



Civic Spaces amid Polarization in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Polarized Democracies

The Latin American and Caribbean region has experienced intense changes in recent years that have led to the emergence of antagonistic positions in society. There are various challenges, from the crisis caused by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic that accelerated the processes of social fragmentation, inequality, and reduction of educational levels, to the repositioning of the countries of the region to the new world order in an international scenario conditioned by the incidence of extraregional actors such as Russia and China. On a political level, the breakdown of traditional political parties that channeled deliberation and were bearers of moderation has led to the emergence of populist movements with authoritarian discourse and practices that have both achieved electoral support and been catalysts of discontent and distrust, driving the region toward bipolar positions that are opposed in the political debate.

In this context, the increasing polarization that the region is experiencing is of concern for its risks to democracy and, in particular, for the reduction of civic spaces. The term *polarization* alludes to the reaffirmation of one's own beliefs and ideas that do not allow for contrasting or modification in their arguments, promoting the reduction, closure, or censoring of many spaces of dialogue and understanding. Many governments and their supporters have managed to take advantage of this situation by driving radical positions in search of political gain and cohesion among their members.

The channels of polarization have been mostly through social media, as spaces of activism that governments seek to control. Digital communication is the place where discussions are conditioned, and many times, realities are twisted in search of the construction of stories that give members of a faction safety and confidence both emotionally and identity-wise, excluding any external evidence that puts their beliefs into question, in what has been referred to as “epistemic bunkers.”¹ In this way, polarization has a negative impact on the quality of civic spaces, generating



conflict and tension around freedoms and mechanisms for citizen control and the participation of social actors. Among its risks is the intensification of different positions and ideas that are entrenched in exclusionary poles and distance both topics of public interest away from debate as well as the willingness to reach agreements through deliberation.

What Is Happening in Latin America and the Caribbean?

The latent “left” and “right” division in the region over the past two decades has created automatic alliances that have perverse effects on civil society and in the search for consensus to solve the major social problems we face today. Ideological biases and extremist political discourse condition and hegemonize the civic space, demobilizing or reducing the sustained participation capacity of citizens and civil organizations in the construction of a common public agenda.

Intense polarization deepens social fractures and weakens the quality of democracies: “In a context of extreme polarization, people feel distanced from the ‘other’ bloc and are suspicious of it. They feel loyal and confident about their own bloc, without analyzing their biases or the basis of their information.”² This also influences the continuity of social mobilization where it is difficult to establish solidarity bridges across situations of injustice and marginalization. The brevity of protests and social resistance, added to the inability of the governing elites to channel social demands in public policies, generate situations of frustration and distrust that are exploited by extreme positions that gain ground to the detriment of a more moderate center with the capacity to reach compromises. The influence of this phenomenon is increasing, as seen in many of the national plebiscites of recent years.

For this reason, tension and conflicts take place around fake news and disinformation circuits that try to shape reality based on what the opposing blocs say and believe, and often seek to control democratic institutions through the rhetoric of resentment and the exclusion of those who are identified as a “threat.” Thus, the authoritarian practices are legitimized for the sake of defending the “nation” or the “people” under a Manichean logic that sees political adversaries as enemies to defeat, creating two irreconcilable sides in an environment where distrust, bias, and enmity between an “us” and a “them” increase.

According to a recent study, polarization levels in Ibero-America have grown by 39 percent in the last five years, with freedom of expression and human rights being the areas with significant polarization, second only to abortion.³ Two cases underpin the issue in our region: in Brazil and Mexico, polarization has increased around freedom of expression as the main topic of discussion. In this sense, it is no coincidence that there is an increase in cases of violence toward human rights defenders, journalists, and indigenous leaders in a context marked by an environmental crisis and the growth of illicit economies.

This highlights the major problem of media polarization in the region and the importance of political discourses and narratives in today’s digital democracies. One of the ways to reduce civic space is to question the role of the media and journalists. Threats and attacks on the press have increased, and there is a shortage of policies protecting human rights and nature defenders. The case of freedom of expression is certainly concerning; according to Reporters Without Borders, the most dangerous region in the world for journalists is Latin America, where about half of the murders (47.4%) have occurred this year.⁴ The more lies that sustain governments are exposed, the more dangerous journalists become in the eyes of those in power. Let us add to this the legitimacy acquired by de facto powers in regional governance and the recurring use of violence as an instrument of social control.

All of this sets a not-so-promising horizon for building democracy and the participation of civil society organizations in public affairs. Some questions that still deserve to be answered considering the context of the region are:

1. How do you deal with discourse that fuels dangerous and exclusionary narratives?
2. What role do civic spaces play in counteracting misinformation and attacks on vulnerable populations?
3. How, at the international level, do you address the contradictions that arise between open societies and others where authoritarian governments control the digital public space?

The answers are complex, but civil society calls for solutions and work to recover the ability to communicate and report safely and reliably as part of inclusive and resilient civic spaces.

Recommendations from Civil Society in Highly Polarized Contexts

Civil society in Latin America and the Caribbean seeks to prevent the deepening of division and distrust in our communities. This can be accomplished through the support and promotion of narratives that have the ability to disprove and counteract the perverse effects of misinformation and unfounded rumors. The rise of authoritarian and intolerant behaviors in society and politics can be disarmed through positive and democratic messages that vindicate truth as a factor of social mobilization.

Moreover, civil society can explore new media formats to call for solidarity in the face of the closure and censoring of civic spaces in the countries of the region. Understanding the logic of polarization and establishing response strategies at the level of communication and information dissemination with a broad perspective of collective interests and society’s well-being can help prevent polarization. We especially believe in the potential of local spaces to manage the truth as a common good. In this regard, we consider it important to understand civic spaces as



“cooperatives for truth” where dialogue and negotiation prevail over violence and censorship as political tools.

Finally, we point out the importance of ensuring the full exercise of rights in a context of peace and security, with spaces for critical thinking and where citizens have an active role as promoters of democratic and inclusive public policies. This may also involve multidisciplinary collaborations that favor communication and dissemination of citizen journalistic initiatives to empower marginalized social actors and strengthen their ability to exercise their political rights. The ideological barriers and territorial gaps of inequality can be overcome by incentivizing the exchange of experiences and solidarity narratives that promote an agenda of rights and freedoms for all.

Endnotes

- 1 Katherine Furman, “Epistemic Bunkers,” *Social Epistemology* 37, no. 2 (Sept. 26, 2022): 197-207.
- 2 Jennifer McCoy, *La polarización perjudica a la democracia y la sociedad* [Polarization harms democracy and society], International Catalan Institute for Peace, Government of Catalonia, 2022.
- 3 Llorente y Cuenca LLYC +Democracia, *The Hidden Drug: A Study on the Addictive Power of Polarizing Public Debate*, 2022.
- 4 Reporters Without Borders, *Annual Report 2022*, 2022, accessed December 10, 2022, <https://www.rsf-es.org/informes-balance-anual-2022-nuevo-record-de-periodistas-encarcelados-en-el-mundo/>.

References

- Furman, Katherine. “Epistemic Bunkers.” *Social Epistemology* 37, no. 2 (Sept. 26, 2022): 197-207.
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