

## Dissatisfaction with democracy in Latin America Analysis of economic and political factors in 2017

### *La insatisfacción con la democracia en América Latina. Análisis de factores económicos y políticos en 2017*

**Yissel Santos González**

Universidad Iberoamericana

yisselsantos87@gmail.com

Orcid code: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6612-5621>

**Oscar A. Martínez-Martínez**

Universidad Iberoamericana

oscar.martinez@ibero.mx

Orcid code: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4103-674X>

#### **Abstract**

*The low satisfaction rates with the functioning of democracy in Latin America since the beginning of the century, has motivated to investigate the causes that originate these results. For that reason, the objective of the article is to explain what factors affect the perception of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in that region. To verify this, a binary logistic regression model was applied to eight variables grouped into three dimensions: economic, political performance and perception of corruption; The database used was the Latinobarometer 2017. The results show that both economic and political factors generate a greater probability of being dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy, despite this, people continue to consider democracy as the best form of government.*

#### **Keywords**

*Satisfaction with democracy, political institutions, economy, corruption, Latin America.*

**Suggested citation:** Santos González, Y., & Martínez-Martínez, Oscar A., (2020). Dissatisfaction with democracy in Latin America. Analysis of economic and political factors in 2017. *Universitas*, 32, pp. 149-166.

### **Resumen**

Los bajos índices de satisfacción con el funcionamiento de la democracia en Latinoamérica desde inicios de siglo, ha motivado a investigar las causas que originan estos resultados. Por esa razón, el objetivo del artículo fue, explicar qué factores inciden en la percepción de satisfacción con el funcionamiento de la democracia en dicha región. Para comprobarlo, se aplicó un modelo de regresión logístico binaria, a ocho variables agrupadas en tres dimensiones: rendimiento económico, político y percepción de corrupción; la base de datos utilizada fue el Latinobarómetro 2017. Los resultados muestran que tanto los factores económicos como los políticos, generan mayor probabilidad de estar insatisfechos con el funcionamiento de la democracia, a pesar de esto, las personas siguen considerando a la democracia como la mejor forma de gobierno.

### **Palabras clave**

Satisfacción con la democracia, instituciones políticas, economía, corrupción, Latinoamérica.

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## **Introduction**

The theoretical understanding of democracy has accompanied the work of dissimilar thinkers from different epistemic and ideological positions over the centuries. During the second half of the 20th century, Latin America experienced processes that consolidated democracy as the successor government system to authoritarian regimes in several countries of the continent, specifically in the Southern Cone, but this does not mean that they were constituted as perfect democracies. The democracies that are born in Latin America during the eighties have had as one of their political tasks, to build and consolidate neoliberalism (Dávalos, 2008), a process that conditioned the democracies of the entire region and today continues to do so.

Democracy has usually developed on two levels, the political, as a form of organization of society that includes decision-making for the good of the majority, and as a way of life, becoming an ethical social community, and sociocultural that determines the action of citizens (Dunn, 2014). When these factors do not operate correctly, we are facing a crisis or absence of democratic conditions that in turn reduce the satisfaction of citizens with the

government. This may explain to some extent, why satisfaction with democracy in Latin America has decreased since, between 2016 and 2017, it decreased from 34% to 30% (Latinobarometer, 2017), this could indicate an unease with democracy and institutions (Galli, 2013).

With the previous logic, it leads to questioning the trust in political and government institutions, income distribution, the degree of freedoms and citizen rights, the performance of the electoral system, which set a standard for democratic satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Díaz, 2014). For that reason, the objective of this article is to analyze how the economic performance factors, together with the political performance factors and the perception of corruption, explain the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Latin America.

The article is divided into four sections, first, review of the literature which expose from different theories, the main elements that explain satisfaction with the functioning of democracy; second, methodology, which describes: the variables and database used in the study, as well as the technique used; third, results, where the findings of the statistical model are exposed; fourth, discussion, where we analyze the results in relation to literature. At the end we present the conclusions.

## **Literature review**

The constant decline in the quality and functioning of democracy in Latin America has been a subject of recurrent analysis in the last decade. On the other hand, although satisfaction with democracy has been one of the most used concepts for political analysis, there is no consensus regarding the dimensions that involve this concept (Canache, Mondak & Sligson, 2001). According to the United Nations Development Program (2004), satisfaction with democracy has been very controversial when explaining which factors determine it; Because it is a performance variable and measures both the evaluation of the political regime and the evaluation of the government or party that is in power, even more as indicated by UNDP, in Latin America, there is an unease and disenchantment not necessarily with democracy, but within it, because citizens distinguish between democracy as a system of government and the performance of rulers in particular.

The assessment is understandable if modern democracy is understood as one in which all citizens share a set of equal conditions before the law, which allows them to exercise the construction of it, by granting power to a certain political figure, as well as to politics itself (Dunn, 2014). Instead, the problem is in the exercise of their citizenship rights before the law and universal citizenship (Galli, 2013). This is what it is called the representative state of law, as an integral part of modern democracy, as the latter author points out.

It is a transfer of political power, where the citizen exercises his sovereignty by delegating his will to a few who will represent him/her, and only then is recognized as universal, but, when the citizen does not feel correspondence between that power he/she has granted to certain political representative or governmental figure, he/she experiences discomfort or dissatisfaction with the political functioning that he/she believed represented him (Galli, 2013), which produces political dissatisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system. Disillusionment with democracy develops on two levels. The first is shown through the political apathy of the subject, through disenchantment or distrust of those who represent him/her, as well as democracy as a representation of his/her interests. The second is an objective one, which is linked to “the inadequacy of democracy to maintain its institutions, the inability to keep its promises and regulate politics” (Galli, 2013, p. 10). Leading the citizen to feel dissatisfied and without political alternatives.

Authors like (Díaz, 2014; Barreda, 2011) have tried to explain what elements determine the satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. These coincide in two elements: the economic performance and the performance of the political system, which include, the functioning of political institutions, the confidence in them, the valuation of people whether or not they agree with democracy as a system of government, or it functions in their country. In addition to the dimensions related to democratic procedures and the control of political power, indicators are also included, such as socioeconomic equality or fair income distribution, welfare level or social justice.

In that sense, the economic performance perspective maintains that the different levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy are associated with the results of the economy, and can respond to indicators measured at national level (economic growth) as well as personal (improvement of their economic conditions or resources), and derived from that, they would also respond to the assessment of the government’s effectiveness in

the management of economic affairs (Díaz, 2014). The greater the economic growth of a country, the probability of consolidating a democratic regime is greater and the degree of satisfaction of people increases (Lipset, 1959; Scott Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2008; Barreda, 2011).

Under that same logic, high levels of social inequality such as those presented by Latin America, together with the distributive inequality of per capita income, diminish democratic satisfaction, as well as the support expressed towards democratic authority in Latin America (Carlin, 2006). In this regard, Schumpeter (1942) and Sen (1999), indicate that the democratic order is linked to the growth of the economy, constituting the stability of the institutions and capacity for social advancement. Both authors lay the basis of a theoretical tradition that has proposed the importance of the economic situation of the country as the most influential factor in satisfaction with democracy.

Located on this analytical axis, Zovatto (2018) includes the element of inequality as a factor in the breakdown of a democracy, although he recognizes that, for 39 years, Latin America has been living the longest, largest and deepest process of democratization or (re) democratization (according to country in question) in its history. But points out that:

(...) democracy in Latin America presents a paradox: it is the only region in the world where there is a combination of democratic regimes in almost all of the countries that comprise it, with large sectors of its population living below the line of poverty (about 30% for 2017, according to ECLAC, 2016), the most unequal income distribution in the world, the highest homicide rates on the planet and very high levels of corruption. (Zovatto, 2018, p. 4)

Regarding political performance as a second factor that explains satisfaction with democracy, Aarts and Thomasen (2008) point out that the variability in the degree of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy has a causal chain that begins in institutional elements. On the other hand, Anderson and Guillory (1997) emphasize the relevance of the political preferences of the citizens and their approval of the president in turn, given the degree of presidentialism in Latin America; to the extent that they feel represented by that party or president they have chosen to exercise power on behalf of all, they will feel more satisfied with the functioning of democracy as a system of government. Along the same lines, O'Donnell notes:

(...) Democracy is not only a democratic regime but also a particular mode of relationship, between the State and citizens and between the citizens themselves, under a type of rule of law that, together with political citizenship, sustains civil citizenship and a complete network of accountability. (O'Donnell, 2001, p. 27)

Institutionalist theory points out that the cause of democracy breakdown and poor satisfaction is due to the fragility of the institutions as well as to an inadequate design (Espino, 2002). That is why, an indicator that allows measuring it is trust in institutions, for that reason, when citizens express high levels of trust in parliament, courts, governments, municipalities, police and political parties, there will probably be greater satisfaction with the democratic system (Cea, Alister & Guerrero, 2015).

Another indicator that can be associated with satisfaction with democracy is the perception of corruption, in this regard Cea, Alister and Guerrero (2015) point out that there is a broad consensus that corruption generates a negative impact on the support of political systems. They emphasize the importance of integrating the notion of corruption into the analysis of satisfaction with democracy as the subjects that:

They have a high perception of corruption, (...) they are openly dissatisfied with their operation, so corruption levels not only harm the government on duty but also depress satisfaction rates with democracy. (Cea, Alister & Guerrero, 2015, p. 93)

Similarly, Morales (2009) states that the perception of corruption responds to those ideas or images that are created regarding the performance of the authorities and, that in Latin America has a specific relevance since presidentialism characterizes the democracies of the region. This may reflect an unease that manifests the lack of satisfaction with democracy compared to the president's evaluation in the country (Cereceda-Marambio & Torres-Solís, 2017). Corruption and political scandals, deteriorate the quality of the political system, at the same time, affect democratic satisfaction, gradually eroding their levels of citizen support and affect the image of the political parties involved (Sotillo, 2015). An issue that acquires special relevance in Latin America in the last decade and is expressed in this dissatisfaction, as Zovatto points out:

(...) There has been an increase in citizen dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and towards elites, expressed in some countries through a wide popular discontent (the so-called “street effect”), which has generated a crisis of governance of different intensity and consequences, even in some countries, leading to the early termination of the constitutional mandates of more than 15 presidents between 1978 and 2016. (Zovatto, 2018, p. 5)

The functioning of democracies in Latin America does not escape the general functioning of the system that must be understood in its hegemonic and polarizing relationship. Aspects that explain its breakdown and low rates of citizen satisfaction, as it constitutes the most unequal region in the world (Zovatto, 2011). For that reason, it is necessary to analyze the satisfaction/dissatisfaction with democracy, taking into account economic, political and corruption categories.

## **Materials and methods**

The study used the Latinobarometer (2017), which has a representative sample, with 20 200 observations, which is distributed in 18 countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. 1200 questionnaires were applied in each country; in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic.

Based on our objective “to analyze how economic performance factors, together with political performance factors and the perception of corruption, explain satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Latin America” the three dimensions: economic performance, political performance, and perception of corruption. The dependent variable was satisfaction with democracy.

**Chart 1**  
**Variables of the statistical model**

Dimensions	Type of variables	Variables	Response values
Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy	Dependent $Y$	Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (binomial)	0. Not satisfied with the functioning of democracy 1. Satisfied with the functioning of democracy
Economic performance	Independent $X_1$	Current economic situation of country 3 (Ordinal)	1. Very bad 2. Bad 3. Regular 4. Good 5. Very Good
	Independent $X_2$	Functioning of the economy 2	1. Not satisfied at all 2. Not very satisfied 3. More or less satisfied 4. Very satisfied
Political performance	Independent $X_3$	Degree of confidence in government 2	1. None 2. Small 3. Some 4. High
	Independent $X_4$	How fair is the distribution of income in your country? 2	1. Very unjust 2. unjust 3. just 4. very just
	Independent $X_5$	Degree of agreement. Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government 2	1. Strongly disagree 2. disagree 3. Agree 4. Strongly agree
	Independent $X_6$	Approval of government management headed by President 2	1. Does not approve 2. Approves
Perception of corruption	Independent $X_7$	How much do you think progress has been made in reducing corruption in state institutions in the last 2 years?	1. None 2. Very little 3. Some 4. Much
	Independent $X_8$	Country ruled by a few powerful groups for their own benefit	1. Powerful groups for their own benefit 2. For the good of all the people

Source: Own elaboration with data from the Latinobarometer, 2017.



The technique used was a binary logistic regression, because the dependent variable is dichotomous. The fit of the model was significant, both in Chi Square ( $p < 0.005$ ), the omnibus test of model coefficients ( $p < 0.000$ ) and the Hosmer and Lameshow test ( $p < 0.000$ ).

## Results

In chart 2, there are the results of the logistic model, as the *Exp (B)* are observed in a 95% confidence interval, greater than one, all with a positive sign, and significant ( $p < .00$ ). The results are ordered from greater to lesser weight, in terms of the probability of feeling satisfied (1) or not satisfied (0) with the functioning of democracy in Latin America. The variables with the greatest weight are those that integrate the economic performance dimension. On the one hand, the functioning of the economy is the most relevant, it increases the probability of being satisfied with the functioning of democracy by 2511 times. In that same sense, the perception of a good current economic situation in the country increases the probability of being satisfied by 1258 times.

Regarding the distribution of income, only 19.3% consider it just, hence our results indicate that, by increasing the perception of the fair distribution of income in a country, the probability that the population is satisfied increases by 1326 times with the functioning of democracy, associating the latter as a form of government that promotes equity or equal distribution of wealth. The above could explain why only 12.4% of the population considers the economic situation to be good and 1.2% that is very good, in this sense this indicator can be associated with the levels of poverty, inequality and at the same time of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and with politics in general.

On the other hand, in the Latinobarometer report (2017) it is clear that the perception that is governed for the interests of a few, increased for the second consecutive year from 73% in 2016 to 75% in 2017. In the case of the statistical model, this variable was the second most important, showing that the probability of being satisfied with the functioning of democracy increases by 1792 times as a country is governed for the good of the entire people and not only for powerful groups and their own benefit. A direct relationship is established that is confirmed with the literature, because according to

Dunn (2014) democracy is a social value associated with the interests of the people, that is why governments are increasingly criticized because they do not defend the interests of the many and, on the other hand, increasingly join in political fraud and corruption processes. The findings also indicate that regardless of the gradual decline in satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, the degree of agreement, with the statement that “democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government”, indicates that as long as people agree with democracy being the best system of government, it increases in 1639 times the probability of being satisfied with the functioning of democracy.

The above can be related to the approval of the government’s administration headed by the president, in this regard, 39.3% indicate that they approve the president’s management of the government. This allows us to explain that the low confidence in the government and the low approval of the government’s management influence the decrease in satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. For that reason, the value of its Exp (B) indicates that the approval of the government’s administration headed by the president in turn in each country increases the probability of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy by 1624 times.

Along the same lines, in Latin America, 33.3% of the population has little confidence in the government and 41.8% responds that they have no trust, which is a very revealing fact given the strong demands of civil society to this institution, due to the dissatisfaction that has been presented in recent years, in that sense, our results indicate that trust in the Government, generates 1309 times the probability of being satisfied with the functioning of democracy, pointing out the importance of this variable to reduce the dissatisfaction with democracy.

On the other hand, considering that one of the most important problems in Latin America is corruption (Zovatto, 2018), the results indicate that by perceiving that corruption is being reduced, the probability of being satisfied with the functioning of democracy is increased by 1120 times. In that sense, trust in political institutions is an indicator of great incidence according to the theory (Ayala, 2002).

**Chart 2**  
**Results of the logistics model**

Equation Variables	B	Standard error	Wald	gl	Sig.	Exp(B)
Economic performance	.921	.031	902.012	1	.000	2.511
Country ruled by a few powerful groups for their own benefit	.583	.052	123.808	1	.000	1.792
Degree of agreement Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government	.494	.031	253.943	1	.000	1.639
Approval of government management headed by President	.485	.048	100.163	1	.000	1.624
How just is the distribution of income in your country?	.282	.031	82.279	1	.000	1.326
Degree of trust in the government	.269	.027	100.154	1	.000	1.309
Current economic situation of the country	.229	.029	62.867	1	.000	1.258
How much do you think progress has been made in reducing corruption in state institutions in the last 2 years?	.113	.023	24.940	1	.000	1.120
Constant	7.513	.139	2933.43	1	.000	.001

Source: Own elaboration with data from the Latinobarometer (2017)

## Discussion

In Latin America, the low satisfaction with the functioning of democracy responds to both economic and political factors, which are closely linked in the exercise of government. The malfunction of these has generated disenchantment regarding the functioning of democracy as a system of government, although 69% agree that there is no better alternative, even with its problems. Despite this, discomfort and dissatisfaction are present, which deteriorates the confidence of citizens in government and other political and civil institutions.

From theory, Galli (2013) analyzes this discontent towards democracy, fundamentally given the impossibility of the democratic system to maintain its institutions, regulate political activity and fulfill its promises. It is impor-

tant to clarify, that it is not a rejection of democracy as a system of government but of its malfunction, which is linked to the institutional crisis of the State in recent decades. In this sense, the fundamental criticism of citizens turns towards the type of government that does not represent their interests or breaches their promises, as well as to the management of the government headed by the president in turn, as these levels of perception continue to decrease. The above is explained in the model if we take into account that these indicators, together with the indicator of the malfunctions of the economy, presented the highest betas and therefore the highest rates in probabilistic terms, therefore, an increase in the negative perception in these variables will increase the probability of not being satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Latin America.

According to the Latinobarometer report (2017), the approval of governments has declined since 2009, adding to this the increase in social demands across the continent in recent decades. Their claims focus on higher quotas for rights, social justice, political freedoms of organization and expression; that have allowed a boom in collective action from different spaces and dimensions of society, in order to generate a real democratization, this being understood as the need to demercantilize society, to question the dominant forms of the market and demand essential rights as citizens. The results of the model show that to the extent that the population perceives that it is governed in accordance with the interests of the entire people, the level of favorable perception on the functioning of democracy will increase. On the other hand, the indicator that reflects the perception of whether the country is governed for the benefit of a few has increased in the last two years. 75% of Latin Americans perceive that they are governed by a few powerful groups, an aspect that has weakened confidence in democratic functioning.

In the same order of ideas, Sotillo (2015) points out that a better citizen perception of the representative function of political parties, together with a greater sense of government effectiveness, will improve the valuation of democracy. On the contrary, lower valuations in these two dimensions will tend to stabilize feelings of democratic dissatisfaction and, therefore, will result in a lack of political commitment among citizens and worse assessments about the functioning of democracy.

The phenomenon of corruption is one of the most serious problems in Latin America since only 35.9% of the population has the perception that progress is being made in reducing it. If we consider that it is one of the in-

dicators that generate the greatest distrust in Democratic functioning (Cereceda-Marambio & Torres-Solís, 2017), it is necessary to include it as a central issue in political and governmental agendas. Our findings show that the decrease in corruption generates an increase in the likelihood of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, as is the case in Uruguay, which is the country with the highest satisfaction with democracy and has high rates of progress in fighting corruption, either through public policies or decision-making aimed at it. Failure to take actions to combat corruption would erode democratic satisfaction and with it the system of political practices of parties and other institutions (Sotillo, 2015).

Regarding the perception of income distribution, only 19.3% consider it just, an aspect that influences in probabilistic terms the decrease in satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. Element that is understood if we assume that 10 of the 15 most unequal countries in the world are in Latin America (Zovatto, 2011), giving what the author classifies as an “inequality trap”, as the Gini coefficient of income in the region it is higher than that of countries in sub-Saharan Africa or some of Asia. The high explanatory level of this variable can be related to the importance that Latin Americans attach to the economic performance factor. It is remarkable that the functioning of the economy turned out to be the one with the highest predictive level, which corresponds to the position of various authors (Díaz, 2014; Lipset, 1959). Together with this indicator, the one that measures the perception of the current situation of the country was included, where only 14% of the population considers it to be good or very good. Both are crucial factors in the valuation that citizens give to democracy and allow us to explain how much the political system works or not (Schumpeter, 1942; Sen, 1999), even the Latinobarometer report states:

The most important problem in the country is economic problems, which are the ones that are most pointed out in the region, over insecurity and crime. In 2017, 23% percent of consulted Latin Americans say that the country's main problem is of an economic nature (wages, employment, inflation ...), while an additional 11% points to the economy in general or the financial situation. In total, 34%, one in three Latin Americans says that the main problem facing their country is economic. (Latinobarometer, 2017, p. 58)

Economic security, expressed in the proper functioning of the economy, together with the perception of stability and development of a country by

its citizens, constitutes a key element in the trust of citizens in their rulers, and the work of those institutions they represent. This indicates the close relationship between the economic structure of a system and the political expression that supports it. Only to the extent that citizens perceive political representation and not the representation of a few, can they experience satisfaction with democracy as a system of government.

However, for Ranciere (2012, p. 61): “The evils that affect our ‘democracies’ are, first and foremost, evils linked to the insatiable appetites of oligarchs. (...)”. Reason why the author states that we do not live in a democracy and never have, but that “we live in an oligarchic rule of law, that is, in states where the power of the oligarchy is limited by the double recognition of popular sovereignty and of individual freedoms”. Although, the thesis that democracy has never existed is debatable, rather democratic systems have possessed and possess a limited character regarding their theoretical expression or significance in the practical reality of their manifestation in the different historical scenarios. Democracy under the liberal principle has been raised as an ideal system for every society, however, its concrete expressions depart from that ideal and express what is recognized as dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy as a system of government.

## **Conclusions**

Satisfaction with democracy is a reflection of the actions and policies that governments undertake, which can be assessed positively or negatively, for that reason, our results prove the hypothesis that both economic performance and political factors, as well as the perception of corruption, explain the satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Latin America. Hence, we can point out that the low perception of these factors due to their possible malfunction is diminishing this perception.

An element to highlight was that the perception of income inequality, the perception that the country is governed for the benefit of a few, along with corruption, are correlated with low confidence in government institutions, which indicates a possible area of new studies. The findings in the model allow us to verify, along with the reviewed literature, the value of its use in studies on the functioning of democracy. Specifically, in Latin America, where democratic fractures can be seen today, due to the lack of eradication

of social issues such as inequality, although the rates of extreme poverty have decreased as in the cases of Bolivia, Chile, or Ecuador. Undoubtedly, these problems have influenced the continuous decline in satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. In spite of this, the majority of the population continues to consider that democracy, despite its problems, is the best form of government. The challenges are in its current implementation when the economic needs of the majority of the population are not met, as the data in the Latinobarometer show.

The above is explained by the system of government that has prevailed in an initially liberal manner and today under the neoliberal hegemony, which has commercialized citizen rights and with them real democracy as an exercise of the government of the people. However, it is to be recognized that there have been democratization processes, regardless of the periods of authoritarian regimes in the region. The fact of having gone through welfare regimes in different periods has contributed to raising the standards of quality of life and with it the acceptance of democracy, although these regimes do not escape the capitalist systemic functioning, therefore, to the capital readjustments to consolidate itself.

Finally, it is important to point out that the role of institutions is fundamental in citizen perception, but it should be added that, since it is about perception, mass media has a certain degree of influence on that perception. In this case, neither the media nor the citizen's perception escape an ideological positioning, which exceeds the individual and subjective space, since they are subject to the functioning of hegemonies.

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Submission date: 2019/10/31; Acceptance date: 2020/02/10;

Publication date: 2020/03/01