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**DEMOCRACY AND URBAN POLITICAL CULTURE IN SPANISH
SOUTH AMERICA, 1810–1860**
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450

July

2022

paper



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DEMOCRACY AND URBAN POLITICAL CULTURE IN SPANISH SOUTH AMERICA, 1810–1860

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Working Paper #450–July 2022**

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Key words: Democracy, Revolution, Cádiz Constitution, Lima, Buenos Aires, republic, elections, popular sovereignty, urban politics, representative government, *caudillos*.

* This is a draft chapter for the forthcoming *Re-imagining Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1780–1870*, eds. Joanna Innes, Eduardo Posada-Carbó, and Mark Philp (Oxford University Press). The authors would like to thank the editors of this volume, as well as Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, Karen Graubart, Natalia Sobrevilla, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on previous drafts.

ABSTRACT

“Democracy,” a word seldom used in public debate at the start of the nineteenth century and negatively associated with tumult, disorder, and direct rule, in a few decades became linked to representative government and increasingly employed with positive connotations. This paper argues that these conceptual changes should be explored in their political and social contexts, since the term “democracy” was invoked to (de)legitimate certain political practices and social sectors. Therefore, in exploring this non-linear process in Spanish America, these pages focus on the interactions between the emerging language of democracy and its varied meanings and uses in urban politics. These interactions were part of the factional disputes on how to implement the principle of popular sovereignty. Starting with an overview of selected emerging political practices during the Independence period, the paper then focuses on Lima and Buenos Aires, two regions with contrasting colonial pasts, responses to Spanish crises, and post-independence paths, showing how the concept of democracy could be put to varied uses according to different contexts and political objectives.

RESUMEN

El concepto “democracia,” escasamente utilizado a principios del siglo diecinueve y con referencias negativas asociadas con tumulto, desorden y gobierno directo, en unas pocas décadas fue transformado, siendo vinculado al gobierno representativo y crecientemente empleado con connotaciones positivas. Al explorar este desigual proceso para la América Hispánica, estas páginas argumentan que el variado significado del término “democracia” debe ser estudiado atendiendo a los contextos políticos en que era invocado ya que se utilizaba para (des)legitimar ciertas prácticas políticas y sectores sociales. Comenzando con una reseña general de la emergencia de ciertas prácticas políticas al momento de la Independencia, el trabajo se enfoca en Lima y Buenos Aires, dos regiones con distinto pasado colonial, respuestas a la crisis española, y experiencias post-revolucionarias, mostrando la forma en que el concepto “democracia” fue sujeto de variados usos en diferentes contextos y según distintos objetivos.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the crisis of the Spanish monarchy catalysed profound transformations in Spanish America's political cultures by giving rise to armed mobilizations and rapid politicization. The adoption of the principle of popular sovereignty brought broad sectors of the population into politics through new electoral processes and various forms of participation in the public sphere. After fifteen years of struggle, a variety of republican systems took form, entailing new rules of play, including written constitutions and definitions of and safeguards for the principles of representation, citizenship, and freedom of the press and assembly, among others.

A common feature emerging across these political communities was that their readiness to launch armed revolutions coexisted with sustained efforts to establish and maintain constitutional governments and representative systems based on large electorates. Once, historians characterised the period of state formation as one of prolonged anarchy, analysed through the frame of *caudillismo*, understood as top-down patronage or clientelism that curtailed the development of institutionalized power.¹ Newer scholarship has revealed a much more heterogeneous social, political, and institutional landscape. As Hilda Sabato has argued, even after independence, periodic elections and lively public opinion coexisted with armed rebellions within a “normalized” if turbulent pattern of politics. As we shall clearly see in the examples of Peru, uprisings of different kinds were often perceived not as definitive ruptures in a republican order but rather as embodying a legitimate choice among an array of political instruments.² Over time, a trend towards the institutionalization of political conflict is observable across the Spanish American world, although how far political institutions succeeded in containing violent contestation varied from state to state.

These developments in practices were both reflected in and shaped by developments in language. “Democracy,” among other words, was put to new uses in changing local contexts, giving meaning (sometimes positive, sometimes negative) to novel and diverse experiences. These pages focus on the interactions between practices and language in selected urban political settings from the 1810s to the 1860s to illustrate the *performative* function and the changing understandings and value of a term used to legitimize or condemn different political practices.

¹ John Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America* (Oxford University Press: 1992).

² Hilda Sabato, *Republics of the New World: The Revolutionary Political Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Princeton University Press: 2018), 112–115.

This study argues that “democracy” was invoked, defined, and used at particular moments and for particular political purposes by a variety of actors. It is part of a larger project that underlines how “democracy,” a word seldomly used in public debate at the start of the century and negatively associated with tumult, disorder, and direct rule, in a few decades became linked to representative government and increasingly employed with positive connotations.³ In exploring this process, these pages highlight the relationship between language and political practices. Therefore, this analysis departs from the few studies on democracy in the region that aim to assess the democratic nature of the institutions of the period or that search for its “democratic roots.”⁴ Rather, this paper seeks to trace the different usages of “democracy” and its varied meanings to support or reject certain practices and institutions once the term emerged in public disputes.⁵

To this end, the first section offers a brief overview of the many forms of political practices that emerged after Spain’s imperial and monarchical crises at the start of the nineteenth century, continuing until the consolidation of independence. Languages and practices, and the relation between them, acquire meaning when analysed in contextual spaces. Starting in the second section, this paper begins to focus on the cases of Peru and the area around the River Plate (Argentina). These were two regions with contrasting colonial pasts, responses to the Spanish crises, and post-independence paths. Debates surrounding “democracy” assumed greater prominence from the 1840s onwards; the last two sections continue with these case studies to illustrate different ways in which countries addressed the new challenges that the affirmation of democracy presented.

Rather than attempt to cover the entire region, our choice of cases and themes to analyse needs some preliminary clarification. First, this study concentrates on *some* of the political practices developed in “cities.” It should be remembered that the Spanish American territory was a *discontinuous* landscape, in which urban and rural areas were relatively distinct. Under colonial rule, the city was organized through *cabildos* (town councils) and coexisted with a variety of

³ *Re-imagining Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1780–1870*, eds. Joanna Innes, Eduardo Posada-Carbó and Mark Philp (Oxford University Press: forthcoming).

⁴ James Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Duke University Press: 2014); Paul Drake, *Between Tyranny and Anarchy: A History of Democracy in Latin America, 1800–2006* (Stanford University Press: 2009).

⁵ It thus follows the approach stated in *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850*, eds. Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (Oxford University Press: 2013) and *Re-imagining Democracy in the Mediterranean, 1780–1860*, eds. Joanna Innes and Mark Philp (Oxford University Press: 2018).

smaller towns (*villas* and *pueblos*) with jurisdiction over the surrounding rural spaces where most of the population lived. The status of “city” was an administrative and political privilege granted without reference to population numbers or demographic criteria. Hence, the “urban” territorial landscape in Spanish America offered great variations. At the end of the eighteenth century, for example, Mexico, the largest city of the Spanish Empire and capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, had 112,000 inhabitants, and Lima, the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru, had a population of 52,600 people representing one-twentieth of the total population; in contrast, in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate, Buenos Aires, its capital, had a somewhat smaller population of 40,000. People of Hispanic descent dominated city populations, but to different degrees. Lima registered 38 percent Spaniards, then a mix of other “castes”: 8 percent Indians, 9 percent Mestizos, 12 percent Mulattos, 18 percent Blacks, and 7 percent Zambos; while Buenos Aires registered 70 percent Spaniards and 28 percent Blacks, Zambos and Mulattos, and only 5 percent Indians and 5 percent Mestizos.⁶

The role of cities as colonial administrative seats of power was undermined during the wars of independence. Rural areas, *villas*, and *pueblos* became more politicized, as leaders emerged from highly mobilized multi-ethnic popular sectors, transforming Spanish American political cultures. The fact that we focus on cities does not mean that we think one should ignore these crucial rural transformations. However, we think that it is important to focus on particular, concrete scenarios in order to illuminate the many uses of “democracy” amid changing practices. The influence of cities also transcended their immediate circumstances: it was in cities, especially capital cities, that central authorities and many of their agents were based; cities were also sites where electoral campaigns were organized, and the rules governing “national” political life were debated in print culture, associations, political clubs, cafes, and canteens.

Not only have we restricted our account to cities, but also to a particular array of practices. Many topics are passed over. We have little to say about the embedding of political practices (and related debates) in a deeply religious Catholic culture. Elections took place in churches, parishes served as electoral districts, mass was often celebrated at the start of an election cycle, leaders appealed to Catholic symbols, blasphemy was criminalized in freedom-of-

⁶ Pilar Pérez Cantó, “La población de Lima en el siglo XVIII,” *Boletín Americanista* 32 (1982): 396–397; Raúl Fradkin, “Población y sociedad,” in *Argentina. Crisis imperial e independencia*, ed. Jorge Gelman (Madrid: Mapfre, 2010), 199.

the-press laws, and many associations did not permit the discussion of religious issues. In most places, Catholicism was designated the official religion of the state, and Church leaders and followers developed their own ideas about democratic republics. Another relevant topic that deserves more attention than we have been able to give it is the role of women in politics. In these republican patriarchal societies, women from different social sectors participated in the political sphere through various channels, including spying, fighting, mobilizing, and writing.⁷ Furthermore, our focus on selected practices does not mean that we consider these “sites of democracy,” or precursors of “modern forms.” Rather, we simply aim to illustrate with concrete examples some of the ways in which “democracy” was related to practice. Finally, because we are concerned with the interaction between words and practices, we focus on the world of the public written word, expressed mostly by *letrados* (men of letters), mainly journalists and politicians, through the press and public speeches, even though, as historians of popular politics have emphasized, all sectors of society were protagonists in the political cultures and practices of the time. While popular groups were regular subjects of debate in the public sphere and some periodicals claimed to speak in their name, until later in the century their members had little opportunity to directly use their own voices through the printed press.⁸

EMERGENCE AND CONSOLIDATION OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY (1810–INDEPENDENCE)

On both sides of the Atlantic, responses to the crisis of the Spanish monarchy tended to endorse popular sovereignty, either to resist Napoleonic rule in Spain or to justify the emergence of

⁷ Vanesa Miseres, “Engendering War Writing in 19th-Century Latin America,” in *The Routledge Companion to 19th-Century Latin American History*, ed. Graciela Montaldo and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

⁸ The first periodical produced in Buenos Aires by Afroporteños was published in 1858. Titled *El Demócrata Negro* or *La Raza Africana*, it ran for eight numbers. A few other periodicals still available were published in the 1870s. See Lea Geler, *Andares negros, caminos blancos. Afroporteños, Estado y Nación. Argentina a fines del siglo XI* (Rosario: 2010); Norberto Pablo Cirio, *Tinta negra en el gris de ayer. Los afroporteños a través de sus periódicos entre 1873 y 1882* (Buenos Aires: Teseo, 2009). Similarly, artisan organizations in Peru or Chile did not publish their own newspapers, with the exception of short-lived publications by Chilean artisan Santiago Ramos in the 1840s, although many periodicals claimed to speak in the name of the artisan communities. See James Wood, *Society of Equality: Popular Republicanism and Democracy in Santiago de Chile, 1818–1851* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011). It is still unknown if artisans or Blacks in Lima put out their own publications. On some occasions, Lima’s artisans expressed their views in *El Comercio*, Peru’s leading newspaper.

autonomous and independent governments in Spanish America. Spain's Cádiz Constitution of 1812 was intended to serve all the territories of the Spanish monarchy in every part of the globe by creating a new sovereign entity: the bi-hemispheric nation. However, insurgent Americans refused this Cádiz system in the name of the sovereignty of the *pueblos*. As a consequence, across Spanish America, aspirant polities faced a common challenge: how to give institutional expression to these forms of bottom-up sovereignty while enforcing political obedience. The question was debated in an unprecedentedly wide forum because freedom of the press was instituted in both insurgent and loyal areas.

In territories which remained loyal to the metropolis, electoral processes were defined by the Cádiz Constitution, which established a system of indirect suffrage to elect members of *ayuntamientos* (local governments), in districts so constructed as to contain populations of at least 1,000, and also (via an indirect process) provincial deputies and representatives to the Cádiz Cortes (Constitutional Assembly). The Constitution was enforced only until the absolutist restoration in 1814; it was re-established between 1820 and 1823 after Spain's liberal revolution. Although at that later date Spain proved unable to contain the independence movements in America, the Constitution had a significant and long-term impact on political practices.

The novel inclusion of the transatlantic territories in the constitutional assembly set the scene for disputes over territorial balance. The American deputies in the Cortes of Cádiz complained about their unequal representation until the Constitution was changed to include the principle that the number of representatives assigned to each electoral district should reflect population numbers. A second set of complaints centred on suffrage qualifications. The 1812 Constitution recognized as Spaniards all "free men born and *avecindados* in the Spanish dominions, and their male descendants," and gave these men citizenship and voting rights. The Spanish concept of *vecindad* traditionally referred to a male head of household with property and residency in a community, such as a city, a *villa* or a *pueblo*. But in these years, *vecino* gradually lost its association with privilege and was increasingly used as a synonym of "citizen" or "free man," though domestic servants, the unemployed or bankrupt, and those in debt to the public treasury were excluded. Native Americans were recognized as Spanish citizens and thus qualified to vote, but descendants of Africans, including the many of mixed race (*pardos*), were explicitly excluded unless in individual cases they demonstrated qualities which warranted

exceptional treatment.⁹ This discriminatory policy spurred American representatives in Cádiz to defend the equality of the excluded, a move which had the potential to expand the representation of their territories.

In insurgent territories, where this Constitution did not apply, authorities were elected according to rules and regulations specific to each jurisdiction but with similarly expansive male suffrage, usually exercised through indirect elections. Definitions of “citizenship” in electoral regulations varied, but generally involved criteria for inclusion or exclusion according to certain social, racial, and ethnic categories. However, it is important to underline that all electoral regulations distinguished between the active vote (that is, the right to vote) and the passive vote (the right to be elected), with stricter qualifications for the latter.¹⁰

Recent scholarship has underlined the impact of electoral processes on Spanish American political cultures and how voting rights allowed for broad popular participation. The inclusion of indigenous people as active citizens gave rise to participatory practices that transformed pre-existing balances of power by promoting inter-ethnic pacts between Indians, Creoles, and Spaniards that varied from region to region. The disruption of former political and territorial hierarchies, especially in the loyal regions in New Spain, Peru, and the other jurisdictions that applied the Cádiz Constitution, was one major change. Elections to *ayuntamientos* in districts of 1,000 people meant that power was extended to rural areas and local communities. In the valley of Mexico, for example, indigenous people agreed to adopt the constitutional *cabildo* (that is, to follow the regulations derived from the Cádiz Constitution), in exchange for the recognized autonomy of their ethnic and political territorial organization.¹¹ In each case, the organization of and elections for *cabildos* reinforced the community character of local spaces and contributed to the “ruralization of politics,” as Antonio Annino has put it, as the expansion of voting to rural areas meant the deconstruction of the political-territorial hierarchies of the Viceroyalties.¹²

In insurgent regions, the right to vote also expanded across cities, *villas*, *pueblos*, and rural areas but the scenarios were more varied.¹³ In Venezuela, for example, the electoral

⁹ Manuel Chust, *La cuestión nacional americana en las Cortes de Cádiz* (Valencia: Fundación Instituto Historia Social, 1999).

¹⁰ Sabato, *Republics*, 50–89.

¹¹ Claudia Guarisco, *Etnicidad y ciudadanía en México y Perú (1770–1850)* (Toluca: El Colegio Mexiquense, 2004).

¹² Antonio Annino, coord., *La revolución novohispana, 1808–1821* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010).

¹³ Annino, *La revolución novohispana*; Víctor Peralta Ruiz, *La independencia y la cultura política peruana, 1808–1821* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2010).

regulations of 1810, applied in the election of representatives to the first Constitutional Congress, established equal participation for all free men, *vecinos* and *avecindados*, without distinguishing between cities, *villas* or towns of different population sizes.¹⁴ In the River Plate, by contrast, it was not until the Provisional Statute of 1815 that the number of representatives was determined by the population size of each electoral district and suffrage thus extended to the rural population. In that statute, political citizenship was granted to every “free man” over the age of 25, excluding salaried domestic laborers who possessed no property or lucrative trade and Afro-descendants.¹⁵

Popular sovereignty was also more informally expressed through other avenues, including *cabildos abiertos* (open *cabildos* or general meetings of *vecinos*), petitions, consultations, rebellions, armed revolutions, or some combination of these. The open *cabildo* was initially the most common mechanism of popular intervention in public affairs. They were most frequently initiated as a popular assembly that resorted to the old practices of *petitorios*, that is, a petition of demands to the authorities. However, even municipal authorities at times summoned an open *cabildo* to decide matters of common interest. Some open *cabildos* led to rebellions or were convened specifically to endorse an uprising against the government. The “*consulta popular*” or popular consultation was another common practice where the authorities could submit to “the people” the choice to ratify or reject a measure or a proposal. For example, in 1816, the government of the United Provinces of the River Plate convened the citizens to vote between an “open *cabildo* or the representative system” for selecting the local authorities.¹⁶ Those in favor of the open *cabildo* argued that it would allow the people to “defend their freedom with greater enthusiasm”; those who supported representation sustained that “the people and their localities” should be “heard in a dignified and decorous way, through Representatives, and not in an open *cabildo*, giving the inconveniences it involves.”¹⁷ In the Banda Oriental del Uruguay, the rebels’ leader, José Gervasio Artigas, also implemented a *consulta popular*. Artigas

¹⁴ Carole Leal, “El Reglamento de Roscio y las elecciones de 1810: una convocatoria a la igualdad,” *Argos* 39 (2013).

¹⁵ Marcela Ternavasio, *La revolución del voto. Política y elecciones en Buenos Aires, 1810–1852* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002); Magdalena Candiotti, “Ciudadanos negros en el Río de la Plata. Repensar la inclusión política de los emancipados entre la revolución y la constitución,” *Estudios Sociales* 53 (2017): 183–213.

¹⁶ Junta de Observación, Sesión 17 June 1816. In *Gazeta de Buenos-Ayres*, 29 June 1816.

¹⁷ *Gazeta de Buenos-Ayres*, 29 June 1816.

had mobilized a powerful base of support in rural areas, and the *consulta popular* served as a tool to legitimize his mandate as “protector” of the *Liga de los Pueblos Libres*, a coalition of rebel provincial leaders. In order to legitimize his confederal project as an expression of popular sovereignty and self-government, Artigas promoted a series of direct consultations in towns, *villas*, and *pueblos*.¹⁸

Riots, uprisings, and revolutions, associated with “citizens in arms,” were undoubtedly the political practices governments most feared. In some cases, armed movements aimed simply to negotiate specific demands. Thus, mutinies from within the ranks of militias or the regular army often demanded improvements in material conditions. In other cases, mobilizations developed into armed revolutions aimed at removing authorities elected through representative systems. This was the case in Buenos Aires in 1815, when part of the regular army revolted against the government and toppled both the Supreme Director and the first Constitutional Assembly, in session since 1813.¹⁹ There were also many examples of disputes related to the electoral process that became entangled in, or led to, armed confrontations.²⁰ Such was the case in Cuzco in 1814, when, during disputes that took place between rival groups at the time of the first elections for the *Cabildo*, two of its members, the Angulo brothers, led an uprising that took control of the southern Andean region and held it for almost ten months before they were defeated.²¹

The central dilemma facing Spanish America was how to establish a stable government that expressed the principle of popular sovereignty and yet secured compliance. In this context, the term “democracy” (seldom employed) was variously associated with anarchy, mixed forms of government, or republics.²² For example, when in the most radical insurgent areas, including Venezuela and New Granada, democracy alluded to a form of government, the word was often

¹⁸ Ana Frega, *Pueblos y soberanía en la revolución artiguista. La región de Santo Domingo Soriano desde fines de la colonia a la ocupación portuguesa* (Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental 2007).

¹⁹ Marcela Ternavasio, *Gobernar la revolución. Poderes en disputa en el Río de la Plata, 1810–1816* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2007).

²⁰ Gabriel Di Meglio, “La participación popular en las revoluciones hispanoamericanas, 1808–1816. Un ensayo sobre sus rasgos y causas,” *Almanack* 5 (2013).

²¹ Víctor Peralta Ruiz, “Elecciones, constitucionalismo y revolución en el Cuzco, 1809–1815,” *Revista de Indias* 206 (1996): 99–131; Luis Miguel Glave, “Antecedentes y naturaleza de la revolución del Cuzco de 1814 y el primer proceso electoral,” in *La independencia del Perú*, ed. Scarlett O’Phelan (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú, 2001), 77–97.

²² Gerardo Caetano, ed., *Democracia*, vol. 2 of *Diccionario político y social del mundo Iberoamericano. Conceptos políticos fundamentales (1770–1870)*, Dir. Javier Fernández-Sebastián (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2014), 15–39.

deployed to refer to “popular government,” in opposition to monarchy and overlapping in meaning with “the republic.” In other insurgent areas where the proposals of constitutional monarchy held more sway among leaders—as in the River Plate or in Chile—democracy tended to be spoken of in the frame of a mixed government that could obtain “the main advantages of monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic governments, without their abuses.”²³ Following this line, the Cádiz Constitution was described as a “democratic monarchy” or as a “republican monarchy.”²⁴ In contrast, among the absolutists in loyal regions, the 1812 Constitution was considered as a source of disturbance that, as Fernando de Abascal, Viceroy of Peru, put it, altered the “fundamental laws of [the monarchy] to introduce the revolutionary principles of democracy.”²⁵

Sometimes, “democracy” connoted equality. In “*Aristócratas en camisa*,” an article published in 1815, Bernardo de Monteagudo described the egalitarian society he saw in Buenos Aires as essential to democracy,²⁶ while the Chilean revolutionary politician and journalist Camilo Henríquez denounced aristocracy as synonymous with privilege and in contradiction with “democratic and popular ideas.”²⁷ Similar examples could be found in Venezuela and Nueva Granada.²⁸

But one of the most frequent uses of the word was to distinguish between direct popular rule and representative government. The former was linked with antiquity (and was sometimes called “pure” or “rigorous” democracy) and was generally portrayed as a source of disorder and as an obstacle to solving the dilemma at hand. Although “democracy” sometimes appeared in association with “republic,” and might in this context implicitly be linked to representative government, the concept “representative democracy” was not part of the political vocabulary during these early stages. In fact, the appropriate category with which the actors framed their political practices was “representative government,” which was born not as an adaptation but as an alternative to democracy. The novel implementation of representative government was

²³ “Manifiesto del Soberano Congreso General Constituyente de las Provincias Unidas en Sud América al dar la Constitución,” *Asambleas Constituyentes*, tomo 6, 2º parte, 725.

²⁴ *El Censor*, Buenos Aires, 22 August 1816.

²⁵ Cited in Peralta Ruiz, *La independencia*, 202.

²⁶ *El Independiente*, Buenos Aires, 24 January 1815.

²⁷ Cited in Gabriel Cid Rodríguez, “El temor al ‘reinado del populacho’. El concepto de democracia durante la independencia chilena,” *Universum*, Universidad de Talca, 32, n° 1 (2017): 200.

²⁸ Eduardo-Posada Carbó, *Representación y democracia en las independencias hispanoamericanas, 1808–1830* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2011); Isidro Vanegas, “Colombia,” in Caetano, *Democracia*, 117–132.

founded on the premise that sovereignty pertained to the people, and it was the people who delegated its power to the authorities.

Democracy, on the other hand, was associated with restless crowds, tumult and collective, unregulated exaltation. It was not only absolutists or conservatives who held this association; the notion also circulated among those who adhered to republican and revolutionary ideas. The *Diario Político de Santa Fe* (New Granada) was among the early—though not the only—publications that expressed this idea, condemning the “disorders of anarchy” that came out of “rigorous democracy.”²⁹ The press in the River Plate expressed similar concepts when it associated “the fury of democracy” with a “lack of organization, consequence, form, system, or morality.”³⁰ The opposition was soon drawn between democracy, understood as the direct exercise of sovereignty typical of ancient times, and the novel ideas of representative government. Such was evident when the *Gazeta de Buenos-Ayres* transcribed the Federalist #10 in its pages:

From these views on the subject it may be concluded that a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens who assemble and administer the government in person, can admit of no cure for the damages from factions. [...] A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect.³¹

An uprising in Lima in July 1822 also illustrates the ways in which the term “democracy” was used. The movement arose out of the deep discontent of Lima residents with the Protectorate established by José de San Martín after declaring the independence of Peru; San Martín was accused of concentrating power and supporting monarchical rule. The aim of the mutiny was to displace Bernardo de Monteagudo, a powerful minister, considered a great despot and responsible for interfering in the elections for the first Congress of the Republic. Lima’s elites mobilized the popular sectors and requested an open *cabildo* to legitimize the coup, reviving the traditional colonial practice of the petition.³² The event also surfaced the risks involved in the

²⁹ Cited in Isidro Vanegas Useche, *Todas son Iguales. Estudios sobre la democracia en Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad del Externado de Colombia, 2010), 111–121.

³⁰ *Gazeta de Buenos-Ayres*, Buenos Aires, 8 June 1816.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Carmen McEvoy, “El motín de las palabras: la caída de Bernardo de Monteagudo y la forja de la cultura política limeña (1821–1822),” in *Forjando la Nación. Ensayos de Historia Republicana*, ed. Carmen McEvoy (Lima: Instituto Riva Agüero, 1999).

direct exercise of popular sovereignty. *La Abeja Republicana*, for example, warned about the dangers of “democracy” associated with the eruption of the “multitudes,” with “vindictive ferocity” and with the “passions” that “keep us from learning the truth and true interests.”³³

It should be clear, however, that those who contrasted direct democracy with representation were reducing the complex, varied, and intertwined repertoires of widescale popular participation to just two alternatives, when in fact, as we have seen, distinctions were often not so clear cut. The discursive might be seen as reflecting efforts to describe, assimilate, or confront uncertainty amidst dizzying new political experiences. These terms also operated *performatively*, to endorse certain practices and processes and denounce others. Drawing the distinction entailed attempts to differentiate between the rulers and the ruled, in contexts in which the founding of legitimate power on popular sovereignty opened up space for popular assertion. In this context, although not often used, “democracy” retained the notion of unruly mobs as well as of more direct assertions of popular sovereignty. The example of Lima clearly shows how popular mobilization was used to legitimize an institutional process, and through references to “democracy,” it was also condemned as dangerously unleashing political passions.

NEW SOVEREIGNTIES AND THE PROBLEM OF ORDER: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO 1840

Following independence, Spanish America adopted republican forms of government; the only exceptions were the two Mexican imperial experiments: that of Agustín de Iturbide (1822–1823) and the Second Empire (1864–1867). The republican governments provided for representation, though they remained open to challenge by alternative manifestations of popular sovereignty. Two common features characterized the numerous political and armed struggles that took place across post-independence Spanish America. First, there were disputes about the right to self-government between the central, provincial, and local powers. And, second, in contrast to what happened in Europe, the fear of popular uprisings did not translate into severe voting restrictions.

How far suffrage was extended varied across post-independence states and changes over time did not follow a linear pattern. “Autonomy” was the main criteria for inclusion, and women,

³³ Elías Palti, “La Abeja Republicana: la democracia en el discurso de la emancipación,” in *En el nudo del imperio. Independencia y democracia en Perú*, eds. Carmen McEvoy, Mauricio Novoa and Elías Palti (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2012), 99–117.

children, and enslaved people were generally excluded on grounds of “social dependency,” as at times were domestic servants and journeymen. Literacy could also be listed as a requirement, although its enforcement was generally postponed well into the future. Provisions relating to property, income, or profession changed over the years as constitutions changed in Chile, Ecuador, and Colombia. Electoral legislation generally did not make ethnic or racial distinctions; as a result, wide swathes of the middle and lower sectors, including Indians, Mestizos, and free Blacks had suffrage rights.³⁴ Studies of electoral practices have shown that the participation of these groups often depended on control mechanisms—formal and informal—that could prevent them from voting. The fact that electoral processes were usually supervised by local authorities opened the way to negotiation and forms of inclusion or exclusion that were not legally mandated.

During this period, Peru and the River Plate—the two case studies we particularly focus on in this paper—followed contrasting trajectories, setting the scene for different patterns in terms of how “democracy” was discussed. Peru, following San Martín’s Protectorate and the Bolivarian era (1822–1827), entered a period in which military *caudillos* (strongmen) engaged in constant and violent disputes for power, with no one able to establish a secure hold on the presidency. Recent scholarship highlights *caudillos*’ flexible use of available political tools. Cristóbal Aljovín has outlined a common sequence in which *caudillos* claimed that government corruption necessitated a resort to violence; they appealed to popular support to launch an uprising; Congress endorsed the action; and the cycle ended with new elections to legitimize the new ruler.³⁵ As Natalia Sobrevilla has underlined, until the mid-nineteenth century, the issuing of constitutions, often also included in this cycle, functioned to legitimize uprisings and leadership change.³⁶ In this context, though *caudillos* formed alliances with local notables, they also needed to negotiate their support among peasants, who were mostly indigenous, as Cecilia Méndez’s studies have shown,³⁷ and in Lima, with artisan unions, as explored by Iñigo García-Bryce.³⁸

³⁴ Sabato, *Republics*, 50–60.

³⁵ Cristóbal Aljovín de Losada, “Votos y bayonetas: Perú 1825–1851,” *Elecciones*, Perú, n° 5 (2005): 177–178.

³⁶ Natalia Sobrevilla Perea, “Batallas por la legitimidad: constitucionalismo y conflicto político en el Perú del siglo XIX (1812–1860),” *Revista de Indias* 246 (2009): 101–128.

³⁷ Cecilia Méndez, *The Plebeian Republic: The Huanta Rebellion and the Making of the Peruvian State, 1820–1850* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

³⁸ Iñigo García-Bryce, *Crafting the Republic: Lima’s and National Building in Peru, 1821–1879*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).

Some features of Peru's electoral culture deserve emphasis. First, a very inclusive voting law defining who had the right to vote at the first stage of the indirect electoral process opened the way to broad participation, although social hierarchies and networks played a large part in the selection of candidates to the electoral colleges.³⁹ Second, elections were competitive, and success depended on mobilizing the electorate. Third, competing claims were often resolved at the next level, in the electoral colleges, adding another instance of negotiations and complexity. Fourth, factional or party divisions were volatile and did not straightforwardly reflect social identities or ideologies; however, as Paul Gootenberg has argued, *caudillos* had diverse competing visions for the republic.⁴⁰ Fifth, in the larger cities, the growing presence of periodicals and pamphlets became a key feature of electoral campaigns; in villages and small *pueblos*, candidates used other tools; in 1834, for example, Luis José de Orbegoso undertook a campaign trip through the Andean South to forge personal ties with potential voters.⁴¹

The conflict of 1834 illustrates several kinds of disruptions in the context of elections. In 1829, the military leader Agustín Gamarra assumed the presidency and, although he dealt with almost two dozen rebellions and uprisings, he became the first president to complete his term. As the Constitution of 1828 did not allow the president serve consecutive terms, Gamarra called a national Constitutional Convention in 1833 to modify this clause so that he could serve again immediately. The elections to the Convention were competitive and violent, and although the new Constitution introduced minimal changes, it soon faced strong opposition. Furthermore, after no candidate achieved enough votes in the electoral colleges, the Convention, claiming the right to choose the new president, proceeded to appoint the military leader Luis José de Orbegoso. Gamarra challenged the decision and initiated a civil war but was defeated. Orbegoso, whose presidential authority was nevertheless weakened by these events, embarked on negotiations with the president of Bolivia, Mariscal Andrés de Santa Cruz, ultimately leading to the formation of a Peruvian-Bolivian Confederation and the approval of another new constitution

³⁹ Peruvian suffrage was quite open, except under the Bolivarian Constitution of 1826 and in the Santa Cruz period, 1836–1839. The 1828 Constitution granted citizenship to all men over 21, or those who were married, without any limitations except participation in the trafficking of enslaved persons, holding positions abroad, incarceration for serious crimes, vagrancy, religious vows, or having abandoned their wives or been divorced with culpability.

⁴⁰ Paul Gootenberg, *Between Silver and Guano: Commercial Policy and State in Postindependence Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 69–99.

⁴¹ Cristóbal Aljovín de Losada, "Sufragio y participación política. Perú 1808–1896," in *Historia de las elecciones en el Perú. Estudios sobre el gobierno representativo*, ed. Cristóbal Aljovín de Losada and Senesio López (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2005), 49–59.

in 1837. After the fall of the Confederation, Gamarra laid claim to the Peruvian presidency, and still another new constitution was approved in 1839 to legitimize his rule. The cycle of revolts and elections nevertheless continued.⁴²

The experience of the River Plate region was significantly different as provincial demands for autonomy led to the collapse of an attempt to centralize power in 1820. Until 1852, the region remained divided into sovereign provinces linked through interprovincial pacts and, after 1831, through membership in a loose confederation dominated by Buenos Aires, the most powerful province. For more than three decades each province was organized under republican governments with their own rules and with authorities elected by popular suffrage, which, in most cases, was highly inclusive. In 1821, the government of Buenos Aires passed a new electoral law that granted the right to vote to all “free men” or “*avecindados*” over twenty years of age, and more strikingly, whereby legislative representatives were directly elected, something highly unusual in this era, when indirect suffrage was more common and generally perceived as an important step in controlling the “excesses” of popular sovereignty.⁴³ Legislators in turn appointed the governor, who was the head of the executive.⁴⁴ *Cabildos*, now seen as the locus of popular assemblies and associated with direct democracy, were abolished and were not replaced by new municipal institutions, thus eliminating any intermediate representative body.⁴⁵ At the same time, the provincial government fostered public debate by stimulating the circulation of newspapers and periodicals, protected by the freedom of the press law of 1821, and by encouraging civil associations.⁴⁶

During the 1820s, political life in Buenos Aires was very active, with broad electoral participation in both urban and rural areas, and intense public campaigning accompanied by debate in the press about lists of candidates. In the early years, these lists did not make clear distinctions between “parties” or “factions”; rather, they presented the contest as one between lists of people who aspired to have a seat in the legislature. At the end of 1824, during the

⁴² Aljovín de Losada, “Votos,” 178–180; Sobrevilla Perea, “Batallas,” 115–116.

⁴³ For example, different was the case of the less inclusive electoral regulations of the Province of Córdoba. The Constitution of 1821 established indirect elections to choose representatives to the Legislature and excluded descendants of slaves until the fourth generation, paid domestic servants, those with no property of at least 400 pesos or lucrative employment useful for the country.

⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that to be a representative one had to be over the age of 25 and a property owner.

⁴⁵ Political control of the province in the urban and rural areas was in the hands of the “judges of the peace” (*jueces de paz*), appointed by the governor.

⁴⁶ Pilar González Bernaldo, *Civilidad y política en los orígenes de la Nación Argentina. Las sociabilidades en Buenos Aires, 1829–1862* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001).

Constitutional Congress set up with the aim of bringing together all the provinces, a sharper divide emerged between two main contending groups, later known as Unitarians and Federalists. The Constitutional Congress failed and dissolved in 1827, leaving deeper factionalism and increasing political violence. It was in this context that Juan Manuel de Rosas, a large landowner and commander of rural militias, was elected Governor of Buenos Aires in 1829 and emerged as leader of the Federalists. In contrast to Peruvian contenders, Rosas managed to dominate the political order for two decades, both in the province of Buenos Aires and across the entire Confederation, although his power was not legitimized by a constitution. Capitalizing on pre-existing factious disputes, he imposed a novel “republican experiment” in Buenos Aires (described below) and from there expanded his influence over the rest of the provinces through negotiations and pacts with local leaders, and also through his powerful armies.

Within the province of Buenos Aires, elections were held annually according to the electoral law of 1821, with its wide and direct suffrage. By the 1830s, popular sovereignty embodied in the right to vote had become such an essential dimension of the political culture that a periodical article signed by “Las Porteñas Federales” demanded that women also be granted voting rights.⁴⁷ In this scene of high social and political mobilization, Rosas succeeded in building an order that effectively excluded his rivals. He closed opportunities to participate in the shaping of candidate lists, imposing a single-list system, and ended the freedom of the press. Electoral processes in this context became rituals that legitimized his power, supported by a formidable apparatus of political propaganda that centred on devotion to his persona and the demonization of his opponents. Through pamphlets, periodicals and personal connections Rosas directly appealed to Buenos Aires’s Black population, in particular to members of its associations, known as “nations”.⁴⁸ Rosas also implemented plebiscites to ratify the “extraordinary powers” delegated to him by the legislature from 1835. Plebiscites were celebrated as opportunities for “the people” to “directly” express their “will.”⁴⁹ By channelling

⁴⁷ *La Gaceta Mercantil*, Buenos Aires, 27 April 1833.

⁴⁸ González Bernaldo, *Civilidad y política*, 113–118; George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980); Oscar Chamoza, “‘To Honor the Ashes of Their Forebears’: The Rise and Crisis of African Nations in the Post-Independence State of Buenos Aires, 1820–1860,” *The Americas* 59, no. 3 (2003): 374–378; María Agustina Barrachina, “La disputa por el apoyo de la población afroporteña en 1833: la interpelación al regimiento de Milicias Defensores de Buenos Aires a través de la prensa,” *Anuario del Centro de Estudios Históricos “Prof. Carlos S.A. Segreti,”* Córdoba, Año 15, N. 15 (2015), 127–146.

⁴⁹ Ternavasio, *La revolución*, 175–237; Marcela Ternavasio, “Rosas y el rosismo: lecturas sobre la república plebiscitaria,” *Estudios* 45 (2021): 79–98.

the exercise of popular sovereignty in this way, Rosas consolidated a regime with substantive popular support from both urban and rural subaltern groups, from the Black population of the city of Buenos Aires to the gauchos and “friendly Indians” who inhabited the province’s frontier.⁵⁰ Rosas’s rhetoric did not resort to the term “democracy.” Making use of the classic cry of the “republic in danger,” he painted his opponents as conspirators and enemies of order, and many were forced into exile. As Jorge Myers has highlighted, Rosas appealed through the official press to tropes of classical republicanism rooted in Ancient Rome, though in practice he depended on modern republican tools—such as the representative system—to legitimize his regime.⁵¹

In sum, Peru came to be dominated by military leaders who failed to stabilize their authority within a representative system; instead, there was a string of revolutions, elections, and constitutions.⁵² In the River Plate, a constitutionless confederal order was dominated by the governor of the most powerful province, who legitimized his authority through a personalist regime, using his military strength but also through popular electoral support within his own province. It should be emphasized that, in spite of their differences, in both cases the term “democracy” was not a central concept employed in the political disputes during this period. Also, these examples are not representative of the whole region. As José Antonio Aguilar Rivera has mentioned in reference to Mexico, “since the first years of the federal republic, the word democracy was used by the centralists and federal factions to justify and legitimize their political projects.”⁵³ Therefore, as he points out, there was not a single conceptual map for a term used

⁵⁰ Ricardo Salvatore, *Wandering Paysano: State Order and Subaltern Experience in Buenos Aires during the Rosas Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵¹ Jorge Myers, *Orden y Virtud. El discurso republicano en el régimen rosista* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1995).

⁵² The 1830s and 1840s in Peru present some similarities to the same period in Mexico, a country that also experienced chronic political instability. It should be remembered that between 1821 and 1857, only two presidents—Guadalupe Victoria and Joaquín de Herrera (1848–1851)—completed their terms in office. In both countries, constitutional law coexisted with elections and revolts. In Mexico, the revolts took the name of “pronunciamientos,” in which civil groups and institutions had a leading role with the purpose of effecting political changes at the regional and national levels during the first national period. Will Fowler, “El pronunciamiento mexicano del siglo XIX hacia una nueva tipología,” *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, n. 38, July–December 2009: 5–34; José Antonio Aguilar Rivera, *Ausentes del Universo. Reflexiones sobre el pensamiento político hispanoamericano en la era de la construcción nacional, 1821–1850* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica/CIDE, 2012), 224.

⁵³ José Antonio Aguilar Rivera, “La redención democrática: México 1821–1861,” *Historia Mexicana*, LXIX: 1 (2019): 12. Venezuela presents a similar case as the concept, also used in a variety of ways, was incorporated comparatively early in the public debates. Luis Daniel Perrone, “Venezuela,” in Caetano, *Democracia*, 215–230.

with different meanings, and “to strip democracy from its 1840s negative connotations became a difficult task that took many different forms according to the social and political contexts.”⁵⁴

MID-CENTURY VISIONS OF DEMOCRACY

The 1840s brought a degree of stability and economic growth to Spanish America, and with it, significant change. In some cases, as for instance in the Province of Buenos Aires, this was achieved by a tightening of executive grip, as Rosas consolidated his rule by closing in on the opposition and reinforcing controls over the public sphere. In other states, including Peru and Chile, these changes resulted in more political openness, a greater circulation of ideas, the flourishing of print culture, and the emergence of new political practices. New visions of democracy reflected in large part a response to such local experiences, as well as to imported and adapted “Doctrinaire” ideas and selective readings on the political culture of the United States. The concept of “rational democracy” could serve to enforce hierarchies and justify exclusions; for some, the United States emerged as an aspirational or even utopian model of an educated civil society. Discourses of representative democracy linked to modern republics gradually replaced previous usages associated with direct government and antiquity. However, democratic republics could be envisioned in multiple ways. A common feature of the new discourses that related to “the people” was the question of whether the new republics in Spanish America were ready for democratic practice. Holding rather sombre views about their societies, the political elites saw the development of the press, education, and associations as tools to move forward and used “democracy” variously to legitimize or condemn particular ideas and practices.

One example of the multiple references and political usages of “democracy” in public debate at this time can be seen in the writings of anti-Rosas Argentines in exile. Many exiles had been members of the “New Generation,” a political and cultural movement that had borne fruit in the foundation of the University of Buenos Aires in 1821 and then had been shaped by the 1837 *Salón Literario* (literary salon), which emulated Mazzini’s Young Italy and other such European associations and whose members aimed to define an Argentine national project. Once Rosas consolidated his power, he closed down the *Salón Literario*, defunded the University, and censored any reference to politics in the press. The numbers of periodicals in circulation declined

⁵⁴ Aguilar Rivera, “La redención democrática,” 11.

from nineteen in 1830 to four in 1841, and those that remained were put to the task of disseminating official doctrine.⁵⁵ Rosas's opponents and most members of the "New Generation" were forced into exile. Many fled to Chile, where the conservative government of Manuel Bulnes, inaugurated in 1841, provided a space for cultural expansion and political stability in the context of a curtailed opposition.⁵⁶ Argentine exiles played important roles in Chilean cultural developments, particularly in the expanding press.⁵⁷ Their writings had a significant impact on public debates, both in Chile and before wider audiences inside and outside Latin America.⁵⁸ In these writings, they made frequent reference to democracy, developing three main lines of argument depending on whether they used the term in relation to the River Plate, the United States, or Chile.

In the River Plate, they argued, the emergence of democracy during the post-1810 revolutionary politics had led to the despotic government of Rosas. While the exiles offered several explanations for this outcome, all premised that the people were ill-equipped to exercise sovereignty. The electoral law of 1821 was viewed as having enabled Rosas's rule by awarding the right to vote to persons not yet fit for it. The law began at this point to be described as having bestowed "universal suffrage," a term not used when it was introduced, when its breadth had been discussed rather in terms of the difficulty of finding any clear "fixed rule" for exclusion in a society perceived to have no deep inequalities or rigid social hierarchies.⁵⁹ In retrospect, it was argued that the law had been based on an erroneous idea of "democracy." Thus, Esteban Echeverría, one of the romantic leaders of the "New Generation," deeply influenced by the ideas of the French Doctrinaires (in particular by Guizot), declared in his *Dogma Socialista* (1838) that, rightly understood, "democracy... is not the absolute despotism of the masses, nor of the majorities; it is the regime of reason."⁶⁰ Accused as a conspirator on account of this publication,

⁵⁵ Myers, *Orden y virtud*, 28.

⁵⁶ Edward Blumenthal, *Exile and Nation-State Formation in Argentina and Chile, 1810–1862* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁵⁷ Iván Jaksic, "Sarmiento and the Chilean Press, 1841–1851," in *Sarmiento: Author of a Nation*, ed. Tulio Halperín Donghi et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 31–60.

⁵⁸ Ana María Stuvén, *La seducción de un orden. Las elites y la construcción de Chile en las polémicas culturales y políticas del siglo XIX* (Santiago: Universidad Católica de Chile, 2000).

⁵⁹ "Ilustración sobre las causas de nuestra anarquía y del modo de evitarla," signed by "Don F.S y dada a' luz por un amigo suyo," Buenos Aires, Imprenta de Phocion, 1820. AGN, Sala 7, Colección Celesia, Impresos 1820, legajo 2472.

⁶⁰ Esteban Echeverría, *Dogma Socialista. Edición crítica y documentada* (La Plata: Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 1940), 201; Klaus Gallo, "Esteban Echeverría's Critique of Universal Suffrage: The Traumatic Development

he was forced to leave Buenos Aires, taking refuge in Montevideo. Similarly, Domingo F. Sarmiento, then in exile in Santiago, wrote of the dialectical, tense coexistence of two cultures, one rural and barbaric, the other urban and civilized.⁶¹ He concluded that, in that context, to “democratize” meant to “barbarize,” and that the “anarchic excesses of democracies out of control” could be observed in excessively widespread voting rights.⁶²

By contrast, the US experience, read selectively through Alexis de Tocqueville’s account, was praised as the most perfect of democracies.⁶³ The exiles argued that, though the River Plate and the United States demonstrated shared values in their struggles for independence, their different trajectories could be explained by the backwardness and ignorance of the masses in the former, in contrast to the level of education and associational life in the latter.⁶⁴ The exiles invoked the example of United States in support of proposals for municipal decentralization, party competition, and the promotion of associations and education.⁶⁵

Ruminations on their host country, most interestingly, allowed them to move beyond the reductive binary between Rosas’s demagogic despotism and “a democracy that only exists in the United States.”⁶⁶ Seen through the prism of their own political experiences, they joined local conservative voices in praising Chile’s “exceptionality,” as the only Spanish American republic that had managed to achieve enduring stability “without having enthroned either a *caudillo* or a despot.”⁶⁷ A stable constitution, regular elections and Congressional sessions, and institutional strength were all perceived as positive features. But the exiles were also critical of Chilean society’s hierarchies, as manifest both in official ceremonies and in more profound ways.⁶⁸ They criticized the large gap between a small, closed, and conservative elite and the extremely poor

of Democracy in Argentina, 1821–1852,” in *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism 1830–1920*, eds. C. A. Bayly and Eugenio B. Biagini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229–310.

⁶¹ Sarmiento’s famous *Facundo: Civilization or Barbarism* was first published in *El Progreso* in 1845 before being printed as a book.

⁶² “Intervención anglo-francesa,” *El Progreso*, 8 June 1843.

⁶³ José Antonio Aguilar Rivera, “Democracy in the (other) America,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Democracy in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 204–205; Jorge Myers, “Democracy in South America,” in *Importing Modernity in Post-Colonial State Formation: The Appropriation of Political, Educational and Cultural Models in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, eds. Eugenia Roldán Vera and Marcelo Caruso (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 153–204.

⁶⁴ “El Progreso: el telégrafo,” *El Progreso*, 20 July 1844.

⁶⁵ “Teorías del Senado,” 5 April 1843; “Que es la municipalidad?,” 19 April 1843; “Espíritu democrático,” 12 August 1844, all in *El Progreso*.

⁶⁶ “Esclavitud moderna,” *El Progreso*, 17 June 1843.

⁶⁷ “El progreso,” *El Progreso*, 18 March 1843.

⁶⁸ Domingo F. Sarmiento, “Las fiestas del 18 de septiembre en Santiago,” *El Mercurio*, 25 September 1842.

lower classes, pejoratively termed “los rotos” (“those in rags”). Nonetheless, they also objected to what they saw as erroneous egalitarian notions—witnessed in Sarmiento’s reaction to the radical Chilean Francisco Bilbao’s translation of Félicité de Lamennais’s *Modern Slavery* (1843). After equating democracy with the people’s sovereignty, Bilbao proposed that the Chilean people should enjoy a share of political power to end their enslavement. Sarmiento warned that, “given their ignorance and poverty, Bilbao was in effect paying homage to barbarism.”⁶⁹ Bilbao, at the time a young founding member of the *Sociedad Literaria*, which emulated the *Salón Literario* of Buenos Aires, had a more radical take on “democracy,” influenced by his sojourn in France, but unusual in this region at this time. In responding to Sarmiento, Bilbao insisted: “The Barbarie is *despotism*. Democracy is equal rights.”⁷⁰ In his famous essay “Chilean Sociability,” published in *El Crepúsculo* in 1844, he presented democracy as the necessary concomitant of national sovereignty, a destiny that could ultimately be fulfilled only through a series of “revolutions” to bring freedom of religion, land distribution, access to education, and the end of political privileges. Bilbao was tried and convicted for blasphemy and immorality since he challenged the Catholic doctrines that had served as the foundations of Chile’s moderate and orderly society. He was set free after paying bail, and his trial served to boost his popularity.⁷¹

Debates about democracy also came to the fore in Peru in the late 1840s. The country experienced important cultural changes after Ramón Castilla during his first presidency (1845–1851) inaugurated a policy of reconciliation between liberals and conservatives. Aided by an economic boom based on the export of guano, which accounted for 80 percent of the government’s income, the state grew in strength. Political stability and wealth expanded the circulation of ideas through a reinvigorated social and intellectual life, also bolstered by developments in education. Unlike in Chile and the River Plate, however, in the 1840s liberal and conservative elites in Lima were educated in separate institutions, reinforcing their animosity. The rivalries between the conservative Colegio de San Carlos and the liberal Colegio de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe fuelled ideological debates and fed political factions.

⁶⁹ “Esclavitud moderna,” *El Progreso*, 17 June 1843.

⁷⁰ Francisco Bilbao, “Al Progreso. Esclavitud Moderna,” 23 June 1843.

⁷¹ Stuvén, *La seducción*, 251–282; James E. Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 136–160.

Like Chile, Peru experienced a rise in the 1840s in high-quality periodicals, with production concentrated in Lima, Arequipa, and Cuzco; these publications were subsidized by the government or by groups or individuals. They mostly concentrated on politics, and circulation numbers rose in anticipation of each election. When in Lima as a correspondent for the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio*, Pedro Felix Vicuña found the Peruvian press freer than in his home country and was surprised by its popularity in a city with only 30-percent literacy. He noted that Lima residents avidly consumed periodicals, which were read aloud and commented upon in *chicherías* and *chinganas*; he noted that “(e)ven the women joined in.”⁷² Present in most cities, these taverns or corner stores were important sites for the circulation of news and rumors amongst the popular sectors and also served as places where urban and rural workers met. Although Peru’s periodicals were published in Spanish, these urban sites facilitated transfers to rural populations, where Quechua and Aymara were the main languages. The rise of literary, scientific, and social associations also reflected the relative prosperity of Peru, and particularly Lima. The participation of newspaper owners, editors, and writers as hosts and members of these associations enhanced their importance in the circulation of ideas, even if their political impact (and number) was less than in some other Latin American cities.⁷³

Artisan associations were the most numerous. At a time in which associations were perceived as a marker of civilization, artisans, possibly influenced by the European events of 1848, defended their right to associate in order to enjoy “the benefits and advantages that democracy offers” and to achieve social equality.⁷⁴ Estimated to form 5 percent of the population of Lima in the 1860s, artisans represented a heterogenous middle sector, between landowners and large merchants on the one hand, and peasants, servants, and (until 1854) enslaved persons on the other; among the artisan class, Mestizos, Blacks, and Indians predominated. While the political orientation of these associations requires further research, Lima’s artisans were not political novices; on the contrary, they had a long record of political participation. They supported different *caudillos* and factions and engaged in relentless and successful efforts to protect their economic interests through the press and petitions to Congress.⁷⁵

⁷² Carlos A. Forment, *Democracy in Latin America, 1760–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 218.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁷⁴ “Unos artesanos,” *El Comercio*, 29 November 1851, cited in Forment, *Democracy*, 233.

⁷⁵ García Bryce, *Crafting the Republic*, 41–70.

In the context of this larger circulation of ideas in Peru as compared to Buenos Aires, “democracy” was more frequently invoked, and not only in Lima. Cuzco, by this time a city of 30,000 people, had witnessed a surge of publications since the first arrival of a printing press in 1824.⁷⁶ The periodical *El Demócrata Americano*, which first appeared there in 1846, offered lengthy and positive coverage of the concept. In a five-installment series published in 1848 and signed “Demócrata,” the paper extolled the advantages of democratic government, defined as a government based on popular sovereignty, and contrasted it with aristocracy and monarchy. It also argued that the region had retained its original “democratic instincts” despite thirty years of civil and political struggles.⁷⁷ Others, however, were not convinced. Many complained in *El Comercio*, Peru’s leading newspaper, about the “frenetic democrats” who refused to understand the limits that should be imposed on the people according to their capacity and reason.⁷⁸

The possible meanings of the term and their implications became hotly contested in Congress. The most relevant debate took place in September 1849 when, after asking: “What, then, is democracy?” Bishop Bartolomé Herrera proceeded to define it as “a way of governing with the objective of common happiness.”⁷⁹ Herrera, the former head of the Colegio de San Carlos, represented an ultramontane position; he maintained that God was the sole source of authority, judged post-Gamarra disorder to be “divine punishment,” and repudiated notions of popular sovereignty and universal suffrage. It is interesting that he did not repudiate “democracy,” but rather sought to define it in a way that suited him. Pedro Gálvez, voicing the liberal position, challenged Herrera, arguing that the term “democracy” did not mean government *for* all, but *by* all.⁸⁰ In other debates in Congress and in opinion pieces in the press, writers and legislators representing different political viewpoints used France as a point of reference. Conservatives such as Herrera continued to embrace the Doctrinaires and, even after 1848, the works of Thiers and Guizot remained popular. As in Chile, radical ideas impacted the liberal youth, although usually within a Catholic framework in which anticlerical ideas such as

⁷⁶ Charles F. Walker, “‘La orgía periodística’. Prensa y cultura política en el Cuzco durante la joven república,” *Revista de Indias* LXI, no. 221 (2001), 2–26.

⁷⁷ “Demócrata. Ventajas del Sistema democrático. Vicios y defectos de las monarquías y aristocracias,” *El Demócrata Americano*, 8 January 1848. See also 7 February; 22 February; 7 April; and 14 April 1848.

⁷⁸ “Defensa libre,” *El Comercio*, 26 September 1849.

⁷⁹ The debates were reproduced in *El Comercio*. The citation is from 14 September 1849.

⁸⁰ Gabriella Chiaramonti, “A propósito del debate Herrera-Gálvez de 1849: breves reflexiones sobre el sufragio de los indios analfabetos,” in *Historia de las elecciones en el Perú*, eds. Cristóbal Aljovín de Losada and Sinesio López, 913–1013.

Bilbao's had no place.⁸¹ Many also argued that developments in France after 1848 illustrated the dangers of marching toward democracy, understood as entailing social equality and the centralization of power.⁸²

The implications of the cultural changes that took place in the 1840s came to the fore in the partisan world of the 1850s. The cases of Peru and Argentina, analysed below, serve to show that, once the term attained centrality and positive value in public debate, invocations of "democracy" were quite numerous and diverse. References to "democracy" served different functions in the nation-building process. In Peru, rival parties used the term to legitimize their policies as they disputed how best to define and implement the principle of popular sovereignty; but as we shall see in the case of Buenos Aires, the concept also served as a means to unite old rival factions in a common cause.

POLITICS, ELECTIONS, AND WAR IN THE 1850s

The 1851 elections in Peru led to the country's first peaceful transfer of presidential power. As José Ragas Rojas has shown, the campaign lasted almost two years and introduced important novelties to Peruvian political practices. Elections in the parishes to choose provincial electors (according to the indirect electoral process) were held in February 1850; elections in provincial electoral colleges were scheduled for December of that year, and the newly elected president was to be announced by Congress in early 1851. Amid this process, various social groups were organized in clubs and associations, while platforms and partisan papers outlined competing ideologies more clearly than in the past. The election became highly competitive, with record numbers of people participating. Two candidates with military careers, José Rufino Echenique and Manuel Ignacio Vivanco, competed in February but, surprisingly, in October, Domingo Elías, a wealthy merchant from Ica, launched his own candidacy, aspiring to win the provincial electors' votes.⁸³ Elías had previously presented himself as the civilian alternative to military leaders in the so-called "*Semana Magna*" of 1844, when he launched a revolt in Lima appealing

⁸¹ Natalia Sobrevilla Perea, "The Influence of the European 1848 Revolutions in Peru," in *The European Revolutions of 1848 and the Americas*, ed. Guy P. C. Thompson (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2002), 191–216.

⁸² "Francia," 5 December 1852; "La democracia y el socialismo," 3 February 1853, both in *El Comercio*.

⁸³ On this campaign, see José Frank Ragas Rojas, "Ciudadanía, cultura política y representación en el Perú. La campaña electoral de 1850" (MA thesis, Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2003).

to the “citizen in arms” (in contrast to the paid soldier) and arguing for civilian empowerment. After Castilla took military control and called for presidential elections in 1844, Elías became the first civilian to launch a presidential campaign, though ultimately he received little support.⁸⁴

For the presidential campaign of 1851, Elías promoted his civilian candidacy once again, but now through another innovation: a political club. The Club Progresista was founded in Lima in mid-1849 with a party platform and a periodical, *El Progreso*, an eight-page weekly that aimed to engage in public debate and lift the campaign above mere personal attacks. In a context in which the word “party” was still pejorative, Echenique and Vivanco organized their campaigns through “societies.” Echenique’s “Sociedad Conservadora de la Constitución y de la Paz” and Vivanco’s “El Porvenir” were by invitation only and had formal internal rules. These innovations were fragile. Associations had no legal protection and could be shut down and their members persecuted, as happened in the case of the “Sociedad defensora de la Constitución y el Sufragio” in Cuzco that supported Elías.⁸⁵ Local clubs, which fed into these societies, oversaw the mobilisation of the electorate through banquets, rallies, parades, and candidates’ visits to *pulperías* and *chinganas* (popular stores and canteens). Vivanco also published a party platform and organised a “meeting” (sic) in which some 4,000 merchants, artisans, farmers, and others marched through the city of Lima in an orderly, peaceful, and non-hierarchical manner, a novel civic display that stood in contrast to the customary violent mobilizations. The banquets held in his honour during the campaign were also depicted by the press as notably inclusive,⁸⁶ although they were not presented or celebrated in those terms at the time; both Vivanco and Echenique’s electoral campaigns appealed to the traditional concepts of liberty and order.

Still, as the electoral campaign progressed, references to democracy became more frequent, eventually emerging as a central theme of the liberals’ campaign. The above-mentioned debate between Herrera and Gálvez took place in the context of discussions about the electoral franchise, which, like most such debates, focussed on who to exclude from the electoral system and how—rather than who to include—as many argued that voting rights were too expansive.

⁸⁴ Víctor Peralta Ruiz, “El mito del ciudadano armado. La ‘Semana Magna’ y las elecciones de 1844 en Lima,” in *Ciudadanía política y formación de las naciones. Perspectivas históricas de América Latina*, coord. Hilda Sabato (Mexico: El Colegio de México, Fideicomiso de Historia de las Américas y Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), 239–251.

⁸⁵ Alex Loayza Pérez, “El Club Progresista y la coyuntura electoral de 1849–1851,” in Losada and López, *Historia de las elecciones*, 1143.

⁸⁶ *El Comercio*, 12 November 1849.

The 1839 Constitution had raised the voting age to 25 (from 21) and established literacy restrictions, except in the case of Mestizos and indigenous persons who lived in areas without primary schools, which meant in practice that it was still quite possible for members of these groups to vote, given the shortage of schools. This proviso, set to expire in 1844, was extended in 1847 until a new Constitution would decide the matter. Extreme conservatives such as Herrera resorted to the Doctrinaire concept of “capacity” in favor of a democracy where the illiterate would be excluded, a measure that would strip the right to vote from most indigenous people (who represented 60 percent of Peru’s population, of which 80 percent were illiterate), Mestizos, and the urban *plebe*.⁸⁷ Not all conservatives agreed. Vivanco, possibly speculating on the advantages of high voting numbers given that his base was in densely populated Arequipa, supported universal suffrage, arguing that while intelligence was distributed in society in a hierarchical three-tier system, each group had a role to play.⁸⁸

Liberals defended universal suffrage in the name of “democracy” as a way of training the population for citizenship. Understood as the right of *all* men to exercise sovereignty, “democracy” became central to their campaign. Through *El Progreso*, they presented Elías as the “man of the people,” whose candidacy was “the most consistent with the essence of our democratic institutions.”⁸⁹ Democracy was linked to civilian government, presented as incompatible with military power, and exercised through associations, political clubs, the press, and debate. It should be noted that the liberal discourse on “democracy” and support for universal suffrage did not entail reference to social equality or a change in Peru’s social, racial, or gender hierarchies; if anything, it aimed to shore them up. The expansion of education, a main liberal priority, was designed to improve artisans’ quality of work, but not to raise their status. Women, considered “the weak sex, born to embellish men’s domestic existence,” were to be instructed in the exercise of domestic virtue and education.⁹⁰ Liberals were ideologically diverse.

⁸⁷ Chiaramonti “A propósito”. On the relationship between literacy and voting regulations and practices see José Ragas, “Leer, escribir, votar. Literacidad y cultura política en el Perú 1810–1900,” *Histórica* XXXI, no. 1 (2007): 107–134.

⁸⁸ *Programa del Diputado electo por la Provincia de Arequipa Gral. D. Manuel F. de Vivanco, precedido de los documentos que lo han originado* (Lima, Impreso en la Imprenta del Correo Peruano, 1850) 130–131. Vivanco’s position on universal suffrage turned again after the elections in favor of restrictions. Alicia Aguila del Peralta, *La ciudadanía corporativa. Política, constituciones y sufragio en el Perú (1821–1896)* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2013), 129.

⁸⁹ *El Progreso*, 30 November 1850. See also, 15 and 29 September 1849, and 14 and 28 December 1850.

⁹⁰ “Invitación,” *El Progreso*, 10 November 1848.

Some advocated the end of Indian tribute and slavery while other leaders, including Elías, were among the largest owners of enslaved people.⁹¹

Regardless of partisan discourses, elections required voters, and election times were moments in which social hierarchies became blurred. Artisans, who during the campaign portrayed themselves as “the people,” defined as the hardworking and productive members of society, were particularly sought after by all candidates as they could help to organize voters; some qualified as electors at the next level.⁹² The campaign was highly competitive and the elections were particularly violent; Echenique’s victory was assured once Castilla opted to support him, with Elías securing the second-most votes and Vivanco coming in a distant third.⁹³

Having lost the presidential election, liberals nonetheless soon gained the chance to implement their program. In 1854, taking advantage of general discontent with Echenique’s presidency, they organized a series of uprisings, and Castilla, taking command of the revolution, overthrew Echenique in January 1855. These lengthy struggles had important consequences, as to gain support their leaders entered into negotiations with, and concessions to, different social sectors.⁹⁴ As a result, Indian tribute was abolished, and enslaved peoples’ long struggles for legal freedom came to an end with the abolition of slavery. Neither the language of these measures nor of the proclamations of the revolution invoked the term “democracy”; they were framed by both sides in terms of fairness and justice.⁹⁵ Following tradition, once in power as provisional president and supported by the liberals, Castilla called for elections for an assembly charged with drafting a new constitution.

During their short time in power, liberals introduced a series of institutional and administrative initiatives. The National Assembly was elected under a new electoral law which provided for universal suffrage and a direct vote. All men over 21 years old, with no further restrictions, were granted the vote in the most expansive electoral law implemented in Peru since Independence. The momentum gave liberals the opportunity to put into practice their ideas about

⁹¹ Peter Blanchard, “The ‘Transitional Man’ in Nineteenth-Century Latin America: The Case of Domingo Elías of Perú,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 15, no. 2 (1996): 157–176.

⁹² Martin Monsalve Zanatti, “Del sufragio a la sociedad civil: pánicos morales, utopías liberales y las campañas electorales limeñas de 1850 a 1858,” in *Mas allá de la dominación y la resistencia: estudios de la historia peruana, siglos XVI-XX*, eds. Paulo Drinot and Leo Garofalo (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2005), 215–237.

⁹³ Loayza Pérez, “El Club,” 95–103.

⁹⁴ Víctor Peralta Ruiz, “La guerra civil peruana de 1854. Los entresijos de una revolución,” *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 70, no. 1 (2013): 195–219.

⁹⁵ Blanchard, “The ‘Transitional Man.’”

democracy, consisting of a large electoral base ruled by the “most capable” while the lower sectors were educated in its practices.

However, the experience of universal suffrage proved short-lived. The Constitution of 1856 maintained the age restrictions and the direct vote but limited universal suffrage by adding additional requirements: voters need be literate, *or* head of a workshop, *or* own property, *or* be retired following service in the armed forces. The law did not make any specification regarding the indigenous peoples, many of whom as owners of property could vote even if they were illiterate. The requirements affected the urban illiterate population more directly—many of its members were indigenous, Mestizos, and Blacks and less likely to have property or be workshop heads.⁹⁶ While radical representatives such as José Gálvez continued to defend unrestricted and direct suffrage, moderate liberals echoed conservative views that the electoral experiment had been disappointing. The Black population was particularly targeted with blame for violence and corruption on election day and accused of “discrediting all democratic institutions.”⁹⁷ Indeed, ungrounded accusations that violence in the city had risen as former enslaved people voted for the first time was used to discredit the law that had offered universal suffrage.⁹⁸ In any event, the Constitution of 1856 was never implemented; in 1860 the newly elected Congress approved a more conservative Constitution, followed by an electoral law that in 1861 re-established the indirect vote.

The River Plate experienced profound changes in the 1850s, when the fall of Rosas marked the opening of a new political era. In a dramatic sequence of events, the governor of Entre Ríos, Justo José de Urquiza, led a coalition that militarily defeated Rosas in February 1852. Under the Acuerdo de San Nicolás, Urquiza summoned a Constitutional Congress to unite the fourteen provinces into a federal republic, but Buenos Aires rejected the Acuerdo and rose in rebellion, abandoning the Confederation. Urquiza’s forces besieged Buenos Aires between December 1852 and March 1853 when, under a new agreement, the province became a separate, autonomous state until 1861.

⁹⁶ Aguila Peralta, *La ciudadanía*, 162–168.

⁹⁷ See, for example, the series of articles published by Manuel Fuentes in his influential periodical *El Murciélago* between March and May 1855, reprinted in *Aletazos del Murciélago* (Paris: Lainé y J. Harvard, 1866), 64–114. The citation is from page 111.

⁹⁸ Carlos Aguirre, *Agentes de su propia libertad. Los esclavos de Lima y la desintegración de la esclavitud, 1821–1854* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1993), 316.

With the new turn of events, new narratives were required to legitimize leaders' decisions and actions. In Buenos Aires, public and political life was reborn: freedom of the press was restored, newspapers proliferated, and new associations and political clubs emerged.⁹⁹ In this setting, the term "democracy" gradually acquired a new and central place in the public sphere. As previously noted, the "New Generation" had represented Rosas's despotism as embodying an "erroneous" concept of democracy, supported by the masses empowered by the electoral law of 1821. By contrast, Rosas's supporters had portrayed him as the "strong man who put an end to anarchy" arising from "profusely democratic forms."¹⁰⁰ The rise of Urquiza and the Confederation, however, required the contending sides to unite. Furthermore, if Buenos Aires aspired to lead the new republic, it needed a story about itself other than one of failed leadership, misguided ideas, and tyrants supported by large sectors of its populace.

Alejandro Eujanian has shown how a new story was soon devised. All segments of the Buenos Aires elite declared themselves victims of Rosas's regime; as such, they could bury their differences. Democracy was reconceptualized as denoting both a desirable form of government and a positively conceived social egalitarianism. The May Revolution of 1810 was now said to have initiated "the empire of democracy and justice," while the universal suffrage law of 1821 was now celebrated as a precocious expression of democracy; the original and profoundly democratic instincts of Buenos Aires, now portrayed as latent during Rosas's era, were said to have made possible his defeat. Thus rehabilitated, Buenos Aires's "essentially democratic" character was invoked in the fight against the new *caudillo*, Urquiza. Its social equality was also claimed to differentiate it both from the provinces of the Confederation and from other Latin American countries.¹⁰¹ The newly returned exiles had some experiential basis for contrasting egalitarian Buenos Aires with rigid social hierarchies in Chile; they also invoked Tocqueville to suggest similarities between Buenos Aires and the United States.¹⁰²

Naturally, things were viewed very differently from within the Confederation. President Urquiza denounced the "demagoguery" of Buenos Aires, while Juan Bautista Alberdi, a former exile who supported Urquiza and drafted the 1853 Constitution, blamed the 1821 electoral law

⁹⁹ González Bernaldo, *Civilidad*, 196–300.

¹⁰⁰ Alejandro Eujanian, *El pasado en el péndulo de la política. Rosas, la provincial y la nación en el debate político de Buenos Aires, 1852–1861* (Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 2015), 47–51.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰² Blumenthal, *Exile*, 295–310.

for having caused continuous disorder in Buenos Aires by politically activating its *populacho* (lower sectors).¹⁰³ Yet Alberdi's often-quoted lines to this effect were written in private correspondence. In public, the leaders of the Confederation increasingly invoked "democracy" to legitimize their proposals.¹⁰⁴ The Confederation adopted Buenos Aires' electoral law of 1821, providing for direct universal male suffrage to elect national authorities. While a few argued for voting restrictions in the name of "capacity," they were silenced in the name of "democracy."¹⁰⁵ Both states thus came to portray themselves as "born democratic," both in their form of government and in terms of social equality. This story became cemented as the official, national narrative for the whole country when, after 1861, Buenos Aires became the leading province of the Argentine Republic and Bartolomé Mitre its first president (1862–1868) and one of its primary historians.¹⁰⁶

FINAL REFLECTIONS

The era of revolutions and independence struggles encouraged interpretations of popular sovereignty which allowed for its direct exercise. Understanding that insurrections could be legitimized as expressions of popular sovereignty makes it easier to see why revolts, constitutional conventions, and elections so often co-existed in Spanish American political culture— though the role of insurrection in the mix was greater in some regions than in others: it was large in Peru, less so in Argentina. "Democracy" was variously understood in these contexts, sometimes invoked by those enthusiastic about changes in the political and social order that undermined social hierarchies and gave more power to the people, but also quite often understood negatively, above all when it was used to refer to informal expressions of popular will.

¹⁰³ Eujanian, *El pasado*, 240.

¹⁰⁴ *Congreso General Constituyente de la Confederación Argentina, sesión de 1852–1854* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta del orden, 1871). See, for example, sessions 53 (5 May 1853); 62 (25 August 1853); 73 (7 October 1853); and 79 (28 November 1853).

¹⁰⁵ *Congreso Nacional, Cámara de Senadores, Actas de las sesiones del Paraná correspondientes al año 1857* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de la Nación, 1884), 60–66.

¹⁰⁶ Tulio Halperín Donghi, "Mitre y la formulación de una historia nacional para la Argentina," *Anuario del IEHS* 11 (1996), 57–69; Elías Palti, "La Historia de Belgrano de Mitre y la problemática concepción de un pasado nacional," *Boletín del Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana "Dr. Emilio Ravignani,"* Tercera serie, núm. 21, 1st semester, 2000.

It was always possible to aspire to a future in which popular participation might be peacefully channelled through elections, and we have stressed that popular participation in elections was not a meaningless ritual. Though elections were commonly indirect (reducing the direct impact of popular choices) and subject to all sorts of manipulation, they did make it necessary for would-be political leaders to cultivate popular support, to enter into negotiations, and to build alliances.

By the 1840s, representation, sometimes referred to as “representative democracy,” became widely urged as the best way forward and, at least in major urban centers, election campaigns were increasingly associated with ideological debate in print (including debate about the meaning of “democracy”) and with club-based efforts to mobilise voters. However, even liberal proponents of this participatory but mediated form of politics remained ready to endorse insurrectionary contests if they saw no other route to getting their way. Moreover, faith in the voting public as it actually existed—rather than as they hoped it might one day be—was often qualified and conditional. Those who had knowledge of European debates were more often attracted by the capacitarian democracy ideal of French Doctrinaires than by the more radical egalitarianism of French democratic socialists, though the latter also attracted some followers. No major restrictions to franchises were enacted in this period, but it was already possible to see that hopes of instituting “rational democracy” in Latin American republics had the potential to give rise to attempts to institutionalise keeping sections of the population out of politics altogether, as would be the case in Peru at the end of the century. In Argentina, by contrast, the new founding myth of a country “born democratic” discouraged any attempt at formal exclusion.

Looking at the two cases analyzed here in comparative perspective, the paths and uses of the concept of democracy from the 1850s on were not alien to the profound differences exhibited in the social structures and previous historical processes of both regions. The strong imprint of the social and ethnic hierarchies that characterized Peru since colonial times, when Lima became the capital of Spanish power in South America, contrasts with the marginality of the River Plate region and its frontier society, where hierarchies manifested themselves in a much more attenuated way. Is on these bases that Bartolomé Mitre recreated the founding myth of the

Argentine nation as having been born democratic, associating the term with the supposed innate inclination to equality of the populations of the River Plate.¹⁰⁷

In Peru, in contrast, the Doctrinaire idea of rational democracy was never fully abandoned, with the concept combining social inequality and existing hierarchies. Even among the most radical liberals, the banner of universal suffrage that would incorporate the popular sectors was associated with a civic pedagogy that presupposed that the most qualified were destined to govern. In Argentina, on the other hand, the rational democracy of the Doctrinaires served as an argument with which to oppose Rosas's despotism rather than as a basis for building the republican order that emerged after his fall. The aforementioned mutation exhibited by the interpretation of the electoral law of 1821 in the 1850s was an example of that change. The universal suffrage attributed to this law, denounced at the time as an instrument of Rosista tyranny based on the "absolute despotism of the masses" and "of the majorities," was in the 1850s vindicated and recovered to regulate the electoral system of the new constitutional order.

In sum, opting for "representative democracy" did not mean opting for an easy solution nor did it imply a linear path. The gradual transformation that registers the concept of democracy in Latin America is largely a tributary of the available political languages that circulated throughout the Atlantic world. But the variations adopted were modulated according to the traditions and idiosyncratic features of each region, and according to the motivations disputed by the various actors in concrete political scenarios.

¹⁰⁷ Natalio Botana, *La libertad, el poder y la historia. Conversaciones con Fernando Rocchi* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Edhasa, 2019), 138.