Citizenship and continuous democracy*

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* A first approach to the topic that has been partly resumed in this article can be found in Cheresky (2006a). This paper has been revised, edited and translated by Gabriela Mattina.
The contemporary democratic wave in Latin America began three decades ago. Whereas in some cases it was a rebirth, in others it was an inception: it had a different start date in each of them. At the beginning of this cycle, the predominant study topic was the transition of previous authoritarian regimes and the enclaves they frequently left. Later, several analyses addressed the possibility of democracy to endure: therefore, studies on “consolidation” proliferated. After all these years something has become evident. The format of procedural democracy that many people dreamt of or wanted to take root has not been achieved. An “electoral democracy” diagnosis has spread instead, which argues that elections are soundly established as the only legitimate means of access to power; but it also implies that the institutional device considered as a characteristic of democratic regimes has not developed or remains in an embryonic stage. In consequence, are these rudimentary or precarious democracies?

We will not present our argument in terms of progress or delay in comparison to the classic paradigm. The disappointment with the course of democracy or the enthusiasm about diverse types of direct democracy provide us with data for a research on the democratic mutation that does not seem to be an exclusive feature of Latin America: on the contrary, similar processes are taking place in other Western societies.

Contemporary citizenship is the starting point of the analysis on the political regime we propose. There is a set of denominations –such as “plain citizenship”, “electorate”, “public opinion”, “social” or “civil movements” and “the people”, in their classic versions of unions or popular organizations– which are not exactly equivalent but are linked to a common principle: the source of political legitimacy in democratic societies. The background and novelty of these notions should be reexamined, since they are vital to understand the ongoing mutation of the political regime.

The centrality of individuals, the pronouncements they make and their social involvement\(^1\) derives from two relatively recent circumstances and from transformations that are still taking place before our eyes.

Democracy has acquired universal validity and value, in spite of the challenging anti-secular traditions that deny the principle according to which the political and social order is left to men’s will or at least to what men can do by following their free will –no longer constrained by the legacy of history and nature–. That is to say that the principle bestowing equality and participation to human beings reverberates all over the world like never before. At least the most important requirement, free elections and civil liberties, is expanding. In fact, the scope of these basic practices is not the same everywhere and their validity varies according to social condition. There are also some inherited elements, corporative realities and ties of subjection that persist in challenging democratic expansion, as well as new inequalities that emerge: however, all these aspects are in question. The universalization of democracy has certainly not disabled the claims for great reforms and a socially fairer order but these aspirations have not been essentially channeled in a providential alternative order –as they were a short time ago– but in the frame of democratic societies. The expansion of the democratic political order, conceived as the outcome of the activity of free-willed men who are not agents of a transcendent meaning, consequently entails the centrality of citizenship. This term, “citizenship”, includes a wide range of definitions, but it stresses what is every time more frequent: a space of individuals who are given rights or otherwise claim for them

\(^1\) We understand this concept in the sense of the French term, vie associative.
and also build changing associative or identitarian bonds. The experience of their public life and their present choices prevails over what they have inherited in this sphere. The political deinstitutionalization or, maybe, the institutional changes we witness are the result of the citizen activity that gives meaning to public life.

In other words, democracy expands, but it simultaneously undergoes a transfiguration. Those formats of equality and freedom that experts in politics frequently linked to certain institutions or laws are in question. Classifications or traditional measures used to distinguish the quality of political regimes according to classic paradigms show themselves to be derisory.

Citizen expansion—an expansion of rights, their holders and autonomy from any tutelage—is accompanied by a questioning of representation linkages in the different orders of social organization. The institutional system is subject to such mutations that the balance between the typical principles of democracy—equality, freedom, solidarity—seems to change, although the process evolves differently in the diverse parts of the democratic world. Anyway, from our point of view there is a common feature that we could call “the political world’s emancipation”. We do not mean that inequalities and social differences have disappeared: on the contrary, they have deepened in many cases and a large number of individuals are not seeking social condition improvements but are instead trying to obtain some public recognition and protection. Technological modernization in economy and communication, as well as globalization processes, have actually favored ephemeral and informal bonds and consequently weakened social identities of not only workers and excluded people, but also of many sectors who used to have a stable and continuous solvency. As a result of this, the conception of public and political life as a mere expression of these realities and the conflicts they entail has vanished. Interests and ideals are constituted in the public sphere along with the citizen identities that support them and that fact also seems to be true for claims related to the world of work or other sociological realities.

In addition, the political world’s emancipation does not place it beyond interests, their organized expressions and the privileges that crystallize within that world; but it does promote changes, the main of which is the fact that the political world is no longer an arena left for certain elites to prevail. This fact leads to a reconfiguration of the political world: if the public sphere and positions of power do not simply express interests which were organized in a previous reality, the very political life also acquires a different flow that does not match hyper-institutionalist conceptions. In other words, it is not about reflecting on the existence of channels and regulations that make public life similar to a system or organization whose development is essentially ruled. We do not mean that public life can take place without some order in civic expression or the recognition of legitimate authority, but the contemporary scene makes evident that the very institutional and regulatory system is permanently revised and updated: in that sense, democracy must not be conceived as a weak regime but an unstable one, because of its movement—derived from conflict and competition between political and social actors—and its capacity to adapt to what comes from the citizen deliberation.

In this way, citizenship is not confined to play an electorate role or be expressed by partisan, corporative or social organizations. The electoral moment is crucial, since it

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2 O’Donnell (1993) conceived a territorial range of colors to show the scope of the rule of law in Latin America, pointing out ‘brown zones’ where the validity of law and rights is weak or non-existent.
allows to appoint rulers and representatives. However, multiplying rights that contradict what was previously established or enunciate unforeseen novelties and change citizen condition do not always stem from constituted power’s initiative: on the contrary, they frequently emerge from public life, looking for validation and routinization by means of a legal and institutional support. It is true that representatives and rulers become enunciators and can even originate enunciations of rights. However, what characterizes the mutation in contemporary democracy is that legal rulers must revalidate the legitimacy of every significant decision they make. Autonomous citizenship keeps distance from power: it is an electorate that chooses different options and, after that, it is on the alert, monitoring government decisions. If the latter are publicly argued and mature in tune with prevailing opinions, the legitimacy of power, that is, the majoritarian representative linkage, gets reinforced. The existence of a variable and distrustful citizenship (Rosanvallon, 2008a) is not a complete novelty, but it currently acquires such centrality that it lets us define the political regime as a continuous democracy. Citizen life is, in this sense, the essence of democratic politics; it requires but does not actually occur within an institutional device—which is therefore not definitive or universal but subject to the particular mutations that democratic principles demand—.

I- From the people to citizenship. Electoral citizenship.

Citizenship’s centrality has been asserted from extremely varied perspectives, but all of them agree on a transformation of our contemporaries’ political condition.

Some of them –E. Laclau (2007), J. Rancière (1995)– pay attention to the formation of popular political identities through an expansion of the egalitarian principle and the constitution of an antagonism or disagreement with an “Other” that creates a bond based on the common condition of oppression (the people resulting from hegemonic action, according to Laclau) or deprivation of public and political existence (the people of the “part of those who have no part” that aspires to be counted in the sphere of logos, to be regarded as a member of the speaking beings’ world, in Rancière’s terms). Nevertheless, these identities are not described as the translation of a social condition into the public sphere and their constitution or emergence are not thought to be necessary or prefigured: on the contrary, they appear as the contingent result of political actions or decisions.

Other authors, who do not constitute a school either, make emphasis on political negativity. According to P. Virno (2003), M. Hardt and A. Negri (2004), social fragmentation prevents a cohesive subject from constituting, while there emerges instead the figure of a multitude gathered by the common denominator of rejection against an order or an enemy. Rosanvallon (2008a), for his part, considers that democracy is undergoing such a mutation that, besides its traditional pillar, the representative system, there is an expansion of the citizen presence and actions which go beyond elections and representation, since distrust is the permanent element of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. Distrust enables public devices that are parallel to those of representation and sustain the figures of the people as watchdogs, the people as judges and the people as veto-wielders. The distrust described by Rosanvallon
entails a citizen satisfaction achieved by the “negative sovereignty” or veto: this point is similar to the previously mentioned multitude’s negativity.

A. Giddens (1987) has highlighted a trait of the contemporary individual: reflexivity. Individualism, understood as the expansion of the freedom sphere, on which new relationships are based and where each person makes decisions independently of natural restrictions or traditional imperatives. According to this perspective, citizens with autonomous capacities could be in charge of decisions and develop linkages in a civil society that strengthens at the expense of a State with less welfare intervention and a market that would find a limit to the commodification of human bonds.

This variety of approaches to the current mutation, which focus on the actors’ specifically political articulation, individualism, the expansion of freedom and a potential autonomy, must be complemented by taking into account forms of popular organization (unions and social movements), which are more related to social, ethnic or environmental conflicts that in some cases persist, while in others they emerge or reemerge as a consequence of the democratic expansion. However, the appearance of these actors does not inevitably imply the constitution of political communities grounded on pluralism and political freedom.3

In this citizen –a term that connotes not only civil and political but also social rights, as exemplified by the widespread concept of “social citizenship”– and popular –a term that connotes more traditional ideas connected with social condition and polarities that seem to cover history: the rich and the poor, the powerful and the commoners– diversity we can recognize a tendency to the weakening and breaking-up of the “organized society” constituted by sociologically consistent actors –society and actors appeared as inherent to a phase of history, industrial society–, which benefits a flowing and contingent field with low institutionality and transitory actors: the citizen’s sphere.

The people, in the political imaginary that predominated in the 20th century, was a subject that covered the whole public sphere and whose unity came from the common condition of exploitation and oppression: partisan and corporative organizations, as well as those existing forms of collective action, seemed to validate this way of representing social reality and translating it into the political scene. This notion of the people and the realities it refers to are being replaced by the allusion to citizenship, which is not conceived as a different subject, but as the space made up by individuals and groups where struggles for the constitution of political identities take place and instituting leaderships aim to establish themselves.

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3 C. Mouffe (2005) asserts that “when instead of being formulated as a political confrontation between ‘adversaries’, the we/they confrontation is visualized as a moral one between good and evil, the opponent can be perceived only as an enemy to be destroyed and this is not conducive to an agonistic treatment. Hence the current emergence of antagonisms which put into question the very parameters of the existing order’. Referring to the positions that extol the consensual and post-political democracy, J. Rancièr (1995) states: “Where politics was supposed to be catching up with the times, dropping dogmas and taboos, what appeared centre-stage was not what was expected: not the triumph of a modernity without prejudices, but the return of the supremely archaic, of that which precedes all judgment –hatred”.
The defining moment of citizen expression is the election. A moment of dissolved political belongings and individuals who are not unconditioned but left to their own judgement².

In contemporary societies, elections are usually dramatization moments in which the political orientation is undefined, they are the “mini-revolutions” of our time, as they set the pace of political life—to the extent that the political regime is stabilized—and illustrate the regulatory force of popular will. Elections arouse growing expectations, since they are marked by a meaning of public freedom and, when they are actually free, their results are unpredictable. Elections are perceived as the democratic action by which the intervention of commoners can be enshrined: above all else, every individual counts equally⁵. Elections exemplify the increasing citizen detachment from permanent identities. After general elections, a new term of office begins and the electoral calendar sets in large part the pace of political life, since other resources used to exercise power, particularly corporations’ influence, find themselves weakened.

The vote is taken seriously, it is less and less regarded as the formal validation of power situations, as it used to happen in façade elections promoted by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. People vote in post-authoritarian contexts in order to anoint emerging popularities and leaderships, like in the case of transitions to democracy in East European countries and Latin America. People vote in critical situations in order to determine legal authorities or the desired constitutional order, like in the recent cases of Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina and Bolivia. Moreover, presidents and parliaments chosen in this way have usually been able to overcome the preceding factionalism. In other words, citizen vote plays a regulatory role that allows to establish competencies or overcome conflicts. The vote frequently starts a new cycle or sets a change of direction, enshrining the general will, whose acceptance ensures civil peace.

Nonetheless, the reinforcement of electoral democracy—the legal order grounded on the citizen pronouncement—has been simultaneous to an intensification of personalism and executivism. The variable citizenship without any permanent identifications is parallel to the existence of popularity leaders or those who aspire to that quality. Direct and frequently ephemeral representation linkages characterize this continuous democracy, also named “democracy of the public” (Manin, 1995). This means that there are two coincident processes: on the one hand, the reaffirmation of the citizen vote as the source

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² C. Lefort (1986) considers the action of voting as the heart of the democratic paradox: “Besides this, nothing makes the paradox of democracy more appreciable than the institution of universal suffrage. It is precisely in the moment when there is an expectation for popular sovereignty’s manifestation and the people in action by expressing their will, that social solidarities break up, the citizen is removed from all the networks where social life takes place, in order to become a counting unit. Quantity replaces substance. It is also significant that this institution has clashed for a long time, in the 20th century, with a resistance from not only conservatives but also liberal burgeois and socialists—a resistance that cannot be exclusively attributed to class interests, on the contrary, it was caused by the idea of a society which is devoted, from now on, to absorb the unrepresentable—[the translation is ours]’.

⁵ ‘The access to power requires the effective conquest of the citizen will: behold the new unavoidable axiom of political action. Nonetheless, if elections have acquired enough importance to contain social and ideal energies of change that previously followed extra-institutional paths, it is because the electoral moment has such actual potential that we can call it a “mini-revolution” in the frame of democratic order. There is a—to us well-founded—belief that, in spite of all kinds of inequalities (particularly economic and political ones), our societies evolve towards conditions of free life that make political orientation unpredictable, in other words, beyond the control of any particular will’ (Cheresky and Pousadela, 2001) [the translation is ours].
of legitimate power; on the other hand, the weakening of corporations, representative institutions and traditional resources of political competition. According to the 2009 Latinobarómetro’s report, democracy is widely supported in Latin America, as its approval reaches 58%. The document states: “Freedom of expression and elections are, by definition, the most universal point they [Latin Americans] all share, and many more of them would be democrats if those were the only characteristics of democracy” (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2009) [the translation is ours].

The mutation of democracy in Latin America

The weakening of parties and political identities is a general feature of the contemporary democratic societies whose mutation we are analyzing, but these traits look particularly intensified in Latin America. While most people identify with democracy, they do not feel the same way towards political parties, although their necessary character is accepted. Moreover, Latin Americans are not very fond of representative institutions themselves either.

People elect highly popular but also highly vulnerable leaders as their representatives, since voters do not wait until terms of office end in order to renew or question the representatives’ legitimacy. Leaders’ popularity coexists and alternates with distrust, and the veto capacity has removed 14 presidents from power in slightly over a decade and has forced in some cases an early change of administration.

This does not prevent popularity leaderships from establishing themselves, as they generate a representative linkage by frequently embodying complaints and rejection, but this popularity seldom settles into a long-lasting organization. The exceptions in Latin America may be Lula Da Silva, who was successfully reelected and could appoint his successor, and the foundational presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The latter is a case of extreme polarization, in which Hugo Chávez’s electoral support seems to fluctuate, as shown in the recent legislative elections.

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6 An example, among others, is the one of France, where “electoral volatility… remains very strong, and parties, even the most important ones, keep being very fragile, particularly the PS” (Grumberg, 2008) [the translation is ours].

7 In this region, an average of 59% assert that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, and even those who affirm that “democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government” reach 76%. Among these, 57% state that “there cannot be any democracy without a Congress” and 60% argue that “there cannot be any democracy without any political parties”. These ‘necessary’ institutions are not trustworthy to the great majority of Latin Americans. When asked “how much do you trust political parties?”, 24% reply “moderately” or “a lot” –aggregated answers– and 34% answer affirmatively when asked for their trust in the Congress (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2009).

8 Distrust is perceived to persist. When asked if “representatives govern for the good of all the people”, only those polled in Uruguay and Panamá gave at least 50% of affirmative answers, whereas the regional average of affirmative answers reaches 33% (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2009).

9 Although he has continuously maintained high popularity rates and won two consecutive elections, Lula’s government is coalition, since his party, the PT, has obtained a lower electoral score than his leader. In 2002 elections Lula conquered presidency, but the PT only got 91 of 513 deputies and 14 of 81 senators. Even taking into account the seats of those who supported Lula in the second round, he did not reach the majority in any chamber. In 2006 elections he won again in the first and second rounds (48.61% and 60.83%, respectively), but his party’s performance was worse than four years before, as it got 83 deputies’ seats.

10 H. Chávez’s legislative slates were equally voted as the opposition’s, but the officialism obtained a higher seat ratio thanks to a favorable territorial allocation system.
Under these conditions, electoral processes have entailed a marked political personalization. Presidentialism got reinforced in Latin America, as the possibility of immediate presidential reelection was enabled in 14 out of the 18 Latin American countries by means of constitutional reforms encouraged by presidents who intended to benefit from this clause (Zovatto, 2009). In this region, concentration and personalization are frequently associated with progressive political and social reforms, but they also refer to representatives of other political orientations who are simply regarded as successful administrators in contexts of serious institutional crises. What all these presidents seem to share is the political intensity they raise around them, which in many cases emerges from antagonic or bipolar political scenes they foster.

**Democratic mutation in the world**

In spite of taking place in a very different sociopolitical context, Barack Obama’s election in the United States seemed to follow the tendency we have described: a variable citizenry that supports a popularity leadership in relation to which organizational devices play a subordinate role. The political meaning this leadership instituted involved a high degree of negativity, rejection against the outgoing president, George W. Bush, and reticence against “Washington’s politicians”\(^\text{11}\).

It is true that in 2008—the year of the presidential election—partisan identification rates were higher than before: 39% of Americans called themselves Democrats, while 32% called themselves Republicans (Sábato, 2010). Nonetheless, if those identified as Democrats had supported the partisan structure’s line at the beginning of the competition, the democrat candidate and probably the president would have been Hillary Clinton. By that moment—early 2007—Obama was an outsider in terms of political traditions. He had been an Illinois state senator for 8 years and a U.S. senator for 2 years, having had such public performance that he enjoyed a significant but ephemeral fame in 2004 party convention. However, Obama had voted against the war in Iraq and had previously stated his open opposition to it, unlike most of his colleagues in the Senate. His emergence was a sign of political renovation: his style and campaign format seemed to be in keeping with this characteristic. According to Balz and Johnson (2009), when Obama announced his nomination by January 2007, he already affirmed: “I recognize there is a certain presumptuousness—a certain audacity—to this announcement. I know I haven’t spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I’ve been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change”. These authors describe that, when he ended his speech, “from across the grounds came the roar of the crowd and the muffled applause from thousand of hands in heavy gloves”, and they conclude: “a new political movement was emerging”. A sense of political difference that the candidate would mention throughout his primary and presidential campaigns, as he did in Waterloo-Iowa: “The biggest challenge we face is

\(^{11}\) B. Obama’s election as president of the United States has been a specifically political—that is, exceptional—event that could be analyzed from different perspectives. We are interested in highlighting that this event was possible in large part thanks to a politically instituted linkage, a leadership built on the basis of citizen discontentment, which allowed to create a movement that mainly developed in the margins of partisan devices.

It is worth noting that the promise of change would have required a powerful society movement, since as soon as Obama started to undertake the promised reforms he found a harsh opposition from society, from Washington, from the Congress, and even from a significant part of his voters and party fellows.
not just the war in Iraq. The biggest challenge isn’t just health care. It’s not just energy. It is actually cynicism. It’s the belief that we cannot change anything. The thing that I’m hoping most of all during the course of this campaign is that all of you decide that this campaign can be a vehicle for your hopes and dreams. I can’t change Washington all by myself” (Balz and Johnson, 2009). Obama’s campaign chief pointed out this explicit objective: “When we entered the race, we talked a lot about trying to run a different kind of campaign. The odds of our electing a president were against us, our only hope of success depended on breaking free of the standard political paradigm and becoming a movement” (Plouffe, 2009). As it is widely known, this campaign was unprecedented in what comes to two complementary aspects: firstly, the mobilization of activists who worked in districts by all means of contact, not looking for voters through traditional mediations, and secondly, the massive registration of new voters: “We wanted to reach voters individually rather than expect some group or person to deliver them. (…) Because we were trying to expand the electorate and attract new and younger voters along with independents and Republicans, we could not afford to spend time at events where there would solely be a very limited audience of traditional Democrat activists (…) The more events we did in the early states, the more we drew crowds that were substantial, diverse, and filled with the type of people who traditionally did not attend political events” (Plouffe, 2009).

Obama caused a large-scale political mobilization. The number of registered voters increased by 9 million in comparison with the previous elections and voter turnout reached 60%, which is an unusually high rate in the U.S. Obama’s victory among young voters was overwhelming: he reached 66% against his rival’s 32%. He also won by a wide margin among low-income voters… and those voters with an annual income of over 250,000 dollars (whose taxes he had promised to raise). He obtained 58% among postgraduates. Over the total popular vote, he collected 52.9% against his contender’s 45.7%.

The last decade’s French electoral experience also illustrates the fluctuation and reconfiguration of political alignments. Nicolas Sarkozy’s triumph in April 2007 election was interpreted, by that time, as a presidentialization of politics and a step towards bipartisanship or bipolarization, taking into account the electoral decline of the Front National and those parties on the left of the Parti Socialiste. That election was also regarded as a rupture with negative politicization. Conversely, the legislative elections held a few months later marked a recovery of socialists to the detriment of the presidential party, as an expression of discontentment with the government’s tax projects: vote fluctuation was a permanent trait in the configuration of the political scene. Concerning the interpretation of bipolarity or bipartisanship, the following elections (2009 and 2010) seemed to refute it by displaying the rebirth of alternatives, particularly ecologism, and certain recovery of the extreme Right.

12 The results of the 2002 presidential election showed such vote dispersion that they surprisingly led to a ballotage between Jacques Chirac, who sought reelection… and the extreme right-winged candidate, Jean Marie Le Pen, whose votes had surpassed those obtained by the socialist candidate (Perrineau, 2007).

13 In the 2009 European elections, the ruling party (UMP) reached 27.88% of the votes, the PS got 16.48% and Europe Écologie obtained 16.28%. The governing party’s scores, and to a lesser extent the PS’, were significantly lower than in previous elections, while the Ecologists’ performance improved. The regional elections showed a recovery of the PS, that got 29.14% and successfully formed an alliance with the Ecologists, who had obtained 12.18% in the first round. The presidential party reached 26.02%
Elections, the threshold of democracy

We could affirm that, in democratic societies, the election is the highest point of democratic uncertainty, because it is ruled by the common citizen’s will and each individual’s voice –including that of experts, the powerful and the rich– has equal weight. In contemporary elections, the identitarian vote is less and less frequent. In those cases where a new orientation has been recently defined, elections can validate it or not. Elections are often dominated by retrospective voting, that is, a judgement on the outgoing administration –whether or not the latter defended a project that proposed an orientation change and recently accessed power–. But the electoral scene that takes shape tends to vary in each election, giving a chance for alternative leaderships to emerge and political parties to be formed. Such was the case of the recent presidential elections in Latin America. There emerged, in Chile and Colombia, outsiders that strongly influenced the configuration of the scene despite not winning the election; whereas in Uruguay the political party that had broken with bipartisanship 5 years before won elections once more. The formation of coalitions centered on popularity leaders is predominant.

Insofar as elections have acquired relevance and have become more complex, paradoxical situations occur, since the vote is an institutional action which takes place according to such regulations that citizens may not find their preferences reflected in the composition of institutions or the election results may imperfectly translate into institutional power\(^{14}\). Hence, as citizen autonomy unfolds, elections have become central and unpredictable. Their results anoint legitimate authorities, but at the same time they are regarded as events where random factors intervene, a fact that fosters the citizens’ sense of independence and the idea that the legitimate expression of their will does not come down to the electoral moment. The electoral supply aims to appear as the result of citizen intervention, whether political groups (parties or coalitions) take into account the prospective candidates’ popularity in the polls or whether they select candidates by holding open primary elections where nonpartisan voters can participate.

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\(^{14}\) Suffice it to remember that in the 2000 U.S. presidential election it was not G. W. Bush but Al Gore who obtained the most votes: Bush was finally chosen president by the Electoral College thanks to the disputed electors of the state of Florida, where there had been an extremely irregular recount whose result was eventually determined by the Supreme Court. In the 2002 French presidential election the vote dispersion in the first round caused the first three candidates to have a narrow vote difference and surprisingly placed the candidate of the *Front National* in a ballotage against the outgoing president, Jacques Chirac, who sought his reelection. The latter finally won, in spite of his poor initial performance, in a kind of plebiscite against the extreme Right in the context of a distorted competition due to the unusual first round results. The results of the 2006 presidential election in México showed a very slight and dubious vote difference that aroused suspicions with long-lasting consequences in the political scene. The 2010 legislative elections in Venezuela showed a similar amount of votes obtained by the governing party and the opposition: however, these results translated into a much higher number of seats for the governing party, due to the arbitrary circumscription design and seat allocation system.
too. These and other procedures weaken the gravitation of partisan structures and party members, favoring a direct relationship between popularity leaders and voters.

Nevertheless, the distance between citizens and representation is not only or mainly caused by circumstantial aspects of the electoral competition. Citizens’ increasing detachment from governments and representative institutions comes from the perception of the democratic regime’s mixed nature, in other words, the fact that it combines both the egalitarian principle –imperfectly translated in the premise “one citizen, one vote”— and the elitist access to the reins of power and government positions—which implies that common people perceive there is a world of the powerful and, in particular, a privileged political class. Since the exercise of power only partly derives from the democratic logic that confers individuals equal conditions, our contemporaries’—who have a clearer view on the political life than before—have limited expectations of the representation resulting from institutional procedures. Moreover, we can even register a universal tendency to a lower participation in the fundamental political action: elections.

By the way, the local level of elections seems to be guided by its very own parameters. The citizen becomes a neighbor, their environmental needs and daily issues (which of course do not currently depend on solely local factors) affect the selection of representatives. The local space is permeated by personal contact and the participation in networks and associations where loyalty is what counts. A greater civic and social involvement is frequent during local elections and the line between election and participation gets blurred at times. However, public projects also tend to acquire, in this context, a neutral, even apolitical character that makes apparently reviving partisan networks lose differentiation among themselves and with respect to other intervening groups, at least in what comes to strictly local issues. Furthermore, there is a tension at this level between national coalitions and movements who bear a distinctive identification and their establishment in a space that downplays or blurs their differences.

Elections and the variable citizenship are the primary foundations of democratic life, but they are not the only focal points of contemporary democracy. Elections have established themselves as a decisive event that offers a chance to determine political orientations which result from both deep society currents and the action of popularity leaders who intervene by giving a meaning. Elections also make evident that party machinery and “the powers that be” have a limited or even non-existent capacity to shape and dominate the citizen expression. Consequently, the electorate is the citizen arena par excellence, where groups and leaders seek to establish themselves and acquire prestige. Nevertheless, citizenship—or the commoners, not to put it in terms of the traditional legal and political notion—, does not completely express itself in the election of representatives.

II- Public space and mixed political regime

We can now ascertain that the usual channels of representation are modified and partly abandoned. During a large part of the 20th century, representation was a stable linkage that structured political order, where political life did take place. This used to apply to political parties that, in spite of evolving, had a continuous existence and roots in society. Leaderships and candidatures emerged from them, that is, political careers
developed within partisan organizations. Even those providential leaders who surfaced used to eventually “routinize” themselves and give birth to parties and organized movements. By that time citizenship was unseparable from social morphology, that is to say the individuals’ structural inclusion in the world of work and organizational affiliations in public life. In addition, referring to “the people” rather than “the citizenry” matched the idea of subjects with already defined identities, unlike nowadays, when the second term trendily refers to a conglomerate of individuals with temporary identities.

Today’s citizen generally has no political identities or even lacks a permanent social belonging. This does not mean that instability and futility dominate public life; there are both certain continuity of political leanings and orientations and, at the same time, an involvement in the public debate (although it is hardly ever as emotional and active as before) that release democratic individuals from corporative and partisan leaders’ directives but does not make citizen statements arbitrary or random.

Thus, the right to petition or even rebel (already mentioned in Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government*) inscribed in the liberal tradition has spread and taken new forms. In different ways, citizenship has a daily and parallel existence that influences formal representation. In the present, public opinion is a permanent fact –regarded as a point of reference between elections– and a moment of citizen configuration that is influenced –but not dominated– by the diverse actions performed in the public space by leaders, institutions and associations. Among these practices, probing the “state of opinion” –individual attitudes measured in polls and surveys– stands out, since it guides politicians and representatives’ decision-making. This opinion –a virtual citizen pronouncement– is a figure that has no legal force but public efficacy and can be seen as the flipside of another figure, the passive citizen, that is, the mass media audience. There is a struggle in the public space in order to influence the audience, expecting an impact on public opinion polls, which are both a source of immediate legitimacy and a forecast of electoral choices.

The interaction between these elements and actors who intervene in the public space (we can find among them, on the one hand, journalists, pollsters and experts in communication; on the other hand, civil associations and social movements, but also more institutional actors, like public officers, political and social leaders) has woven a fabric of political analyses and events that seems to relegate political parties, who used to structure that scene, to a secondary role.

The main device of political communication are mass media (in the first place, non-pay television, which is the most influential media in popular sectors but, at the same time, it depends up to some extent on what print media thematize), but they share this function with the Internet and cell phones, which are left to initiatives beyond existing devices.

The concentration of mass media in private hands has been critized by those who advocate their democratization, and a multiplication of speakers is likely, according to the social and political fragmentation. We may ask ourselves whether or not it is convenient to differentiate private monopolies from national or public networks, as well as whether or not this communicational fragmentation undermines a political
community’s life that in some cases, where it used to take place, was based on an audience that received similar information and listened to speakers everyone knew. It is worth analyzing the morphology of the public space, according to P. Rosanvallon (2008a). A set of formal or informal institutions corresponding to indirect powers appear in it: risk rating agencies in the world of finance; social observatories that develop their own measurements or may discredit official measurements of inflation, poverty or unemployment; NGOs specialized in environmental or security issues; and even the very state powers –particularly judicial institutions– have an increasing gravitation, beyond their constitutional competencies.

Political communication is now open to new voices who challenge or problematize decisions or initiatives from the representative system. Observatories made up of professionals from different areas regularly express their views on diverse matters. Some of these new voices are the following: opinion polls; pronouncements made by judicial officers or institutions (that carry legal consequences in some cases, whereas in others they connect specific circumstances to general principles of justice); groups who express specific or generic petitions or vindications (regarding human rights, urban security, environmental risks, social policy, official measurement indexes, military or intelligence operations), participate in the public space using documentation, images or measurements and are actually heard because they are virtually representative, in other words, they are trusted by public opinion and therefore pursue to be their spokepeople. Certain individuals or well-known journalists usually have this aspiration, which is implicitly in competition with formal representation. This ensemble of non-state institutions and actors becomes a true second pillar of the political regime, which makes political legitimation a continuous process whose raw materials are government decisions and citizen claims.

Citizen social involvement

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15 Wolton (1999) regards television as an essential resource for democratic life in the contemporary societies. Moreover, he particularly highlights the role of social bond creation played by generalist television, opposing to the argument that focuses on a growing individual freedom provided by the diverse options available on thematic channels and the new interactive media. The author points out the potential of public television, which “due to its slightly stronger independence from advertising funds, it can continue offering a broader variety of generalist programs than private television. Whether public or private, the aim of generalist television is to establish a permanent bond with the core question of national identity. To the extent that the television supply is more general, in contact with the multiple components of society, it particularly plays a national communication role, so important in a time of open borders. Television is the main mirror of society: it is essential, for social cohesion, that social and cultural components of society be able to meet and address one another on the main media”. According to Wolton, television “is useful to speak to each other… it is a formidable tool of communication between individuals” [the translation is ours].

16 Pierre Rosanvallon (2008a) recalls that according to Jules Michelet, journalism already established itself as a sort of “public function” in the 19th century, and adds: “It is hardly surprising that journalists saw themselves as the voice of public opinion, but in fact they were much more than that. They also performed a representative function and exercised a share of sovereignty”. This vision was questioned in the name of the exclusive legitimacy of the ballot box. Rosanvallon concludes: “In recent years, however, watchdog powers have reasserted themselves. The time is therefore ripe for theorists to reconsider the question of legitimacy with an eye to overcoming the limitations of both the Jacobin and decisionist positions, neither of which seems adequate to contemporary practice” (Rosanvallon, 2008a).
The mass media audiences, diverse speakers and organizations specifically devoted to influence public opinion coexist with citizen participation in public associations which are usually called “civil society”.

This citizen social involvement constitutes another dimension of public space. Along with a traditional associativity, expressed by unions and interest groups, there is a new type of social involvement which has a more territorial character but is not completely detached from social morphology. The term “citizenship” refers to the individuals’ public dimension, ranging from a conjuncturally passive condition of right bearers to their varied forms of public action. However, this citizenship is “taken” from the social condition, the diverse situations in the world of work and a classification produced by the State that defines rights, beneficiaries and public obligations. Citizenship is marked by this basic social and institutional morphology, but its current autonomous expansion implies a detachment, or rather a modification of this conditioning factors. Public identities citizens acquire are not determined –but are indeed influenced– by the social condition or the State’s institutional device.

The process of democratic expansion, specially in Latin America, has focused on citizen participation in varied ways. This participation comes from two different sources. On the one hand, governments, political actors and association networks have fostered varied and contradictory premises of citizen participation, some of them promoted a reduction of the State’s role, counterparted by individuals and groups’ accountability; others sought to widen the citizen intervention in the making and execution of public policy. On the other hand civic and popular mobilizations have attempted to influence or condition decisions, and varied participative experiences were born in that way. That activation has occurred independently of the aforementioned institutional actors, in a relatively spontaneous fashion.

Regarding what comes to the public sphere, it is convenient to differentiate the citizen political presence and activation described above –characterized by practices of demonstration and, at times, disruption–, and the citizen/neighbor participation, associated with claims and needs generally tangible at a local and administrative level. These are not inevitably contradictory arenas, since they sometimes develop coordinately, but they frequently appear separately. The term “civil society” used to refer globally to the citizen presence in its multiple forms, without differentiating their magnitude and how public the orientation of claims and mobilizations was. This notion acquired a particular prominence during the processes of transition to democracy that unfolded both in Latin American and East European countries. In many cases the proliferation of association groups preceded the mutation of representative linkages; and in others civil society played a key role in the fall of authoritarisms and the path that democratic springs would take. However, that profile linked to democratization was lost, insomuch as the most spontaneous associativity declined and the term “civil society” was identified with NGOs (Olvera, 2006 and 2010).

The so-called “neighbor” citizen participation (an appropriate enough name that these citizens vindicate and aim to institutionalize) has persisted and renewed itself, encouraged by the anti-globalization mobilization and, in the Latin American case, the

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17 Evelina Dagnino, Alberto Olvera and Aldo Panfichi (2006 and 2010) refer to a perverse or tricky convergence between democratizing participative projects and the project that pursues to reduce the State’s responsibilities (until it becomes “minimal”) and transfer them to civil society.
emergence of leaders who accessed power affirming it grounded in direct democracy as an alternative or palliative to the deficiencies of representative democracy. Participation implies a specially local intervention and has had varied expressions centered on the needs of excluded urban population, such as the water boards in Bolivia and Venezuela and the missions promoted by the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, during his first term of office. The participatory budgeting may be the most emblematic participation format: its most well-known example is Porto Alegre, but it has spread in other countries of the region.

However, the diversity of existing experiences lets us examine the significance of this citizen public action, in order to estimate the degree to which it is a neighbor activity linked to the solution of particular and local needs, where participation merely lies in getting involved in the execution of already made decisions; and the extent to which there is an actual intervention in the very decision-making process. We could also discuss whether an autonomous popular social involvement is promoted or it is rather about “top-down” initiatives that create a fiction of citizen intervention and turn these participatory devices into extensions of the State network.

The role of this participation in the democratic public space is therefore ambivalent. Popular citizen activity, particularly in the excluded sectors, leads to petitions and claims for needs that are not considered as rights, insofar as they mainly demand a recognition and a resource provision authorities tend to channel by means of specific decisions or informal networks.

Nevertheless, beyond the universe of those who request solutions to vital needs and do not access a sort of institutionalization or formalization that incorporates them to the citizen public space, there is a trait we mentioned above: even those demands that appeal to egalitarian principles and rights tend to proliferate in a citizenry that does not make up a “common space”. Conversely, it is usually subject to fragmentation or even confrontation about its claims (Schnapper, 2006).

Moreover, the autonomous citizenship –that is, non-alligned to political parties or unions– certainly enables new formats in the constitution of public and political identities. In other words, the public space stands out because it has also experienced a mutation: while it essentially used to be a scenario for the expression of organized groups and relationships of force, it is now structured as a sphere of argumentation and deliberation where rulers and representatives must legitimate their decisions –which can be rendered unfeasible–. The electorate becomes a watchdog and judging citizenry. New actors –some of them ephemeral, others more permanent– emerge on the basis of particular or general claims that are not generally tied to a social or territorial location but result from a public construction. In some cases they are conglomerates that develop a direct presence or cause outbursts, such as Laclau’s or Rancière’s “popular subject” or Virno’s multitude; whereas in others they have a bipolar format: they are a limited number of activists who maintain a relationship of virtual representation with their

18 E. Dagnino, A. Olvera and A. Panfichi (2006 and 2010) argue: “Bearers of technical competences and social inclusion, ‘trustworthy’ voices among the various possible voices in civil society, NGOs are frequently regarded as the ideal allies by those State sectors who advocate the transference of responsibilities to civil society (…) The NGOs’ political autonomization created a peculiar situation in which these organizations are accountable before the international agencies that finance them and the State that hires them as service providers (…). Even though they may be well intentioned, their operation mainly expresses their board of directors’ intentions” [the translation is ours].
supporters or simply with a diffuse public opinion. New ecology groups are able to switch from one format to the other: they can demonstrate against a concrete decision, as in the case of deforestation policies in Peru or Brazil and the construction of a paper mill in Gualeguaychú (Argentina) but they can also alternate massive demonstrations with the stability of a more organized group whose action has a public impact since it represents a wide group of citizens. The claim for human rights and public security in Argentina promoted by Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and the madres del dolor, respectively, as well as the claims made by relatives of FARC’s hostages in Colombia and the Damas de Blanco in Cuba are all typical of a virtual representation group. We understand by the latter a handful of activists who strongly influence the formation of public opinion in the public space, since although they are those specifically affected by the situation, they also appeal to a principle of justice supported by citizens: they are therefore representative and must be taken into consideration by decision-makers. Piqueteros became well-known in Argentina in the critical period that culminated at the end of 2001. The roadblocks, –which were not mainly led by unemployed people but by those socially excluded and groups of the population who could not meet their basic needs– got together individuals who came from generally neighboring areas. The roadblock was an initial action: it was not the translation of a pre-existing and concrete social identity –that one of a factory, an industry or even a neighborhood– into the public sphere, on the contrary, it actually gave an identity to individuals who came from different circumstances. The action of interrupting normal activities gave birth to a protest and boosted claims for solutions. The significance of this action was stronger and stronger because of its detrimental consequences and, specially, the television coverage it frequently used to receive. Although Piqueteros ocassionally held massive demonstrations, there were frequently a few of them in the streets: however, they were “untouchable” by then, as they virtually represented many more people and were supported or accepted by a large part of the citizenry. This way of conflictively expressing needs has multiplied in Latin America, frequently involving not only those excluded but also other social sectors. The “cacerolazos” were a more ephemeral but powerful expression of citizen protest that took place at the end of 2001 in Argentina. This protest was also formed in the public space and can be considered as spontaneous, to the extent that, despite its massive and ubiquitous character, it was not organized by any leader or association. The cacerolazos were marked by a strong rejection of political representation, illustrated by a generalized slogan that applied to all politicians whether they were part of, supported or opposed the government: “out with them all”. The movement caused the collapse of the government, which was eventually replaced by a provisional one appointed by the Assembly of both legislative chambers, in accordance with the Constitution. The protest turned out to be an outburst with a great capacity to question traditional political parties and leaders, but its institutional trace, popular assemblies, had a limited citizen participation and did not survive for long. Notwithstanding the expectations, neither a long-lasting rebirth of civil society nor a political recovery by grassroots leaders happened (Cheresky, 2006a and 2006b).

This configuration of the public space as an entity that is certainly conditioned but not determined by economy and State structures can foster the politicization of democratic

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19 Beyond the excluded sectors, farmers and other social groups have blocked roads: this action was also used in several cases to express discontentment with varied situations.
societies and increase the importance of the egalitarian logic, although this may not necessarily happen. As the citizen and sometimes popular condition is predominant, the egalitarian logic prevails over varied types of hierarchical differences. We have stressed the contemporary evolution towards a “democracy of the public” (Manin, 1995) in order to highlight the primacy of the political struggle and those specific differentiations and subjectivizations that can be created in the public space.

Politicians and representatives depend greatly on this arena. Some of them may not look for an immediate connection with “people”, pursuing a more strategic action, but none of them ignores this space.

We would like to emphasize the citizen autonomy, that is, the perception of a society more and more composed of individuals with only a few weak permanent identifications, except for the cases in which precisely the expansion of the democratic principle has awakened new identities or contributed to resurface buried ones, such as – in Latin America– indigenous communities in Bolivia and, to a lesser extent, Ecuador. But collective subjects have not disappeared: anyway, they have different characteristics than before. It is true that ethnic identities emerge, challenging the universalist political community, but in spite of their repercussions they do not follow the predominant tendency.

As described above, legal representation is acknowledged by citizens, who do not aim to replace it, except for moments of crisis such as the cacerolazo in Argentina, the corruption of Fujimori’s government in Peru and the excluded people’s protests in Ecuador, for instance. Moreover, even in those critical moments there is a shared aspiration to elect new representatives: this essential belief in the decision by the vote of the majority is what lets us recognize the rooting of democracy over wide regions of the world and particularly in Latin America. The “powers that be” still exist and renew themselves and at the same time citizen distrust remains, but the access to power results from free elections. In fact, we could make several remarks on the factors that condition the exercise of popular will and the restrictions faced by governments, but we are in a position to affirm that the capacity and, in many cases, the primacy of “the powers that be” have declined.

**Democracy, a mixed regime**

Nonetheless, the democratic regime has a mixed nature by which the dinamics of political equality counteract the efficacy of persistent inequalities based on wealth, capacities or natural qualities. The political public space, even as expanded and free as it is in contemporary societies, cannot avoid the coexistence of both principles.

There is a perception that those who access and alternate in power constitute a privileged elite seeking to hold on to those positions: this idea is widespread as never before among our contemporaries because the tension between egalitarian and “aristocratic” principles, typical of the democratic regime, nowadays appears with other features that make it visible, once traditional identities and, consequently, the identification between representatives and represented have started to suffer a crisis.

In the past, the horizontal division of the social or socioeconomic structure (between workers and employers, the poor and the rich) or the vertical one of institutions (between different ethnic or regional identities, religious beliefs, partisan alignments and union affiliations) could be publicly “expressed” in such a way that “rulers” and
“ruled” from any of these fields seemed to share a common sense of belonging. In the present, those differential positions of power within organizations and corporations have weakened or dissolved insomuch as the identification relationship, which assured cohesion and obedience, finds itself questioned. In the same manner, those identities based on the social division of labor have declined, insomuch as individuals continuously switch or adopt new identifications.

This does not mean that “conventional” identifications have dissipated (for instance, those coming from wealth or sociocultural differences). However, there seems to prevail a perception that gives more relevance to the unequal distribution of resources in the very public and, particularly, political spheres. The chances for individuals to be seen or heard are completely different, depending on their sociocultural capacities or institutional position in the State or mass media. In our societies, the public space is permanently flowing and there are certainly ways to be heard or to have some significance in it—which is a characteristic of this virtual and egalitarian arena; nonetheless, there persist structural resources that give different chances to the diverse social groups. Anyway, neither those who are supported by a structural position of power nor those whose identities form themselves on the basis of old or new claims actually have any predetermined capacities to become public voices. There is no decisive objectivity for both the powerful and the common people that determines before the conflict the position of demands, the potentially emerging rights and their legitimacy. It is in this sense that the democratic regime itself (Rancière, 1995; Rosanvallon, 2008a) or electoral processes (Manin, 1995) are considered to have a mixed nature: they combine principles of equality with principles of unequal access.

Leaders are no longer invested with the republican transcendence they used to be ascribed to, which made citizens expect and assume they would build the general will and the common good (Schnapper, 2006). As they lost their “aura”, they suffer the fragility of those who are judged by the conjunctural efficacy of their political performance. They are usually confined to representing bare interests at the same time that they are deprived of the prestige their selection source confers them, in other words, the idea that their social origin, educational background or experience would make them more suitable for representing citizens. Contemporary citizens reckon that no one can better represent them as themselves (Schnapper, 2006), although they are willing to delegate government tasks. The ongoing crisis of representation seems to lie in this tension.

This questioning of the rulers-ruled relationship, specially but not only in the field of political representation, is accurately shown in opinion polls that repeatedly signal the low trust in politicians, union leaders and judges as well as in their respective institutions, compared to other categories of individuals or institutions with no political representation.

III- Popularity leaderships and citizen self-representation

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20 The Catholic Church (68%), the radio (56%) and the TV (54%) can be found among the trustworthiest institutions, whereas others are appreciated by a minority: civil service (34%), the police (34%), the Congress/Parliament (34%), the Judicial Power (32%), unions (30%) and political parties (24%) (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2009).
As the system of belongings and beliefs that made citizenry stable disintegrated, the latter has evolved in two directions. On the one hand, it tends to support a new type of leaderships, frequently more ephemeral than those of the past and subject to the ups and downs of popularity rates. On the other hand, it tends to representing itself: it evades any representation when demonstrating or protesting or it rather provides itself with a type of representation that lasts as long as the mobilization does.

The analysis of the new leaderships and their conditions of emergence, focusing on Latin America, still requires to ascertain some citizen behaviors and beliefs regarding political institutionality. As we previously pointed out, despite the ups and downs there are some stable attitudes, such as the willingness to vote, as well as the belief in the efficacy of the vote and its priority over other alternatives of civic expression. However, the acceptance of social and political protest is also extended, although its most aggressive versions, like roadblocks and *escraches*\textsuperscript{21}, have lost legitimacy\textsuperscript{22}.

In terms of beliefs, trust in the market as problem-solver –an idea that was in vogue in the nineties– has decreased. There are, instead, both a strong awareness of the lack of distribution policies and an expectation of State intervention\textsuperscript{23}.

This electoral citizens, who distrust representation and do not have any stable identities, are law-abiding but at the same time willing to judge each and every government decision and, if necessary, even exercise a veto power through mobilizations. The citizenry’s counterpart are “instituting leaderships” who must permanently legitimize their actions.

The emergence of popularity leaders who establish representation linkages by keeping a “direct” relationship with citizens and speaking autonomously\textsuperscript{24} has become possible and frequent due to the previously mentioned individual detachment from permanent identities. These new popularity leaders crystallize a social discontentment and fill a void in representation, instituting instead a linkage whose potential fragility comes from the fact that popularity is grounded in immediate action or particular circumstances: leaders are neither supported by an organized movement nor idealized in a populist fashion.

What all these leaderships share is a direct relationship with public opinion, which is generally based on governmental action and the presence in mass media, particularly television. In fact, popular mobilization, assemblies and massive rallies are a crucial...

\textsuperscript{21} This commonly used term in Argentina and Uruguay refers to a kind of demonstration in which activists protest in front of the home or workplace of a person they want to denounce for various reasons, such as human rights violations or corruption.

\textsuperscript{22} When asked “Which is the most effective way to change things?”, 64% choose the vote (2009), whereas three years before that answer was given by 57%. Moreover, 67% affirm that “the way one votes can make things different in the future”.

At the same time, 92% fully agree or agree that “protest marches, demonstrations, etc. are normal in a democracy” (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2009).

\textsuperscript{23} When asked “How fair is the distribution of wealth?”, 21% (regional average) answers “fair or very fair”; in some countries the satisfaction, even from a minority, is higher: Bolivia (34%), Venezuela (32%), Uruguay (31%). Even though most surveyed are for market economy, the privatization of State-owned enterprises was supported by only 33%. A majority of 57% affirms that the State is capable of solving problems (including those who answer “many problems”, “most of the problems”, or “all the problems”) (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2009).

\textsuperscript{24} Since they do not regard themselves as bearers of a tradition, and if they do, they are not strongly committed to it.
part of the linkage with the new foundational leaders. However, in the paradigmatic cases of Venezuela and Bolivia the relationship between the leader and the masses has different connotations; in the first case, the initiative comes from the leader, while in the second one there is a relevant tradition of organized communities who usually act autonomously.

Leaders’ popularity is personal and, to a large degree, independent of the parties or movements that support them: therefore, they can exercise power quite freely. For instance, Lula da Silva and Michelle Bachelet are typical cases in “non-foundational” contexts.

The image of popularity leaders is not associated with party programs or detailed promises but with an orientation of government action. The formation of the last decade’s leaderships in Latin America was marked by political renovation, and even where parties were more stable, the weight of public opinion was tangible in the selection of leaders who sometimes did not belong to the traditional spheres of the “political class”. New leaderships have held varied positions according to the configuration of national conflicts: rejection of the nineties politics (“neoliberalism”), the authoritarian past and the sociopolitical exclusion allowed by the existing institutional system.

The popularity leaders who have raised more questions about the transformations and uncertain evolution of the democratic format are those associated with refoundational processes. In these cases, leaders tend to embody representation so strongly that there are no conceivable successors to lead their own political group and, at the same time, they favor such polarization that alternation in power is regarded as a catastrophic change of political regime and a loss of achievements. The general aspiration of

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25 They are both popularity leaders who emerged from well-consolidated parties and coalitions. Lula’s popularity rates go much further than his parties’. This is a significant situation, since the PT had formed itself as a traditional organization. Nonetheless, its leader –who had run for the presidency, unsuccessfully, four times– accessed power by extending his popularity beyond partisan borders and building relatively homogenous government coalitions –encouraged by his own popularity, as well as realignment-prone parties and political representatives–. Lula collected three times more votes in the general elections than his original party.

In Chile, Michelle Bachelet came to power as a citizen democracy’s advocate and she owned an extremely high popularity rate (80%) by the end of her office, thanks to her government action. She exercised power breaking with the Chilean party-system tradition, a fact that probably favored her popularity: “The government kept distance from conflicts in ally parties, refusing to play a role of moderation or integration, despite the fact that the powerful presidentialism confers the head of State huge authority and power to do so” (Hunneus, 2010). An example of the outgoing president’s popularity is that “‘concertationist’ candidates to both chambers prioritized her in their propaganda and pushed the presidential candidate to the background” (Hunneus, 2010). The latter, Eduardo Frei, did not profit from the transference of Bachelet’s votes and popularity, and was finally defeated. Conversely, the presidential election in Brazil seems to favor Dilma Rousseff as Lula’s successor in the presidency, which does not necessarily imply a leadership replacement. Likewise, in Argentina, Cristina Kirchner partly profited from her husband’s popularity and succeeded him in the presidency.

26 Néstor Kirchner defined himself as the adversary of Carlos Menem, the peronist president of the nineties who had implemented a neoliberal policy to which the new leader offered a diametrically opposed alternative. The *Concertación* in Chile was born as an alliance for democracy transition when its antagonist, Augusto Pinochet, was alive (in fact, he was the Commander-in-Chief of the Army until many years later, when he handed over the command to his successor). In Uruguay, Tabaré Vázquez’s triumph in 2005 resulted in a reconstruction of the traditional bipartisanship. A coalitional Left came to power, maybe promoting a political bipolarity in different terms.
presidents to continue in power indefinitely is much more stressed in these cases. The “foundational” type of government, as we mentioned before, considers the leader to express the popular will and have a direct relationship with its supposed expressions, frequently ignoring other representative and judicial authorities. The future of these democracies is particularly uncertain, since many of the critics of personalistic power have a dubious commitment to democracy and usually express a discontentment with the damage of their social interests.27

These leaders suffer, like others, the ups and downs of popularity, they can win or lose elections, but institutionality is still not clearly established.

There have also emerged popularity leaders who are out of or even contradict the “left turn” in the region, such are the cases of Álvaro Uribe and Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia and recently of Sebastián Piñera in Chile.29

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27 As A. Rouquié (2009) points out: “Governments who follow a national-popular model are not antidemocratic. They were not only chosen by universal suffrage, but they also seek, more than others, the electoral anointment –and pursue even more frequently a plebiscitarian path–. But in the name of the majority principle or national interests they overlook legal rules and constitutional precepts. The bipolar political cleavages they produce paradoxically lead to an advocacy of democracy by conservative social sectors, who have never been enthusiastic about free and broadened political participation” [the translation is ours].

28 Electoral fluctuations in Bolivia illustrate that the cohesion of the pro-government vote is limited; citizens vote differently depending on the public offices at stake. Evo Morales came to the presidency in 2005 with an unprecedented absolute majority of the votes (more than 52%), but he had to govern without a majority in the Senate after 2007. On December 6, 2009 he was reelected by the impressive score of 64% and achieved the majority in both chambers. However, a few months later, in April 2010, he suffered a significant fall in the departmental elections. In all three western departments, its electoral strongholds, pro-government vote declined from 88% in the previous elections to 55% in the most recent one. Moreover, the opposition triumphed in 7 out of 9 department capitals. Local analyses consider the urban electorate’s disaffection with MAS to be significant (Nueva Crónica, 2010).

In Argentina, the government-supporting ensemble centered on Néstor and Cristina Kirchner achieved consecutive electoral triumphs. This fact comforted a government that, since 2003, was based on the popularity its actions acquired in a short time: it made up for the scarce electoral score (22.4% of the first-round votes, as no second round was held because Carlos Menem, who had gotten the first place in the first round, was certain of his future defeat and consequently withdrew from the runoff) that took Néstor Kirchner to the presidency. In the 2007 elections C. Kirchner was elected president with over 45% of the votes, but was defeated in the main cities, including the capital one. The disaffection of the urban electorate spread after the long conflict with the farmers and led to the government’s defeat in the legislative elections of June, 2009, which made it lose the majority in the Congress and confirmed its minority status.

In Mexico, we cannot refer to popularity leaders in the same sense because, among other reasons, the president is chosen by a first-past-the-post election system and the PAN leaders who have accessed the presidency since 2000 have alternated and were consequently key actors of democratization. The elections also illustrate a considerable fluctuation of the vote. In the last legislative elections of July 5, 2009 the PRI regained its centrality, as it collected 43.65% of the votes –15% more than in the previous elections– and almost obtained the majority in the Deputies Chamber. This party got the third place in the presidential election and symbolized a past of hegemonic power that lingered for many decades.

29 The competition between the right-wing parties, Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) and Renovación Nacional (RN), for the presidential candidate’s nomination translated into the national elections: the party that reached the second round would be supported by the other one. In 2009 polls allowed S. Piñera to run for office, thus avoiding the weakening effects of a public competition for the candidacy between allies. The right-winged candidate showed himself as a renovation alternative to the Concertación, that had declined and suffered several defections after 20 years of government. In Colombia, the presidential candidate would have been Uribe if a revocatory referendum that allowed a third term of office had been approved, but the Constitutional Court declared its unconstitutionality in
The promise of political renovation may be more properly interpreted as the answer to the citizen tendency to express discontentment in different contexts, even claiming for renovation to “renovators” or marking the decline of the old renovation. In this way, alternatives appeared in Chile: although the country’s electoral system favored bipolarity, it could not prevent an outsider, Marco Enríquez Ominami, from collecting over 20% of the votes. Likewise, in Colombia the governing party was challenged by Antanas Mockus, who shortly after led an emerging party. In Brazil, in spite of the polarization of the presidential election, a third party headed by Marina Silva –the Partido Verde– obtained a respectable score and softened the vote concentration. Therefore, two tendencies guide the dynamics of the new leaderships. On the one hand, political personalism, regarded by its advocates as the decisionist resource to counteract the “powers that be”, seems to strengthen to the extent that this exercise of power is associated with sometimes significant socioeconomic transformations. This personalism, benefited by the presidentialist form of government that focuses on decision-making by the Executive power, gets reinforced, and so does the popular leaders’ aspiration to continue in or come back to power.

On the other hand, the challenges to government groups, to the “political class” in general –including those who were popularity leaders in the past– foster the appearance of new leaders who seek to channel the emerging popular discontentment.

February, 2010 (three months before the election) (Lozada, 2010). In March an assembly of the Partido de la U proclaimed J. M. Santos the continuity candidate: he symbolized the recovery of the State sovereignty in many regions that used to be controlled by the guerrilla, as well as successful hostage rescues allowed by a tough national security policy. In spite of the questionings regarding the respect for human rights and the connivance with the parapolice, the majority approved of an efficient leader and his succession. Uribe also consolidated himself –as left-winged leaders also did in the region– displacing the traditional political parties.

Bearing in mind the electoral supply and results in the presidential elections, the left-right cleavage seems to be altered. The most significant fact was the emergence of M. Enríquez Ominami in the Chilean elections: he was a candidate supported by the Partido Verde and the Partido Humanista who reached a considerable percentage of the votes (20.14%) in the frame of an electoral system that strongly encourages bipartisanship. Despite his performance, his party did not get any seats, indeed. The new leader had been a pro-government deputy who wanted to compete in the Concertación’s primaries, but since his party (the PS) denied his request, he consequently decided to run for the presidency on his own –out of the party structure–. His campaign intended to break with the polarity by denouncing the “party machinery”. This denounce could appeal to the Concertación’s electorate who only voted in one round of primaries held in some regions, where Frei collected most of the votes: therefore, the primaries did not continue and the main progressive parties did not suggest any alternative candidates in order to favor a Christian Democrat candidate (as two consecutive presidents came from that sector), among other reasons. This idea of partisan loyalty and cooperation was probably ignored or resisted by Ominami’s voters. In this context, another candidate emerged “out of the party”: it was Jorge Arrate, who came from the left wing of the Concertación and got a lower percentage (6.21%). If the votes of the Concertación’s candidate and those who abandoned the coalition had merged, they would have reached 55.95% of the votes. However, in the second round that electorate did not converge on the pro-government candidate. Almost a third of the votes received by “outsider” candidates did not transfer to Eduardo Frei.

In Colombia, A. Mockus –former mayor of Bogotá– joined the Partido Verde along with two other former mayors. This party had had little electoral weight until then, but Mockus was chosen as a presidential candidate in such successful primary elections that they positioned him as a relevant challenger. Although the result fell short for the expectations, it was the birth of an strong alternative in the political scene that will probably influence the orientation of president Santos’ government.

In Brazil, in spite of the polarization in the presidential election, the candidate Marina Silva –former minister of Environment in Lula’s government and currently an opposition leader– ran for the presidency backed by the Partido Verde and collected 20% of the votes.
Both tendencies coexist. Leader presidents try to cope with distrust by multiplying non-mediated strategies of real or virtual proximity (such as television speeches, radio programs, etc.). These presidents have generally come to power in a wave of renovation of the elites supported by either new or traditional groups: they are women, indigenous people, former guerrilla members, priests or simply individuals out of the circles that traditionally participated in power. All these cases illustrate the crisis and fragmentation of traditional parties, although it is not certain that they are agents of a new and consolidated political elite.

However, the public space is suitable for this dynamics of renovation and instituting leaders because it is also the stage for the citizen presence in its varied forms, that is, not only as public opinion, social involvement and virtual representation, but also as a direct expression or action. Therefore, the veto or citizen outburst—which are the main expressions of self-representation—constitute the flipside of popularity leaderships: in their extreme versions, the latter turn representation into embodiment and absorb the autonomous citizenship.

The change in the citizen and popular presence in Latin America is significant.

In the democratic societies of the past, the public space lent itself to the exhibition of strength of socially consistent organizations. Prior to the expansion of audiovisual mass media, demonstrations and ritual celebrations—made by the national and local State, as well as popular and workers’ organizations and political parties—were typical images of the public space. This was an arena of exhibition and measurement of strength. In the populist tradition, streets were more relevant than ballot boxes, not only because that was the place where the relationship between the leader and the masses—essential to renew legitimacy—used to develop, but also because electoral promises and the consolidation of government action took place there. By that time, the presence of mobilized masses was an immediate answer that made action visible and better channeled political intensity.

Nowadays, the presence of citizen individuals follows another pace of politics. Arguments are exchanged in the public space and the government or opposition’s legitimacy are strengthened or weakened by means of the public opinion shaped by polls. Nonetheless, the citizen “presence” has a different nature: it constitutes a collective actor that, although it may be ephemeral, it succeeds in dramatizing a claim or a veto. Citizens are, more frequently than before, autonomous or “out of control” and do not obey any call. This presence is marked by ambiguity, as it usually carries individuals and groups’ passions and selfishness as well as claims that are indeed publicly deliberated with other institutional actors and can reach the level of rights or general interest policies. This presence often has a more hermetic meaning of veto or negativity towards policies or leaders, but it can also result in a permanent challenge to the law, eventually weakening the public space as a citizen space open to everyone.

Despite being enabled by the weakening of traditional institutional and representative devices, self-representation comes from varied sources.

One of them is individualism: not only ideological—the personal exercise of reflection and decision before public choices—but also sociological: the technological and professional mutations that favor the growing circulation and displacement of personal positions in the worlds of work and sociability.
Urban areas in Latin America have served as a backdrop for demonstrations of citizens who reject government decisions (taxes, price raises, censorship, environmental claims, etc.) or specific shortcomings (urban crime, precarious transportation system, lack of energy for home consumption), frequently mobilized out of political or corporative representations. They are spontaneous expressions and when an organized presence is noticeable, it usually joins citizen mobilization but does not start it. They are civic or popular mobilizations that do not answer to any call or, at best, this call is made by an ad hoc organization created by the mobilized sectors themselves.

This tendency to self-representation has also affected/mark the most classic forms of public expression.

Unions and social movements face both the scarcity of permanent followers and the variable behavior of those who are involved in conflictive moments. The leaders’ decisions are questioned and possibly revised in mobilized people’s assemblies, which become an alternative center of power with an ultimate decision legitimacy. In this way, collective agreements between parties or arrangements between the authorities and petitioners’ delegates render void at the pronouncement of informal deliberative organs. Assemblies, as well as other forms of public presence, have become both a resource of sensibilization before the virtual political community constituted by the mass media audience, and a way of showing authenticity, counteracting the frequent distrust towards corporative organizations.

We can also ascertain that in many cases real or potential self-representation is behind representation, conditioning or even disrupting it.

Citizen initiatives can transform institutional frames. The abstention, the blank vote or the spoiled vote sometimes express apathy or lack of interest, but they can also be a way of reacting to a dissatisfactory electoral supply by including an option that was not previously considered and now acquires a meaning, it represents something different.

Emerging candidates can conjuncturally operate as an “empty signifier” (Laclau, 2007). In other words, they can express something beyond what they literally state or represent. They can occasionally collect a negative vote against traditional governments or candidates, gathering discontentment. Their consolidation as representatives of that negative identity is circumstantial.

The tendency to select candidates to elective positions either according their popularity rates or holding primary elections gives the non-partisan voter some intervention in the formation of the supply. This tendency opposes to the instituting action of the aforementioned popularity leaders, who initially relate with the variable citizenry in a converse fashion: they seek to establish a cleavage or political difference, occupying a position within the framework they create. It is true that an already outlined political differentiation can express itself or be confirmed in polls or primary elections, but in these cases surveyed people merely recognize already produced identifications and adjust to them31.

However, the aim of the already mentioned expanding practices is to build a representation on a “logic of proximity”, committing with tendencies that take shape out

31 Primary elections, as well as the acceptance of the verdict of polls, stress the subordinate and instrumental character of political machinery and networks.
of partisan structures. This citizen centrality and its effects permeate contemporary societies and lead us to examine their significance to the democratic regime.

D. Schnapper (2006) observes that the “Homo Democraticus tends to think that he can be represented only by himself”. That would result from the decadence of the republican ideal that implied to build a general will –which was in no way conceived as the aggregation of individual or particular wills– through political institutions. Consequently, in the present time that Schnapper sociopolitically defines as a “providential democracy” “representation has ceased to be the instrument of political transcendence and has become the means by which the needs and identities of citizens are expressed” (Schnapper, 2006).

According to this author, there is more democracy in this continuous format, since those who hold power are at the mercy of a society whose egalitarian demands multiply –but they are fragmentary and barely connected with a general representation of the political community–. Therefore, this “plus” of democracy is not necessarily positive to the author, who points out that the ethnic and the political are indivisible.

We can conclude, firstly, that citizenship has acquired a centrality that stems from its emancipation from the institutional device of representation, but it is worth reiterating –in order to avoid misunderstandings that would not be consistent with the interpretation we presented here– that representation is not disregarded, but its legitimacy is permanently at stake. Secondly, there is an expansion of a direct citizen presence that frequently does put the institutional system in check.

The most typical expressions of citizen presence are in tune with the way they appear on mass media. Common people’s strength, in which the number counts –evoking the vote count itself– is made of an articulation between the effective presence in the streets and its virtual basis –that needs the mass media– on the “implicitly represented”. This fact lets certain claims and collective mobilizations aspire to express a majoritarian opinion that must be heard by representatives and authorities, and can even impose decisions to them.

32 As conclusion, D. Schnapper (2006) downplays any valorative consideration on the analyzed mutation: “There is no essence of democracy. The crumbling away of the practices of the representative republican system implies the end neither of democracy nor history”.

33 The impeachement to Aníbal Ibarra (former mayor of Buenos Aires City) that culminated in 2006 when he was dismissed from office illustrates the complexity of the new citizen mobilization. The public action claiming for justice was started by the relatives of the victims of a fire in the nightclub “República de Cromagnon”. This action focused then on the claim for Ibarra’s impeachment, which finally took place under the relatives’ intense and varied pressure in its stages of instruction and judgement. The city legislature seemed defenseless before that claim and it gave in many times to the pressure received “from the streets”. This pressure was based on a legitimacy that came from the pain of having lost someone dear, as well as the claim to know what happened and which were the responsibilities of the different people involved. The claim for justice actually turned into a claim for a verdict that seemed evident to those mobilized. Ignoring their claim, not for starting the impeachment and determining the responsibilities but for certain judgement, was considered by them and a part of the public opinion as a denial of justice. What is most significant is that the movement’s emotional intensity did not correspond to a supposedly majoritarian part of the city’s public opinion who was for Ibarra’s dismissal: many polls carried out during the impeachment revealed the opposite. However, this citizen opinion who was more cautious when it came to determine responsibilities was not willing to support the mayor by means of mobilization or a plebiscite, as it was shown in the weakness of direct actions for the mayor and the previous failure in gathering signatures to call a plebiscite.
This “out-of-frame” citizen mobilization, incomparable to mass mobilizations of the past, which used to be organizationally framed and called by leaders, has led to an idealization of the “good society”, that would have a capacity of redress or would be bearer of a justice principle. This idealization does not notice that society is not always a source of cosubstantial politicization, reform or progress: its actions can even entail the delight in individual or particular immediate interests and identitarian passions, and its excesses can ultimately destroy the institutional basis of its own existence. Nonetheless, despite the warnings on the misleading illusion of conferring natural civic virtues to the citizenry and its mobilization, what actually seems to be typical of democracy is the expansion of the citizen life: its more spontaneous and non-institutionalized forms are actually compatible with democracy and improving democracy’s quality, to the extent that even being particularist or identitarian they imply the challenge of developing their potential plurality and thus becoming a demos. In a world where not only routines and institutional devices but also the “powers that be” have consolidated, the citizen spontaneity, as well as other civic expressions that take it center stage and have a continuous presence, should be received as a promise.

But the mobilization of Cromagnon victims’ relatives did not simply consist of the expression of individual suffering and claims for redress that go beyond human beings’ reach. In fact, although it was subject to partisan appropriation, this mobilization also had a political impact since it shed light on the local State operation, the existing laws in the field of citizen security, the procedures of public officers’ appointment and the limits or even corrupt connotations of the activity they carry out. We can conclude –not overlooking the reservations on the impeachment development– that in this case the mobilization of the affected people contributed to throw light on crucial political problems: this would not have happened if only institutional devices had intervened.
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