20$^{\text{th}}$ century with the democratic election of Hugo Chávez, an ex-military member and a political outsider. Gamboa (2017; 2022) argues that Chávez was able to introduce different laws that granted him major authority and power, and decreased the influence of other institutions. Moreover, as Velasco-Guachalla et al. (2021) argue the case of Venezuela is an example of how a government can establish an institutionalized coalition regarding its authoritarian goals. By conceding more power to the military and extending the presidential term limits, this country suffered from a backsliding episode. Furthermore, Laebens (2023) shows that there have been other episodes around the world with different results. For Latin America, adding to Venezuela, Nicaragua suffer from incumbent takeover of democracy, meanwhile examples of "institutionalized enforced exit" by electoral defeat, term limit, or successor in power happened to Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador, respectively, where leaders did not succeed in their attempts to take over democracy but hurt the political system. These cases show the relevance to create a framework that can identify their determinants and impacts on political systems.

Capturing Backsliding Episodes

There can be several measures of democracy as there are definitions of it. As a consequence, there could be as many democratic backsliding measures as there are measures of democracy.[8] In that regard, this section shows how the literature has estimated democratic backsliding episodes or approaches to them. It is good to keep in mind that I assert that there exist more problems empirically with this measurement given that there is no consensus about the measures of democracy itself. Thus, a debate surged when claims about measures of backsliding were contested, arguing that the current measures focus on subjective measures that come from expert opinion and not from objective ones such as elections (Little and Meng 2024). Moreover, evidence indicates that recent episodes of democratic backsliding are not uncommon from a

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[8]Nevertheless, something to consider is that some "minimal" conceptions of democracy may not work to estimate these episodes given there operationalization as democracies or not (0 or 1) and its change would entail a full breakdown (Alvarez et al. 1996; Przeworski et al. 2000).

historical perspective. The process has to do with the incorporation of new democracies during the Third Wave with their "poor" institutions and lower income (Treisman 2023). However, there has been a response indicating that objective measures have their own drawbacks as well and clarifying how and why country expert opinions are reliable (Knutsen et al. 2024). In that regard, I build on Jee, Lueders, and Myrick's (2022) study of measures of democratic backsliding to illustrate the problem. For this case, and following the authors, I choose the three measures of democracy examined in this study —Freedom House, Polity, and V-dem (polyarchy) —, to show their definitions and explore studies that have used them to create backsliding measures.

Tomini and Wageman (2018) use the Freedom House measure to account for democratic breakdown and regression. The authors apply a QCA (Qualitative Comparative Analysis) to answer their question where they employ the Freedom House measure and classify its diminishes in 3 categories: loss of democratic quality, breakdown to a hybrid regime, and breakdown to an authoritarian regime. For the first case, they analyze cases that decreased at one point, for the second 1.5 points, and for the third, more than 1.5. The cases that seem relevant for democratic backsliding episodes are the ones situated in the second category. However, all of these seem to pertain to three particular regions: Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Additionally, for Polity, Huq and Ginsburg (2018) explore the loss of constitutional democracy. The authors argue about the risk of authoritarian reversion through constitutional means showing how periods before a reversion of democracy have occurred. In particular, they focus on "constitutional retrogression" where they contend it can be seen through the Polity measure in any decrease in value. They indicate that 37 countries from all over the world have suffered from this. Nevertheless, they consider cases ranging from a 1 to a 5 five-point decrease, even if these remain democratic as the category (6 to 10) suggests.

Finally, the V-dem measure contemplates these episodes differently, given the way it considers backsliding, or, as the literature indicates, in terms of "autocratization" episodes. For instance, Lührmann and Lindberg's (2019) examine if a "Third Wave" of autocratization is in progress. Their definition of a potential episode of autocratization entails the polyarchy measure and indicates that it starts with a decline of 0.01 from one year to another. Then, they follow this episode as a continuous decline occurs considering that there could be a period of no activity (up to four years). Next, they conclude that the period finishes if the polyarchy measure increases by 0.02 or more, or there are no other declines starting the fifth year. Finally, they estimate the total magnitude of the process from the previous year the starting episode to the end, and record the episode as autocratization if the difference is 0.1 in the period (see Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) full description on page 1101). Something worth mentioning is that this measure is particularly connected to Waldner and Lust (2018) definition of backsliding given that the authors argue that these changes can happen in dictatorships as well as in democracies, where in the former they signal a decrease in democratic procedures and, in the latter, a reduction in quality.

With these examples, the literature has provided more fine-grained measures of backsliding and elucidated how empirical studies have employed different measures to account for backsliding

episodes. Nevertheless, some concerns appear related to if a decrease in the value of these measures is actually related to a backsliding episode itself, or has to do with something else. For instance, Freedom House and Polity may reflect more abrupt changes that may not capture the gradual changes of the definitions while the V-Dem (polyarchy) measure, more a nuanced analysis, may need subtle changes to decide what is and what is not a backsliding episode. Moreover, if we use these measures in a study, are all of them going to indicate the same backsliding episodes? These are just a few concerns that arise. Specifically, for the Freedom House index, there are no patterns in more developed political systems as the literature indicates (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Furthermore, are these episodes congruent even if the country remains a democracy as suggested by Huq and Ginsburg (2018)? Finally, with the V-Dem (polyarchy) measure and regarding autocratic episodes, some countries may pertain to this category even if the literature suggests they are not. Is this a correct measure? Given all these, the second implication the paper postulates that:

H2: *Different measures of democracy yield different backsliding episodes*

Latin America and the Third Wave of Democratization

For all of the above Latin America seems to be a perfect region to test the hypotheses. The Third Wave of democracy resumed a period of significant theory development and empirical analyses about transitions to democracy that showed a decline in the number of dictatorships around the world and a considerable contagion effect (Huntington 1991; Clark, Golder and Golder 2018). The 1970s is marked as the start decade of this wave and, as the literature has noted, regime changes were caused by loss of confidence to authoritarian regimes, international pressure, policy changes, but, particularly, they marked a turning point for countries in the world (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Huntington 1991; Mainwaring 1992). Latin America was not the exception where most of its countries switched from authoritarian to democratic rule by the beginning of the 21st century as Table 2 shows.[9] Something to consider is that three countries —Costa Rica, Colombia, and Venezuela —were already democracies before this decade. This resurgence of democratic ideals posited a significant reconstruction of governments with a particular focus on elections and the electoral boom for the countries of the region (Flores and Nooruddin 2016).

The wave for the region was inaugurated by the Dominican Republic in 1978 and followed by Ecuador right after in 1979. Other countries did not take long to arrive, with a contagion effect in the 1980s where 11 countries transitioned to democratic regimes. However, an economic setback impacted the whole region with a generalized debt crisis period era. This had major repercussions particularly through the Washington Consensus which made major changes in the political and economic systems of the countries. Moreover, the last decade of the century was difficult to the newly established democratic systems given that the region faced several issues regarding their political systems related to impact of international actors, the lack of economic growth, and the questioning of their legitimacy performance (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2005).

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[9]Some transitions took longer because of different factors. Check Munck and Luna (2022) for specific details.

Table 2: Year of Transition —Third Wave of Democratization

Country	Year
Argentina	1983
Bolivia	1982
Brazil	1985
Colombia	1958
Costa Rica	1949
Chile	1989
Dominican Republic	1978
Ecuador	1979
El Salvador	1984
Guatemala	1985
Honduras	1981
Mexico	2000
Nicaragua	1990
Peru	1980
Panama	1989
Paraguay	1989
Uruguay	1984
Venezuela	1958

Source: Munck and Luna (2022)

Nevertheless, the final two countries transitioned to democracies with Nicaragua and Mexico in the 1990 and 2000, respectively.

Apparently, democracy made its way to stay despite a period of breakdown in Dominican Republic and Peru in the 90s that seemed not to affect the general destiny and trends of the region (Mainwaring and Bizzarro 2019). Moreover, once the 21st century resumed, there were setbacks such as the "Corralito" in Argentina, the collapse of the party systems in Bolivia and Ecuador, right and left governments reversals in Argentina and Brazil, more authoritarian regimes in Nicaragua, a coup d'état in Honduras, and other events that weakened this democratic ideal. Consequently, the region has characteristics to answer the questions that this article formulated. In that regard, as the next section shows, this is particularly relevant when observing the differences in empirical results and also when evaluating backsliding episodes.

Research Strategy

This paper employs three measures of democracy to answer its questions. Particularly, the focus is to shed light in their impact on empirical results and their adequacy to estimate democratic backsliding episodes. As mentioned earlier, Freedom House assigns scores for political freedom and civil liberties in a scale from 1 (greatest degree of freedom) and 7 (smallest degree). Moreover, the average of these ratings determines if a country is Free, Partial Free or Not Free (Freedom House 2024). For this measure, I reverse the scores (1 is smallest degree and 7 is the highest degree of freedom) to compare greater values as a better democracy, and add civil liberties and political rights in 1 measure. Thus, this index goes from 2 to 14 and the information goes until 2023. The second measure of democracy is Polity. This is a unified political score

that ranges from -10 (strongly autocratic) to +10 (strongly democratic) (Marshall and Gurr 2020). Furthermore, the scores can be converted into particular regime categories: from -10 to -6 as autocracy, from -5 to +5 as "anocracies", and from +6 to +10 as democracies (Regan and Bell 2010; Marshall and Ramsey 2016). This can be particular useful given the idea of regime breakdown. However, something to consider for these data is that the last year recorded is 2018 which decreases the number of observations compared to the other measures. Finally, the last measure comes from the Varieties of Democracy project with reference to electoral democracy. It resemble Dahl's (1971) idea of polyarchy and is an interval measure that goes from low to high (0-1) ranging from 1780s to 2023 (Coppedge et al. 2024). In that regard, Figure 1 shows the average values of the measures per year for the 18 Latin American countries starting 1978.[10]

Figure 1: Measures of Democracy Resuming the Third Wave in Latin America
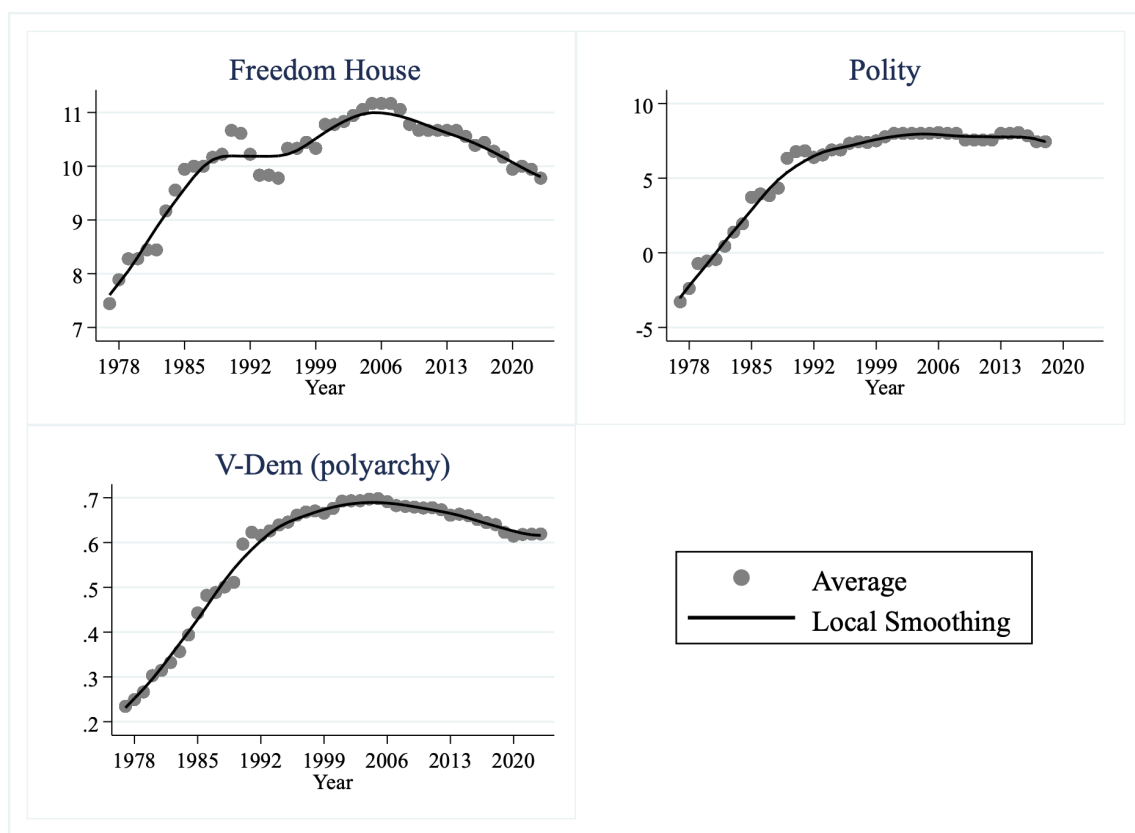
Source: Freedom House 2024; Marshall and Gurr 2020; Coppedge et al. 2024

The first aspect to consider is the upward trend that each measure shows provided the transition and incorporation of new countries as democracies. As indicated before, every measure exhibits that higher values are translated into *better* democratic regimes given the measurement of the concept as Table 1 shows. One partial conjecture to this figure is that the measures seem to capture similar features as they show analogous trends. Second, each graph illustrates the particular average of the measure for all the countries in a particular year with the dots and, additionally, it shows a local smoothing which allows to observe trends in the series. In

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[10]Appendix A shows tables and box plots of each measure and country starting their year of transition.

that regard, it seems that the polyarchy measure from V-Dem adapts this trend better to its averages. In contrast, the local smoothing looks more uncertain about the Freedom House trend particularly in the 1980s decade. The polity graph appears to provide a satisfactory representation of its underlying political measure. Nevertheless, this series is discontinued after 2018. Another feature to consider is that after 2020 the trends for the Freedom House and V-Dem measures slightly decrease at 1985 levels for the former and at 1992 for the latter providing a second conjecture of a democratic quality decrease. Finally, there is a decline around the 1980s for the Freedom House and the Polity measures showing a stagnation for the first and a little more subtle for the latter. This is particular likely due to the lost decade that the region suffered with implication to the political, social and economic spheres. However, it seems that the V-Dem (polyarchy) measure may not have captured this decline.[11]

Determinants of Democracy in the Literature

In order to check the empirical results of the different measures of democracy, I choose some determinants to test these implications following the specialized literature (Casper and Tufis 2003; Högström 2013; Vaccaro 2021). The scholarship shifted its focused from modernization to survival theory arguing that economic development has an effect on the transition for the former and quality for the latter (Lipset 1959; Huntington 1968; Przeworski et al. 2000; Boix and Stokes 2003) even with a regional focus for Latin America (Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1978). Nevertheless, what can be considered for empirical studies is that higher levels of economic development increase the chances or, to be more precise, the persistence of democratic regimes. In this regard, the specification of the models consider an economic indicator related to this theory. Thus, the first variable is the "Real GDP per capita in 2011 dollars" from the "Maddison Project Database 2023" (Bolt and van Zanden 2024). There are other sources with the same measure for this indicator that are well known (e.g. World Bank). However, those miss information for Venezuela which, as seen in the next sections, is essential to assess the empirical results for the measures of democracy but, more importantly, for the backsliding episodes. However, the measure from Bolt and van Zanden (2024) includes Venezuela in the dataset and that is why is considered for this estimation. Given the typical right skewed of the variable, it is transformed to a logarithm.

Additionally, the specifications incorporate three more variables. Two of the variables are related to the size of the countries arguing that these can indicate that some countries are more likely to democratize as shown by Högström's (2013) study. In that regard, population and area are included in the models and both come from the World Development Indicators from the World Bank (2024). Again, given the skewed distribution, these variables are logged. Finally, the third variable is party system institutionalization from the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al. 2024). This variable is a proxy to the institutional constraints that every regime faces regarding opposition and opportunities to take office. In particular, if a factor can be identified that

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[11]Appendix B shows the trends of each measure for every Latin American country starting their year of transition.

influences how participation is represented across countries, the robustness of the party system may serve as a valuable indicator. This is an interval measure ranging from 0 to 1 where higher values indicate a more institutionalized party system. Thus, these variables are particularly relevant given their effect on the democracy.[12]

Multivariate Approach: model specification

To test the empirical results of different measures of democracy starting the Third Wave of democracy, I employ a multivariate approach with an ARDL(1,1) model specification given the Time Series-Cross Sectional structure of the data and the stationarity of the variables. The multivariate approach specifies different dependent variables with the same independent, controls, and/or determinants for each. In this particular case, my dependent variables are the different measures of democracy and the determinants are taken from the literature as indicated above. Consequently, I estimate the models in the following way:

$$Measure\ of\ Democracy_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Measure\ of\ Democracy_{it-1}+$$
$$\beta_2 Determinants_{it} + \beta_3 Determinants_{it-1} + \beta_4 Year + \epsilon_{it}$$

where i indicates the unit (country) and t indicates time (year). Additionally, I incorporate a lagged dependent variable at the right-hand side with the determinants and their lags as the ARDL(1,1) model indicates (Philips 2018). Moreover, I run several tests regarding the independence of the data (cross-sectional and temporal), their heterogeneity, and the dynamics. Consequently, I use panel corrected standard errors in every case and add the year to control for any trend.

In addition, to answer the second question of this paper I calculate democratic backsliding episodes with the Freedom House, Polity, and V-Dem (polyarchy) measures as the literature suggests (Tomini and Wageman 2018; Huq and Ginsburg 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Wilson et al. 2020). Given the prominence of these events, it is imperative to assess their measurement to acknowledge in what ways they shape our understanding of democratic backsliding and political systems more generally. Finally, something to consider are the implications if there are different cases in the backsliding episodes depending on the measure. Thus, the last part of the next section shows these cases and provides some clues on how to analyze them. Moreover, I expand on this analysis and employ Survival Analysis with Kaplan Meier graphs. Generally, these kind of methods consider a hazard rate at which an observation/unit fails by t given that this observation/unit has survived until that t, which shows a conditional failure rate. In this case, I am particularly interested when a backsliding episode occurs given how long democracy has survived to assess whether these episodes yield different outcomes based on the measurement.

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[12]Table 5 in Appendix A provides the descriptive statistics of these variables by considering the data structure as the next sections shows.

Results and discussion

The first question of this paper asks how do measures of democratic quality impact empirical results. As indicated above, three of the most commonly used measures in the literature —Freedom House, Polity, and V-Dem (polyarchy) —were chosen to answer this concerns. As Table 1 shows, these measures capture different components and attributes of democracy that the theory indicates as relevant. Additionally, for the period of time and region considered in this work as Figure 1 shows, they may seem to share some commonalities. Nevertheless, the operationalization and scales are different for each one and may be capturing distinct facets of democracy that may not overlay, supplying with different results to empirical analysis. Something else to consider is that there are different number of observations due to the periodicity of the information where Polity ends in 2018. Thus, to test this first implication, Figure 2 shows the results of the democracy variables regressed on the set of determinants that the literature suggests.[13] However, as the the data structure and model specification manifest, the lagged value of each measure is incorporated in the right-hand side of the equation.[14] In that regard, we can see that the lagged democracy variables are positive and have a statistically significant result in all the specifications, all else equal, showing that the value of the measures of democracy at the present time are determined for its past value controlling for the rest of the variables.

Furthermore, the results show that there are differences among the empirical results of the measures. For instance, the *GDPpc(log)* has a statistically significant effect, both in present value, on Freedom House and the V-dem (polyarchy) measures. Nevertheless, even if positive, the effect is not statistically significant for the Polity indicator. Consequently, all else equal, economic development has a positive and statistically effect on *some* measures of democracy that increased their values, whereas others, even if positive, do not show statistical significance. Furthermore, we can tell that the dynamics indicate different effects that should be considered as well. In all the models, the lagged *GDPpc(log)* variable has a negative effect on the democracy measure but it is only statistically significant when regressed on the Freedom House measure. This particular result indicates that the opposite direction of the coefficient makes the variable's effect short lived but only for the first measure[15]. In contrast to the economic development variable, the party system institutionalization variable seems to provide more stable results of its effect on the measures of democracy.[16] Again, there is switch between the signs of the coefficient for the three measure with a positive in current periods and negative in the lags. Nevertheless, the results are only statistically significant when regressing the variable on the Polity and V-Dem measures, all else equal, and not for Freedom House.

Finally, there are mixed results for the population and area variables (see Table 6 in Appendix C). The first thing to consider is if the coefficients exhibit the same direction of the signs. For the

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[13]The Population and Area variables were not incorporated in this graph but are part of the model specification for each measure. Table 6 in Appendix C shows the coefficient results for all the variables.

[14]The traditional pooled model specification was estimated for these measures of democracy as Table 7 in Appendix C shows. These models incorporated fixed or random effects with varying empirical results depending on the specification which further calls into question the utility of the measures.

[15]See Carlin et al. (2015) interpretation for this model specification.

[16]This variables was lagged 3 periods given its non-stationarity characteristic until that point.

Figure 2: Model Estimation for Different Measures of Democracy
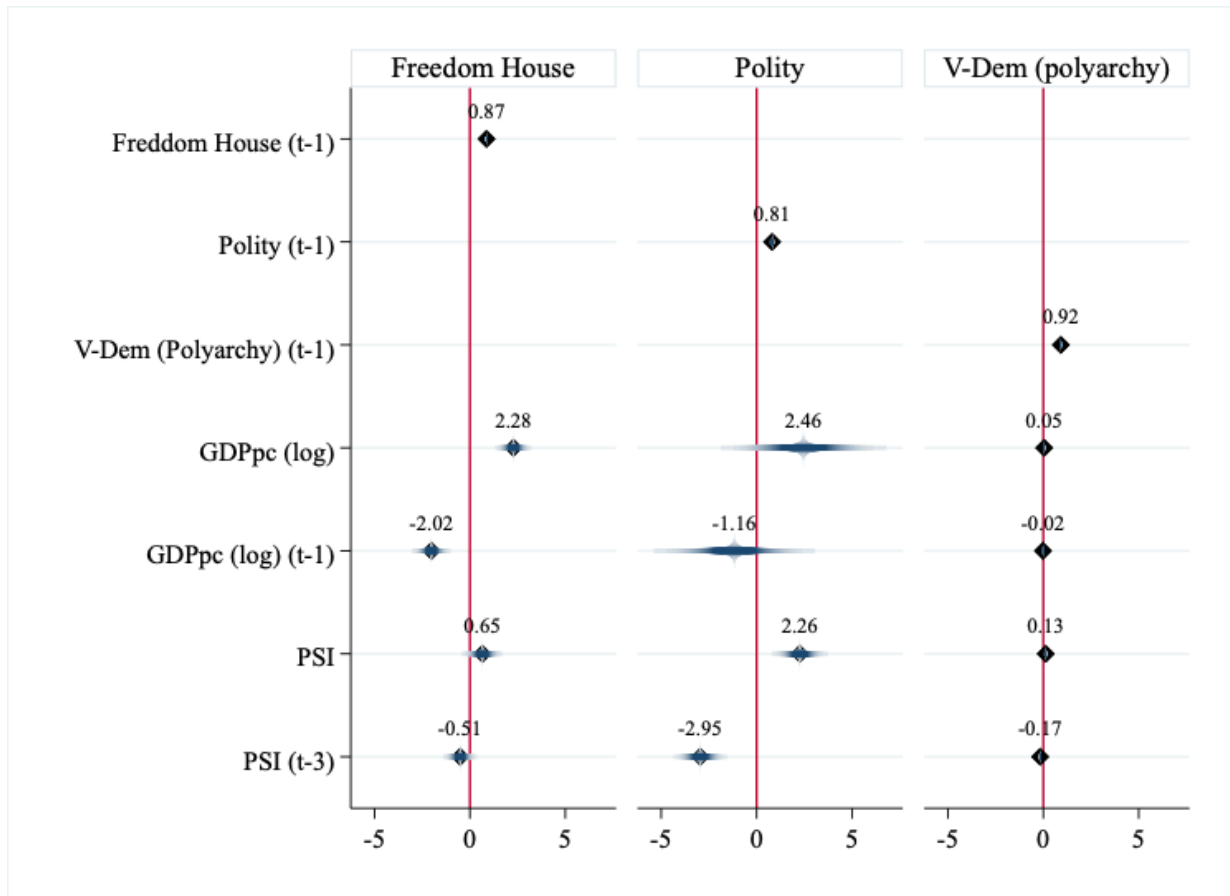
population variable, when regressed on Freedom House and V-Dem (polyarchy) the results show a negative sign in current periods and a positive one in the lags, while the contrary occurs when regressed in Polity. Furthermore, the results of the population variable are only statistically when regressed on the V-Dem (polyarchy) of democracy provoking, once again, different results on empirical results and questioning their use. Finally, the last variable to consider is area. This variable displays statistically significant results in both, current and lag values, when regressed on the Freedom House measure. In comparison, it does not show any statistically significant result for the Polity or V-Dem (polyarchy). Nevertheless, something worth mentioning is the signs of the coefficient are both negative in current and lag times when regressed on the V-Dem (polyarchy) measure. Even though these are not statistically significant, the similar signs indicate that the effect of this variable is long lasting given this specification.

With all these results, a first conclusion for the question corroborates that different measures of democracy yield varying empirical outcomes of democratic quality. The multivariate analysis with a dynamic specification provides a first look on empirical results when the measure of democracy changes. In particular, there are varying results for the determinants with positive and negative effects, and some statistically significant or not. This first conclusion raises doubts as to whether the measures can actually calculate similar results depending on their

use. However, there is a second question this article must answered and is related to capturing the backsliding episodes that the literature urges in these times. Consequently, the following subsection exhibits some empirical results about the measurement of these events employing the three measures of democracies previously established.

Backsliding episodes in Latin America

The second question of this work refers to the ways that different measures of democracy shape our understanding of democratic backsliding. As indicated above, there is an ongoing debate about what democratic backsliding means in the literature with several explanations. Additionally, building on that debate, backsliding episodes estimation may be different for different measures. Consequently, after some tentative conclusions about the different empirical results that the measures provide, this section exhibits the particular cases of democratic backsliding for the three measures. In that regard, there are two considerations to make: 1) the need to understand what are the measures showing as backsliding episodes and 2) if these events overlap regardless of the measure of democracy that is been employed. Consequently, Table 3 shows all the cases of backsliding episodes depending on the measure that is employed. Building on the literature, the aim is to estimate if any diminished occurred in the measure from year to year to any country. As the table exhibits, there are several cases of this decrease with similar cases that all the measures present but differences that are relevant to each one. This, again, probes the use of different data to assess empirical results and questions the understanding of backsliding episodes in the region.

Table 3: Number of Backsliding Episodes per measure

Freedom House		Polity		V-Dem (polyarchy)	
Country	Episode	Country	Episode	Country	Episode
Argentina	2001	Argentina	1989	Bolivia	2006-2020
Bolivia [a]	2001-2003	Bolivia	2003	Brazil	2016-2021
Brazil	1993	Bolivia	2009	Ecuador	2007-2013
Colombia	1989	Colombia	1995[c]	El Salvador	2018-2023
Colombia [a]	1993-1995	Dominican Republic	2016	Guatemala	2018-2023
Honduras	2009	Ecuador	2000[c]	Honduras	2006-2010
Nicaragua	1991-1993 [b]	Ecuador	2007[c]	Mexico	2020-2023
Nicaragua [a]	2007-2009	Honduras	1985	Nicaragua	2006-2023
Nicaragua	2016	Nicaragua	2016[c]	Peru	1990-1992
Nicaragua	2018	Paraguay	1998	Peru	2016-2023
Nicaragua [a]	2020-2022	Peru	1992[c]	Venezuela	1998-2018
Peru	1988-1992 [b]	Venezuela	1992		
Peru	1997	Venezuela	1999		
Venezuela	1992	Venezuela	2001		
Venezuela	1999	Venezuela	2006		
Venezuela [a]	2008-2010	Venezuela	2009[c]		
Venezuela	2018	Venezuela	2017[c]		

[a] Special cases added to the measurement. At least two consecutive periods with a decrease of 1.

[b] Cases with a decrease of 2 (at least) in consecutive periods.

[c] Cases with a decrease of 2 or more.

The Freedom House measure shows 17 episodes with a decrease in its measure resuming the Third Wave of democratization in the region. Following the literature (Tomini and Wageman 2018) this variables captures if there was a decrease of at least 2 points in the score.[17] For this set of cases there are three particular subgroups that the table shows: 1) 10 cases with a decrease of at least 2 points from one year to the immediately next in the score (no superscript in the table), 2) 5 cases with a decrease of exactly 1 point from one year to the immediately next in the score in at least 2 consecutive years (superscript a), and 3) 2 cases with at least 3 points decrease spanning in at least 3 consecutive years (superscript b). For the first subgroup, 6 cases changed its status —from Free to Partial Free in 5 cases and from Partial Free to Not Free one —. The only case that turned to Not Free status (consider as non-democratic) was Nicaragua in 2018 were the score went from 7 to 5. For the second subgroup, the status changed from just one of the cases: Bolivia from Free in 2001 to Partial Free in 2003. However, in this subgroup Nicaragua remained in the Not Free status from 2020 to 2022 with an additional decrease in the score (5 to 3) with one of the lowest values for the measure in the whole dataset. Finally, the last subgroup includes the cases of Peru from 1988 to 1992 and, again, Nicaragua but from 1991 to 1993. These cases show a decrease of at least 3 points in at least 3 consecutive years. The first case reported a changed in status that reached the Partial Free level while the latter stayed as Partial Free.

Additionally, building on Huq and Ginsburg (2018) with the Polity measure, the paper estimates the number of backsliding episodes. This variable shows if any decrease in value, from 1 point and lower, has happened from one year to another in any country of the region resuming their year of transition. In that regard, as Table 3 shows, there are 17 country-year cases were a decrease in the polity measure occurred. Of this total, 10 episodes show a diminished of 1 point whereas 7 exhibit 2 points or more. Given these results, one could argue that these countries suffered from a diminished in their democratic quality. Nevertheless, as the polity measure allows, there may be more prominent cases than others in regard with the regime type involved in each decrease. As noted earlier, this score ranges from -10 (strongly autocratic) to +10 (strongly democratic) with a subdivision of the measure. Particularly, countries situated in -5 to 5 scores are classifies as "anocracies" which pertain to more representative cases of backsliding and hybrid regimes. For the measure there are 4 countries that switched from democracies to anocracies according to the scores. The first case is Honduras that diminished its score by 1 point going from 6 in 1984 to 5 in 1985. Additionally, as the event of the "autogolpe" shows, Peru suffered from a 12 points diminished in its score from 1991 to 1992. Even though it did not go lower, was on the verge of becoming a dictatorship.[18]. The third case is Ecuador in 2007 with a score of 5 with a 2 point decrease from 2006. Finally, Venezuela has suffered from repeated episodes where in 2006 went from 6 to 5. The other two episodes are similar to those of Peru but for those cases the country went from anocracies to dictatorships in 2009 (5 to -3), and finally,

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[17]Tomini and Wageman (2018) indicated that the score should decrease at leat 1.5 points. However, as mentioned above, I add both civil liberties and political rights into a measures that ranges from 2 (low) to 14 (high). Consequently, the 2-points here resembles the estimation of the authors.

[18]Literature on this

after a recovered period, in 2017 (4 to -3).

In addition, this measure exhibits some diminishes that may be emblematic to consider for the backsliding episodes. For instance, Ecuador went from 9 to 6 in the year 2000 after a financial crisis that lead to dollarization of the economy and high rates of inflation, unemployment, and poverty. Likewise, the general elections in Nicaragua where president Ortega was reelected by circumventing constitutional term limits provoke a decrease of 3 points (9 to 6) in the score. Finally, Colombia's score went down 2 points in early 2000 from 9 to 7. All of the cases in the table show a decrease in the score that may be relevant. However, some of the countries remained as democracies or suffered from drawbacks that were recovered later indicating that any diminished in the measure may not imply a democratic backsliding episode but. Thus, the theory must consider some other factors when classifying which episodes are considered as backsliding and which are not, regardless of the measure. Additionally, something to note is that the information is available until 2018 which leaves out more recent cases that the other measures do consider.

Finally, the third column of the table shows the autocratization episodes when the V-Dem (polyarchy) measure is employed. This variable is taken from the V-Dem project and refers to Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) (Edgell et al. 2020; Maerz et al. 2020; Wilson et al. 2020) and is estimated in the literature (Lührmann and Lindberg's 2019). Particularly, it analyzes episodes of regime transformation through a continuum and estimates instances of democratization and autocratization. For the particular goal of this paper, I use the autocratization variable with the episodes that are shown in Table 3. There 11 cases from 10 countries that the dataset estimates as autocratization episodes in Latin America resuming the Third Wave of democracy. Something to consider, is that these episodes entail a greater number of years given their definition of a autocratization episode as a continuous process that may reflect better the conception of a gradual change. The longest autocratization episode if the one for Venezuela that starts in 1998 and finished in 2018 —a total of 21 years for the country. After this case, Nicaragua and Bolivia complete this top three of countries with the longest autocratization episodes for the region. Arguably, extending the presidential term limits by circumventing the constitution from the executive can account as some of the determinants of these episodes. Furthermore, these cases are similar to the ones shown for the Freedom House and Polity measures with the exception of the periodicity.

With all the results in mind, there are some tentative conclusions than can be make regarding the ways that different measures of democracy shape our understanding of democratic backsliding in Latin America resuming the Third Wave of democratization. With respect to the similarities, the measures are intended to show that decreases in their scores may reflect strikes on democratic processes, institutions, components, and ideals within countries. Given the concerns that the literature has shown lately, it is imperative to address the problem with empirical results that can provide clues for its study and possible solutions, which the measures are trying to accomplish. Additionally, there are similar cases that overlap for the three measures which indicates a partial agreement of this dynamic and its conception. For instance, countries as

Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela, are equivalent for the measure with some periodicity difference. Thus, it provides a robust preliminary approximation for quantifying the problem. Nevertheless, there are some caveats regarding these results that are worth noting. First, other cases do not overlap which questions the ability to compare and contrast different measures. This is connected to a second and a third issues regarding the definition of the episodes and level of measurement that affects, more generally, what the measures are trying to capture.

The Freedom House and the Polity are measured as ordinal variable with discrete values that sustain a particular ordering but the equal-unit distance can be questioned, as equivalent decreases may not carry the same significance across different value ranges. In contrast, the interval measure of the V-Dem variable could reflect a better gradual process of changes as noted above but lacks the division of values into categories, from one type of regime to another, that the other measures have. Finally, the periodicity of each database, in particular that of Polity, does not allow for greater comparisons because it cannot be assumed whether after 2018 there will be more cases that may overlap. All of these raises concerns about the empirical results to the countries that have suffered from these episodes, their conceptual definitions, measurement, and the implications for their political systems more generally.

Figure 3: Average Time until Backsliding Episode
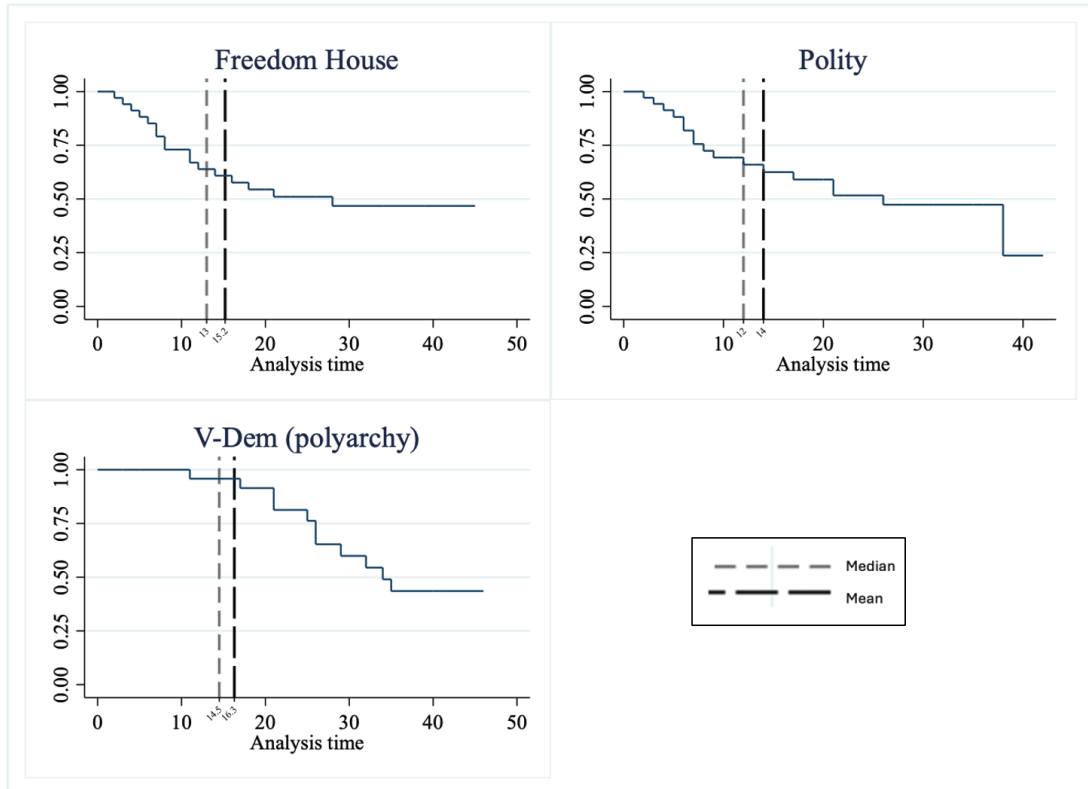
To expand on this particular caveat, Figure 3 shows Kaplan Meier when considering the backsliding episodes for each of the measures. In this case, the concern is when a backslid-

ing episode occurs given how long democracy has survived for every measure. As mentioned earlier, there are 17 cases for each Freedom House and Polity measures and 11 for the V-Dem (polyarchy) measure. Additionally, the goal of the graphs is descriptive with the aim to assess whether these episodes yield different outcomes based on the measurement. Moreover, For the V-Dem (polyarchy) measure, I recoded the events to 1 when the episode initiates and 0 the rest (check Table 3). In that regard, the measures of backsliding are somewhat more comparable. The average time until these episodes occur varies by the measure with 13, 12 and 14.5 for the Freedom House, Polity, and V-Dem (polyarchy), respectively. This provides even more evidence about the different empirical results that these measures yield and implications to their periodicity and impacts on democratic or hybrid regimes.

Conclusion and Agenda

The Third Wave of democratization involved an intense study of new regime transitions globally. Results varied across regions and countries where democracy lasted in many, others showed returns to dictatorship, and some were trapped in hybrid regimes. In parallel, as the focus of analysis shifted from explaining regime transitions to evaluating the character of democratic regimes, different measures of democracy were developed to asses its quality with several components specific to each one. Nevertheless, disputes about what these measures show have plagued the discussion. Additionally, the momentary equilibrium of what democratic political systems meant took a new direction where various actors adapted their expectations and refined their actions by manipulating the democratic system's rules to achieve their own goals, boosting backsliding episodes. As a result, the measures of democracy designed to reflect its quality had to adapt to this shift and find new plausible ways to measure their implications with, once again, a disagreement on theory and measures. Given all of the above, this article investigates whether different measures of democracy produce consistent empirical results for 18 Latin American countries starting the Third Wave of democratization. Latin America has shown the Third Wave as a transition with different results both cross-sectionally and temporally. Some countries strengthen their democracies, others returned to dictatorships, yet others face an intricate blurred path between these two poles. In this regard, the article argues that varying measures of democracy yield different empirical results regarding democratic quality and episodes of democratic backsliding. Specifically, the work compares and contrasts three of the most widely measures of democracy in the literature: Freedom House, Polity, and V-Dem (polyarchy).

By specifying and estimating a multivariate approach with an ARDL(Autoregressive Distributed Lag) regression models, this work finds difference in the empirical results. Notably, the multivariate analysis with a dynamic specification indicates that the determinants show varying effects —both positive and negative—with some being statistically significant and others not. This finding supports the firs hypothesis of the work and raises questions about whether these measures can consistently produce comparable results depending on their use. In particular, as the models show, the results vary throughout specifications, dynamics, kind of effects, and

number of observations. All this indicates that it is necessary to take precautions when choosing one of these measures since it leads to obtaining some results and not others. Additionally, a secondary objective was to compare the backsliding episodes identified by each of the measures. The literature has employed all of the measures to estimate backsliding episode showing that decrease in their scores may reflect these. However, the main conclusion for this objective is that different measures yield different backsliding episodes with only a few being repeated. In that regard, there are similar cases that overlap which indicates a partial agreement of this dynamic and its conception. Nevertheless, other cases are not repeated which questions the ability to compare and contrast these prominent events. This is particular relevant given the caveats on how these episodes are defined and the level of measurement of the variables.

Consequently, considering all these results, it can be concluded that the measures of quality of democracy that are chosen for empirical work will yield some results and not others. In particular, given the shift in the study of the quality of democracy to new events that weaken it, it is necessary to evaluate the use of the measures and the way they shape ideas, theoretical and empirical, of democratic backsliding. Additionally, empirical studies have employed different measures to account for backsliding episodes. Nevertheless, the biggest question is that if a decrease in the value of these measures is actually related to an episode itself, or has to do with something else. Are these episodes part of polarization, inherit weak democracies, or institutional change explanations that compose the literature. For instance, how are the empirical cases of democratic backsliding in Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela —countries appearing in all the three measures—different or similar from those seen in Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Brazil —countries appearing in two of three measures—or the cases of Mexico and El Salvador showing at least a 4-consecutive year decline in the V-Dem (polyarchy measure). More specifically, for the Freedom House index, there are no patterns in more developed political systems as the literature indicates (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Furthermore, are these episodes congruent even if the country remains a democracy as suggested by Huq and Ginsburg (2018)? Moreover, with the V-dem indicator and regarding autocratic episodes, some countries may pertain to this category even if the literature suggests they are not. Is this a correct measure?

Finally, something wort mentioning is that there exists an unstructured conceptual framework on how democratic backsliding unfolds as this essay suggests. There are some definitions and some processes that can make sense of how it initiates but there is no general consensus. To study backsliding, this study suggests that it is necessary to reach agreements on a unified framework that starts with a clear definition of the phenomenon. In this regard, we could start with Bermeo's (2016) definition but add the strength of institutions (Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo 2020) as a component. This approach allows us to identify which countries are more susceptible to rule changes and which are not, a key concern within the broader discussion on the topic. Then, we could check the attempt to subvert other institutions via democratic means. This is important because as this literature suggests, accountability is central to these events (Laebens 2023). Furthermore, with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) idea of the figure who wins elections, we could identify what threatens these institutions. Particularly, a new strand indi-

cates how populists from the right and left can intervene in this step and which mechanism they use (Weyland 2024). Moreover, we have to consider polarization in citizens and their possibility of supporting these leaders. Finally, there is the need of unification and combination of different measures. This will be intimately connected to the theory but can help to sort out which cases seem relevant in different indicators and which ones cast doubt. In this regard, the debate about democracy and its measures will be present, but showing these shortcomings and being clear about the goal, can be helpful when investigating and estimating democratic backsliding episodes.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table 4: Average Scores of Democracy per Country

Country	Freedom House	Polity	V-Dem
Argentina	11.76	7.83	0.80
Bolivia	10.45	8.14	0.64
Brazil	11.13	7.91	0.79
Chile	13.09	9.07	0.84
Colombia	9.63	7.51	0.56
Costa Rica	13.76	10.00	0.89
Dominican Republic	11.20	6.61	0.56
Ecuador	10.64	7.30	0.66
El Salvador	10.28	7.00	0.47
Guatemala	8.44	6.26	0.51
Honduras	9.58	6.37	0.47
Mexico	10.42	8.00	0.65
Nicaragua	8.15	7.76	0.48
Panama	11.80	8.83	0.71
Paraguay	9.69	7.20	0.55
Peru	10.02	6.18	0.65
Uruguay	13.28	9.40	0.85
Venezuela	8.83	5.83	0.54

Source: Freedom House 2024; Marshall and Gurr 2020; Coppedge et al. 2024
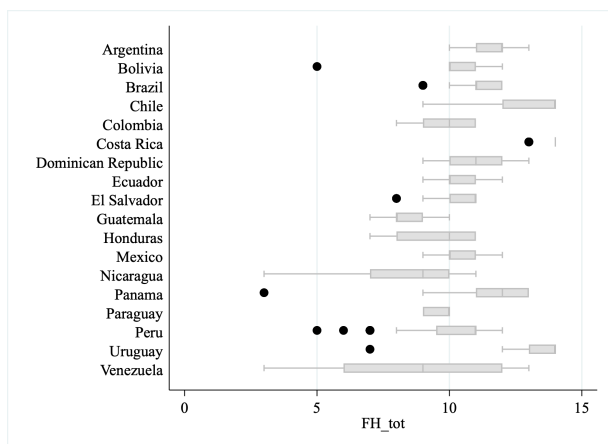
Figure 4: Boxplot Freedom House
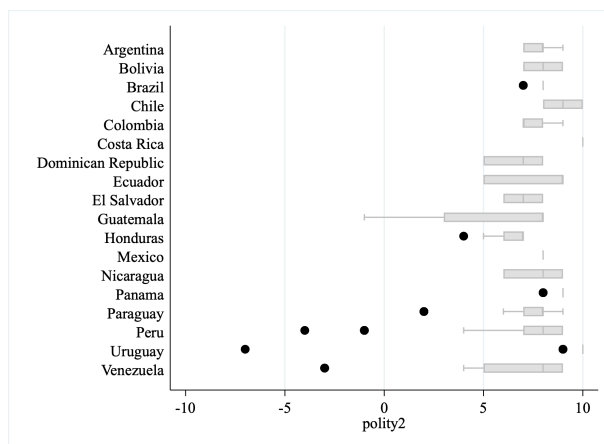
Figure 5: Boxplot Polity
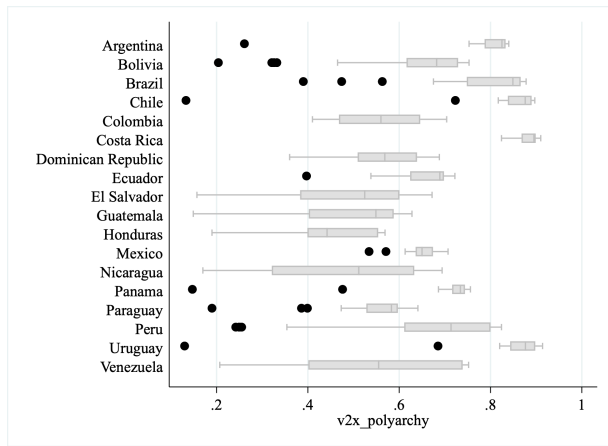
Figure 6: Boxplot Electoral Democracy

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics Time-Series Cross-Sectional

Variable		Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max	Observations
Freedom House	overall	10.68333	2.120763	3	14	N = 720
	between		1.605065	8.147059	13.76087	n = 18
	within		1.432067	1.883333	14.85725	T-bar = 40
Polity	overall	7.574603	2.24281	-7	10	N = 630
	between		1.171671	5.829268	10	n = 18
	within		1.911396	-8.825397	10.74533	T = 35
V-Dem (polyarchy)	overall	0.6440806	0.1828467	0.13	0.914	N = 720
	between		0.1397996	0.4650698	0.8866304	n = 18
	within		0.1214184	-0.0756944	0.86211	T-bar = 40
GDP pc (log)	overall	8.506716	0.64868	7.069975	9.814432	N = 674
	between		0629787	7.401168	9.385035	n = 17
	within		0.2491875	7.879032	9.228747	T-bar = 39.6471
PSI	overall	0.6029261	0.1892356	0.207	0.975	N = 717
	between		0.1838417	0.3487045	0.951225	n = 18
	within		0.0772196	0.2561056	0.8792215	T-bar = 39.8333
Population(log)	overall	16.36956	1.100602	14.63287	19.16804	N = 720
	between		1.163338	14.99438	18.99587	n = 18
	within		0.1941321	15.80975	16.82889	T-bar = 40
Area (log)	overall	12.71004	1.586683	9.938855	15.93875	N = 702
	between		1.633991	9.938855	15.93875	n = 18
	within		0.0134759	12.66316	12.77172	T = 39

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Appendix B

Figure 7: Freedom House

Graphs by Country Name

Figure 8: Polity

Graphs by Country Name
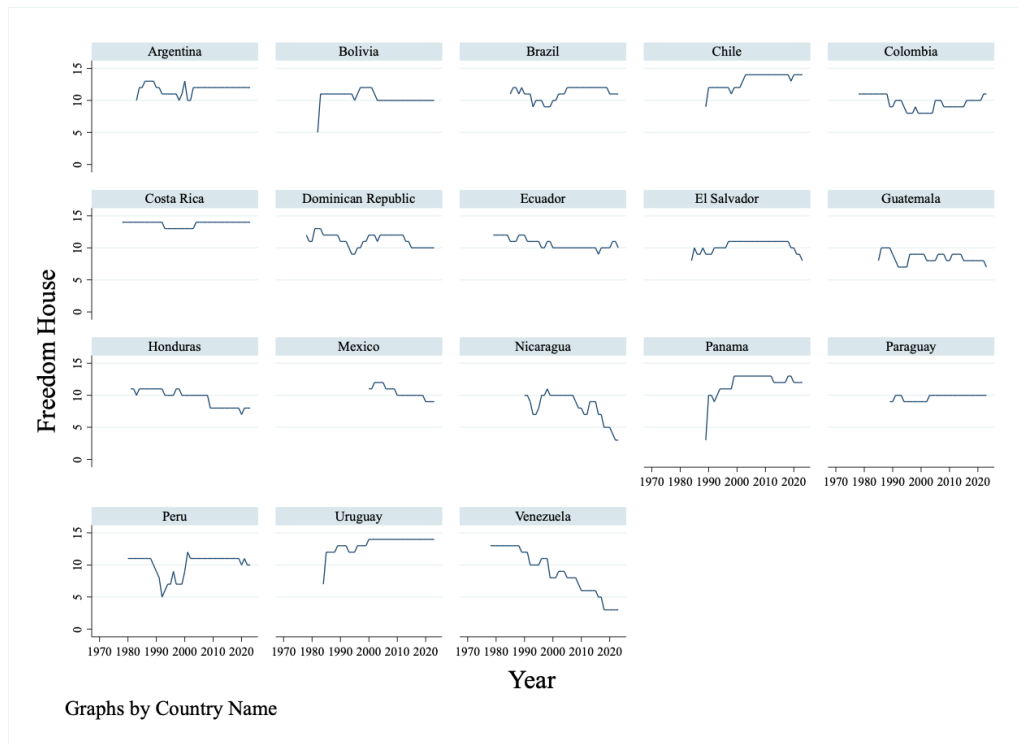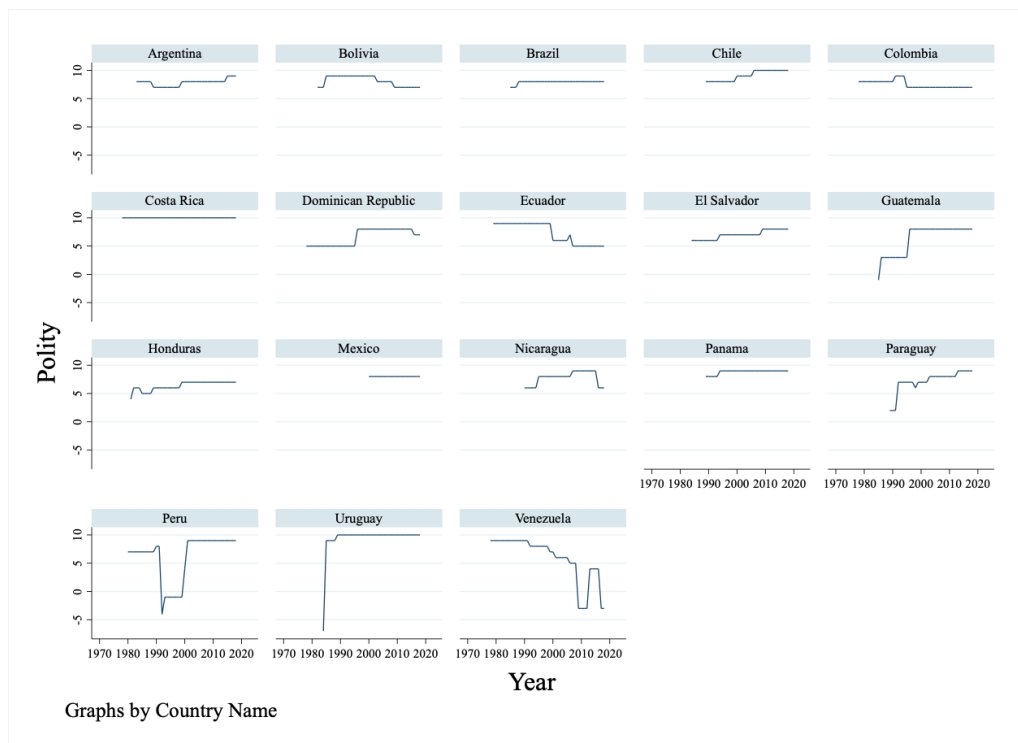
Figure 9: V-Dem
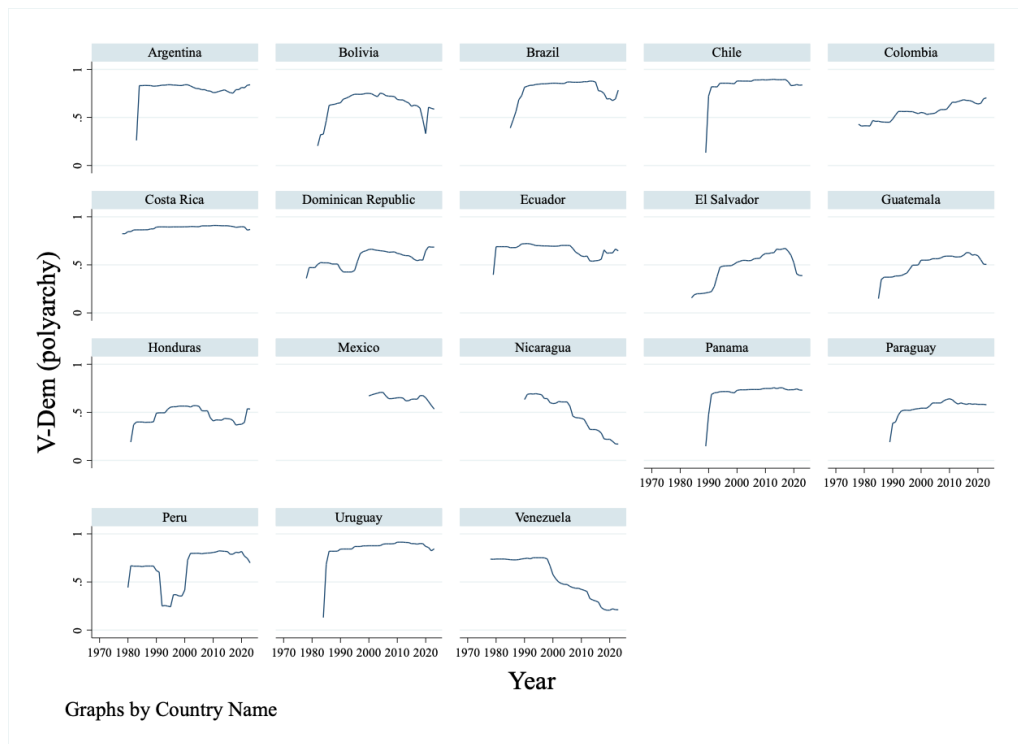
Appendix C

Table 6: Regression Models: ARDL specification

	Freedom House	Polity	V-Dem (polyarchy)
Freedom House$_{(t-1)}$	0.871***		
	(0.02)		
Polity$_{(t-1)}$		0.814***	
		(0.04)	
V-Dem (polyarchy)$_{(t-1)}$			0.921***
			(0.02)
GDPpc(log)	2.280***	2.457	0.0455**
	(0.37)	(1.68)	(0.02)
GDPpc(log) $_{(t-1)}$	-2.022***	-1.164	-0.0162
	(0.39)	(1.63)	(0.02)
PSI	0.653	2.263***	0.126***
	(0.42)	(0.57)	(0.03)
PSI$_{(t-3)}$	-0.513	-2.954***	-0.165***
	(0.35)	(0.54)	(0.02)
Population(log)	-2.877	4.745	-0.559***
	(3.23)	(12.12)	(0.20)
Population(log)$_{(t-1)}$	2.236	-4.827	0.556***
	(3.18)	(11.81)	(0.19)
Area(log)	-9.182**	-1.169	-0.0327
	(3.78)	(5.19)	(0.32)
Area(log)$_{(t-1)}$	8.000**	6.711	-0.0387
	(3.74)	(5.36)	(0.32)
Year	-0.00256	-0.0268**	-0.00139***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Constant	32.83	-37.58	3.714**
	(20.83)	(47.21)	(1.70)
N	645	573	645

Standard errors in parentheses

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

Table 7: Pooled Models Specification

	F. House	F. House	Polity	Polity	V-Dem (pol)	V-Dem (pol)
GDPpc(log)	2.763**	1.959**	3.428**	2.078***	0.134	0.141**
	(1.08)	(0.91)	(1.29)	(0.53)	(0.10)	(0.07)
PSI	3.718*	4.209**	0.317	1.136	0.426**	0.385**
	(1.90)	(1.66)	(1.99)	(1.70)	(0.19)	(0.17)
Population(log)	-5.001***	-3.362***	-2.819	-1.369*	-0.0460	-0.0667
	(1.65)	(1.26)	(2.83)	(0.82)	(0.15)	(0.08)
Area(log)	0.951	1.661**	29.73***	0.514	0.664*	0.0462
	(4.06)	(0.68)	(6.80)	(0.46)	(0.38)	(0.04)
Constant	53.28	24.35***	-355.3***	4.056	-8.507	-0.358
	(70.89)	(9.04)	(122.00)	(8.57)	(6.55)	(0.61)
Fixed Effects	Yes		Yes		Yes	
Random Effects		Yes		Yes		Yes
N	699	699	627	627	699	699

Standard errors in parentheses

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01