

Authoritarian or Democratic Innovations? A Reassessment of the Influence of Political Innovations in the Democratic Quality of Latin America

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BACKGROUND

In exploring the impact of institutional reforms in Latin America, scholarly attention has shifted to democratic innovations to enhance civic engagement and participation in formal institutions. However, we must consider the prospect of incumbent takeovers. Strong executives can mitigate the potential benefits of higher political participation and use it to remove elite constraints on their power. This research examines an understudied tool in the larger field of democratic backsliding and presidentialism.

THEORY

- Democratic innovations aim to correct the shortcomings and biases of formal institutions. However, assuming that innovations will positively impact democracy overlooks the varied effects they can produce, depending on the presidents' strengths and agendas (Dresden et al., 2015).
- By increasing the instances where citizens cast their votes, executives can attempt to bypass elite-level constraints and erode conventional political institutions and accountability mechanisms from a position of strength (Svolik, 2014).

DATA

- The LATINNO dataset curated by Progrebinschi (2021) includes 3744 democratic innovations in 18 countries of Latin America.
- The high-level, mid-level, and low-level dimensions of democracy, the presidentialism index, and control variables like Mass Mobilization and GDP per capita from the V-Dem Project (Coppedge et al., 2023).

METHODS

- Time-series cross-sectional models with fixed effects and interaction effects between presidentialism and innovations on the following dependent variables:
  - High-level and mid-level dimensions of democracy.
  - Low-level components of electoral democracy.
  - Legislative and judicial constraints on the executive.



Strong executives use innovations to harm competitiveness and fairness of elections.

Presidents use innovations to subvert formal institutions and remove elite-level constraints on them.

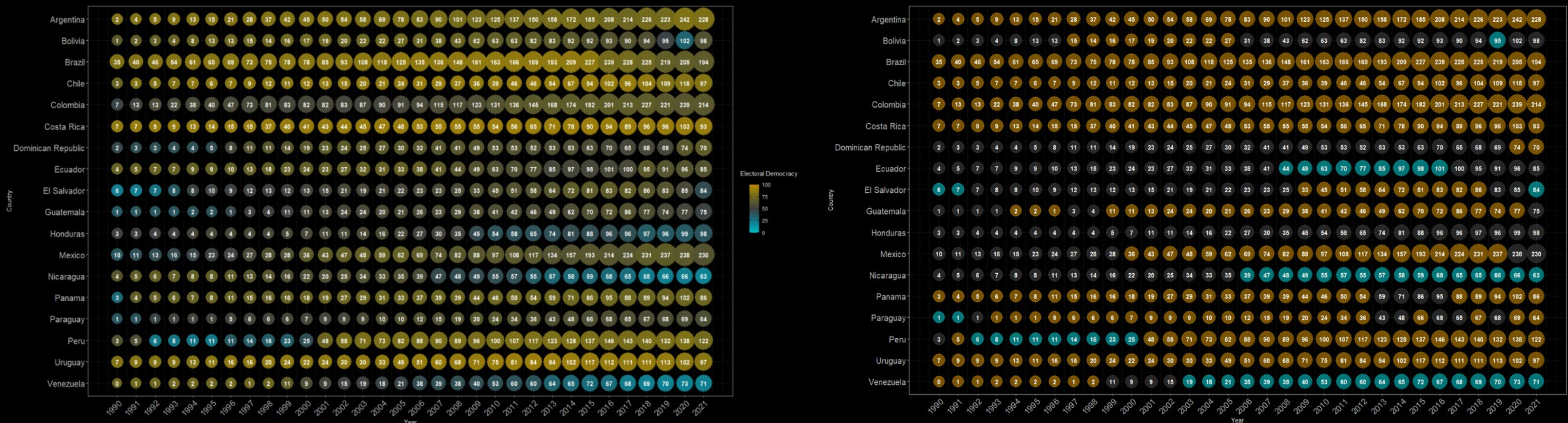


Figure 1. Number of innovations per country in Latin America from 1990 to 2021: (a) by Electoral Democracy Index (EDI); (ii) by Presidentialism Index.

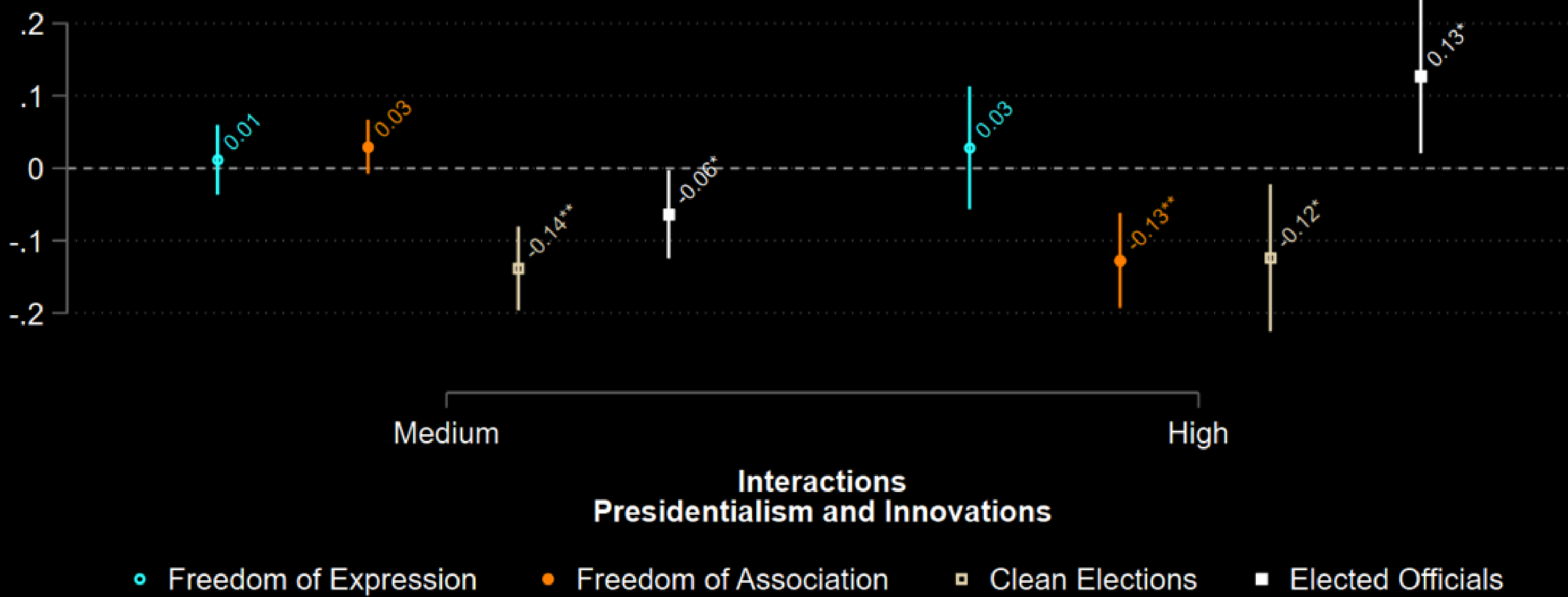


Figure 2. Interaction effects between Innovations and Presidentialism on each of the low-level components of the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI).

RESULTS

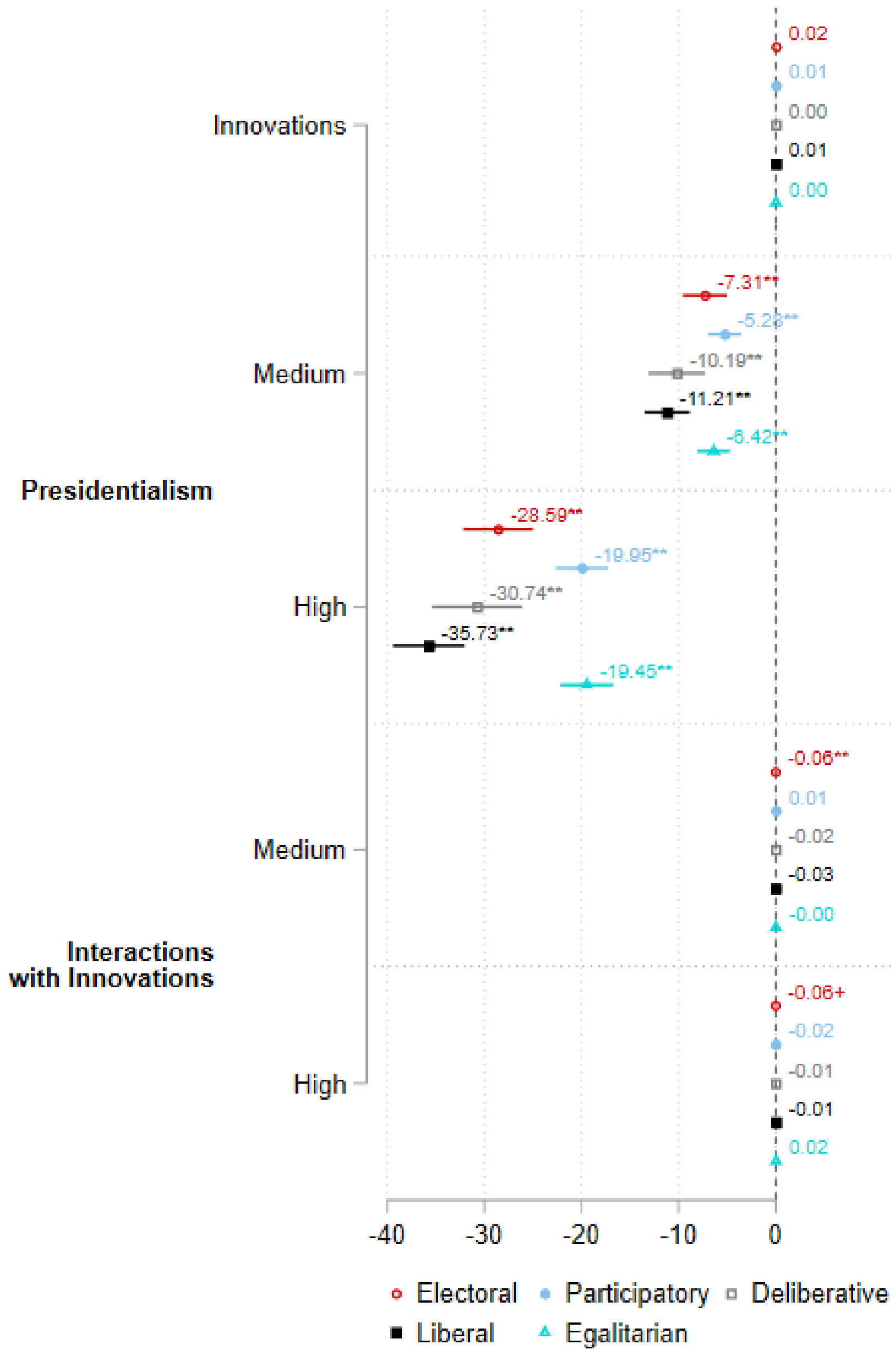


Figure 3. Interaction Effects of Innovations and Presidentialism on the High-Level Democracy Indices.

CONCLUSIONS

- Strong executives remain a threat to democracy, even when introducing "democratic innovations" to increase political participation. These innovations could potentially lead to incumbent takeovers.
- Strong leaders may increase the number of elections, but they create an uneven playfield that weakens vertical accountability. Having the support of the people allows them to increase their power vis-a-vis other elites and formal institutions, decreasing horizontal accountability.
- Although a project to study how consolidation and democratization work, LATINNO also offers an opportunity to study the strategies leaders use to co-opt civil societies.

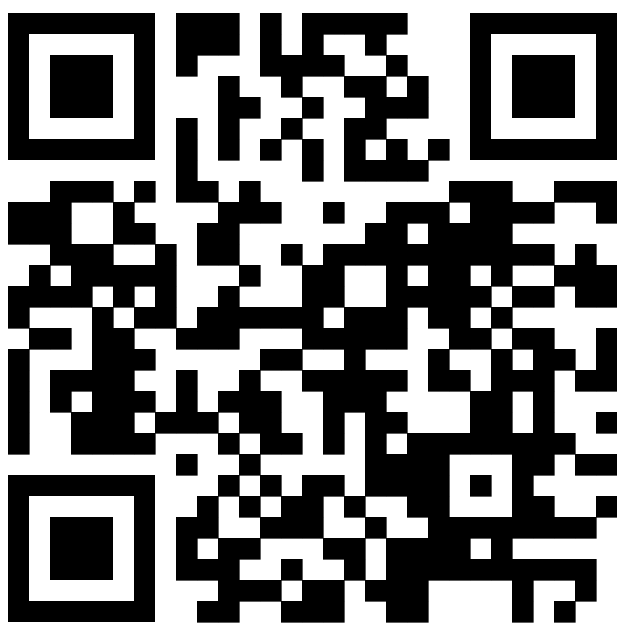
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