

Possible Relationships Between Access to Digital Social Networks and Support for Democracy in Latin America

Geélison Ferreira da Silva^{[a],*}; Pereira Mencato, S.^[b]; Luiz Eduardo de Souza Pinto^[c]; Rafael Soares Duarte de Moura^[d]

^[a] Department of Social Sciences, State University of Montes Claros, Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, Brasil.

^[b] Department of Political Science, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brasil.

^[c] Department of Social Sciences, State University of Montes Claros, Claros, Minas Gerais, Brasil.

^[d] Department of Substantive Public Law, State University of Montes Claros, Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, Brasil.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This article analyzes the association between internet access through digital social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, and political attitudes identified by the literature as harmful to democracy. These attitudes include not perceiving democracy as the best form of government, dissatisfaction with democracy, distrust of institutions, and a greater perception of corrupt politicians. The hypothesis is tested that digital social networks favor political attitudes harmful to democracy and thus contribute to its recent crisis, using logistic regression from the Latin American Public Opinion Project database (LAPOP, 2018/2019). The results indicate that digital social networks do not directly compromise the preference for democracy.

Key words: Democracy; Internet; Political attitudes; Digital social networks; Latin America

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to analyze potential associations between internet access, through three major digital social

networks (Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp), and political attitudes identified in the literature as harmful to democracy (not perceiving it as the best form of government; having less trust in institutions; having a greater perception of corruption and being/dissatisfied with democracy) (Putnam, 1993; Casalecchi, 2018; Moisés, 2008). This analysis uses data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (Lapop, 2018/2019)¹.

Since mid-2015, political scientists have started to pay special attention to the democracy crisis. Przeworski (2019, p.36-37), one of the analysts explaining the democratic crisis, discusses the role of spreading false information, which leads people to cling to beliefs rather than facts. According to Lewandowsky et al. (2017), the difficulty in distinguishing true from false leads people to choose the reality they prefer, replacing scientific evidence with biases. Consequently, populist leaders, like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, have best used digital platforms to lie, confuse, and incite hatred, attacking and weakening the foundational institutions of democracy, fostering and benefiting from the crisis at hand (MOUNK, 2018).

Although the literature addressing the crisis of democracies points to the use of digital social networks as one of its direct or indirect causes (Mounk, 2018; Przeworski, 2019), further studies are needed to analyze whether access to or exposure to these platforms helps

¹ The LAPOP conducts public opinion surveys in the Americas, generally biennially since 2004. The surveys assess aspects such as attitudes, evaluations, individual experiences, and political perceptions. It carries out the only comparative survey that covers 34 nations, including all of the Americas, namely North, Central, and South America, as well as a significant number of Caribbean countries. The 2018/2019 round, in addition to including questions related to political attitudes, the dependent variables of this research, also gathered data on patterns of access to digital social networks of the respondents, which are the independent variables, as well as sociodemographic aspects that are used as control variables. All these sets of questions were applied in 18 countries, which are those selected for the survey.

or hinders the spread of political attitudes harmful to the regime. This article aims to bridge this gap by testing the hypothesis that aspects such as lower democratic adherence and satisfaction, greater distrust in institutions, and greater perception of political corruption are exacerbated by the use of the analyzed social networks.

Latin America is the ideal region to test the hypothesis that access to digital social networks compromises democratic support. It was selected for empirical analysis because most of its countries are part of the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1994) and often exhibit low regime quality and incipient institutional performance (Diamond & Morlino, 2005). This is compounded by a political culture marked by distrust (Lagos, 1999), and authoritarian or ambivalent attitudes towards democracy (Casalecchi, 2018; Moisés, 2008). These conditions make the region potentially more sensitive to the effects of the democratic crisis, so they should be more prominent in the area.

Regarding the database that best captures the necessary information for research in the selected area, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (Lapop, 2018/2019) gathered predominantly political information, corresponding to the dependent variables, and paid special attention to the use of digital social networks Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, independent variables also covered in 18 Latin American countries in the study.

This article is divided into a section subdivided into two topics related to the literature review (1- political attitudes and democracy; 2- internet access and digital social networks and democracy); the following section presents the methodology used in the database analysis and the results analysis. Finally, it is considered that this sequence successfully elucidates the proposed association between access to digital social networks and political attitudes deemed harmful to democracy, in order to achieve the research objectives, indicating that the use of networks in itself has different democratic impacts, especially considering the possibility of capitalizing on the tool, which (contradicts or disagrees with the analyzed theory and the raised hypothesis).

2- POLITICAL ATTITUDES, DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND DEMOCRACY

This section is devoted to a literature review on topics relevant to this research and is divided into two topics. The first addresses the role of individuals' political attitudes in sustaining, succeeding, and continuing political regimes and the attitudes considered desirable in a democratic context. The second topic discusses the ambiguous role of the internet. Especially in its early phases of societal diffusion, the internet was viewed more positively by analysts because they believed it would enhance political participation and popular freedom, central principles

for liberal democracy. However, more recent literature, particularly concerning the democratic crisis, has positioned the internet at the heart of the causes for the degeneration of democratic regimes in various societies.

2.1 Political attitudes and support for democracy in Latin America

Almond & Verba (1963) demonstrated the need for congruence between a society's political culture and its political regime for stability and success, and Easton (1965) noted that contextual factors such as political support are important for the longevity of regimes. There has been significant empirical research into the nuances of what impacts adherence to democracy.

Although this research touches on studies of political culture, there is no intention to reinforce the view that culture is determinative of political regimes. The goal is merely to test whether digital social networks affect political attitudes such as adherence to and satisfaction with democracy, trust in institutions, and perception of corruption.

Indeed, the developments from these seminal studies (Almond & Verba, 1963; Easton, 1965; 1975), along with the spread of democracies around the world in the mid-1980s, with the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1994), led to questions about the survival ability of recent democracies without a deeply rooted democratic political culture, where the functioning of institutions and public policies were not yet capable of satisfying citizens (Rennó et al., 2011; Diamond & Morlino, 2005).

An important aspect in dealing with the concept of political attitude is the level of trust in institutions. For authors like Putnam (1993), trust is central to the development of a civic culture that positively affects the performance of institutions, which, in turn, reinforce trust.

Norris (1999) argued that a large reservoir of trust favors adherence to law and enhances the governmental capacity to develop sustainable public policies. Despite this view, she believes that the decline in trust in institutions since the mid-1970s does not pose a risk to democracy. She relies on Easton (1975) to argue that political support is multidimensional, allowing for the possibility that citizens may be dissatisfied with the performance of institutions but still adhere to the principles of democracy as a political regime. Based on this assumption, it is necessary to test the effect of digital social networks on regime adherence, satisfaction with its performance, and trust in institutions.

Studies on political support in Latin America show at least contradictory behavior by citizens. Lagos (2000) stated that Latin American citizens are cynical, as they express a direct preference for democracy but exhibit behaviors harmful to the regime, including a syndrome of distrust.

Similarly, Moisés (2008) showed that a significant portion of Brazilian citizens are ambivalent, as they

express a preference for democracy over any other form of government, but a significant portion also say that in some situations it does not matter whether the regime is democratic or not. Casalecchi (2018) also found that even though Latin Americans express a preference for democracy over any other form of government, they do not have a democratic commitment, as they admit that in critical situations, a government without parties, parliaments, or a supreme court, fundamental institutions of a democratic regime, would be acceptable.

Regarding the effect on the perception of corruption, the theory anticipates that social networks increase individuals' tolerance, as Bonifácio & Fuks (2017) argue that experience with corruption tends to increase tolerance towards it, hence engagement through digital social networks would produce the same effect.

The following topic will address the role of the internet and digital social networks in politics. In a context like Latin America, where support for democracy is considerably vulnerable, it is expected that digital social networks may have more pronounced negative effects on democratic attitudes, if they indeed have the capacity to compromise support for the democratic regime.

2.2 Internet, Digital Social Networks, and Democracy

The internet emerged in the context of technological development spurred by World War II and the Cold War. It is not necessary to discuss the speed at which computers and the internet have developed and continue to develop rapidly, nor how they transform economic, social, and political relations (Castells, 2000).

In the political sphere, the shift from a traditional communication paradigm to communication through “Web 2.0” is marked by Barack Obama’s presidential campaign in the USA in 2008 (Gomes et al., 2009). “Web 2.0” is based on technological innovations that play a prominent role on the World Wide Web, enabling the creation and sharing of content by users themselves. Thus, digital social media platforms are collaborative platforms that operate through social networking interactions online (Lourenço, 2015).

Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) assert that Twitter has become a space where reality is defined in a market of opinions, allowing more influential actors or even bots to impose worldviews that overshadow facts or even scientific knowledge. Similarly, the counting of likes on Facebook also has the power to create epistemological realities.

According to Eatwell and Goodwin (2020), Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump extensively used this medium to facilitate their elections, including attacking institutions and spreading false news. Nicolau (2020) shows that WhatsApp was decisive in the outcome of the 2018 elections in Brazil.

These innovations, along with strategies for

manipulation and dissemination of false information, are identified as one of the causes of the current democratic crisis. However, more precise empirical investigations are needed to confirm or refute the harmful role of digital social networks on political attitudes. Major studies tend to view the degenerative capacity of digital social networks, which, on the other hand, can also become tools used positively (Calderon & Castells, 2021; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Mounk, 2018; Nicolau, 2020; Przeworski, 2019).

Mounk (2018) presents two perspectives on the role of digital social networks in politics: from an optimistic viewpoint, he believes that digital social networks enhance the political participation capacity of ordinary people, which is necessary for a democratic regime. From a more pessimistic perspective, he considers that digital social networks are used by populist leaders to degenerate politics for their own benefit.

However, it is important to note that a more ambivalent or pessimistic view of the role of digital social networks in politics gained strength around 2015. Until then, the emancipatory view of communication prevailed, as citizens were believed to have better conditions to position themselves critically against authoritarianism and to organize politically to monitor political processes (Mounk, 2018).

Since mid-2015, the effective use of digital social networks by far-right movements and leaders, gaining ground around the world and achieving electoral success, became more evident. This occurs through the selective use of digital social networks in “bubbles” and “echo chambers” with the sharing of similar political orientations, not necessarily based on facts (Mounk, 2018).

That’s why, in discussing the causes of the democratic crisis worldwide, Przeworski (2019) includes the spread of false information through digital social networks and the inability of people to differentiate them from facts, opening space for the predominance of shared beliefs and biases. Calderón and Castells (2021) note that information received via mobile phones from people considered trustworthy and within the social circle of the recipient is given higher credibility, even if it lacks foundation, ending up being used opportunistically and manipulatively.

Despite the alleged negative impact of digital social networks on democracies that can weaken and undermine liberal democracies, Mounk (2018) considers that these networks can also serve as tools of democratic opposition to authoritarian governments, even contributing to the overthrow of dictators. Given this ambiguous nature of digital social networks found in the literature, it is imperative to analyze, based on empirical evidence, the impact of the use of digital social networks on political attitudes that can affect democracy, especially in the context of Latin America. This is the undertaking of the following section.

3. DATA SYSTEMATIZATION AND ANALYSIS

To test the impact of the use of digital social networks on political attitudes in Latin America, it was necessary to utilize a database that includes information on both the use of digital social networks and political attitudes in the countries of the region studied.

The LAPOP (Latin American Public Opinion Project) conducts biennial surveys since 2004 in various countries of interest. In the 2018/2019 round, it paid special attention to digital social networks while maintaining a

broad focus on political attitudes. It conducted 31,050 interviews, covering the analyzed aspects in 18 Latin American countries (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica), in addition to Canada and the USA, which are not part of this study.

Table 1 presents the LAPOP (2018/2019) questions that served as the basis for constructing the variables used in the statistical tests and how they were categorized, the concept they represent, and the name of each resulting variable from the questions.

Table 1
LAPOP (2018/2019) questions, categorization, concepts, and variables

LAPOP Question (2018/2019)	Response Options	Categorization	Concept	Variable
ING4. Changing the subject again, democracy has some problems, but it is better than any other form of government.	To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? It ranges from 1 to 7.	1 to 4 = 0-Disagree 5 to 7 = 1-Agree	Adherence to democracy	DemMelhorGov
PN4. Overall, are you very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in Brazil?	(1) Very satisfied (2) Satisfied (3) Dissatisfied (4) Very dissatisfied	1 and 2 = 1-Satisfied 3 and 4 = 0-Dissatisfied	Satisfaction with democracy	SatisfDem
B13. How much confidence do you have in the National Congress? B18. How much confidence do you have in the Police of your country? B21. How much confidence do you have in the political parties? B21A. How much confidence do you have in the President of the Republic? B31. How much confidence do you have in the Supreme Federal Court?	Scale where 1 means NONE, and 7 means A LOT. Other values indicate intermediate levels of confidence.	Responses were summed and standardized to range from 0 to 100. The index was divided into categories: 0 to 50 = 0-Does not trust; 51 to 100 = 1-Trusts Confirmatory factor analysis tests were conducted	Trust in institutions	ConfInst
EXC7NEW. Thinking about the politicians in Brazil, how many of them do you think are involved in corruption?	(1) None (2) Less than half (3) Half of the politicians (4) More than half (5) All	1 and 2 = 0-Does not perceive 3, 4, and 5 = 1-Perceives	Perception of political corruption	PercepCorrupPol
SMEDIA1. Do you have a Facebook account?	(1) Yes (2) No	1 = 1-Yes 2 = 0-No	Facebook account	TemFace
SMEDIA4. Do you have a Twitter account?	The same as above	The same as above	Twitter account	TemTwit
SMEDIA7. Do you use Whatsapp?	The same as above	The same as above	Whatsapp account	TemZap
SMEDIA2. How often do you view content on Facebook?	(1) Daily (2) A few times a week (3) A few times a month (4) A few times a year (5) Never	1, 2, 3 = 1-Frequently 4, 5 = 0-Rarely	Frequency of Facebook use	FreqFace
SMEDIA5. How often do you view content on Twitter?	The same as above	The same as above	Frequency of Twitter use	FreqTwit
SMEDIA8. How often do you use Whatsapp?	The same as above	The same as above	Frequency of Whatsapp use	FreqZap
SMEDIA3. How often do you view political information on Facebook?	The same as above	The same as above	Frequency of political use on Facebook	FreqPolFace
SMEDIA6. How often do you view political information on Twitter?	The same as above	The same as above	Frequency of political use on Twitter	FreqPolTwit
SMEDIA9. How often do you view political information on Whatsapp?	The same as above	The same as above	Frequency of political use on Whatsapp	FreqPolZap
Q1. Gender	(1) Male (2) Female	2 = 1-Female 1 = 0-Male	Female	Mulher
Q2. How old are you?	From 16 years old	Discrete	Age	Idade
ED. What is the last year or grade of school you completed successfully?	Calculate the number of years needed	0 a 18	Years of education	Ed

Source: The authors, 2023

It was verified how the LAPOP indicators (2018/2019) were operationalized as variables, from Table 2. Therefore, it is appropriate to present the descriptive statistics for each of them, which is done through Table 2.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
DemMelhorGov	13114	0,57	0,49	0	1
SatisfDem	13114	0,39	0,49	0	1
ConfInstDic	13114	0,46	0,50	0	1
PercepCorrupPol	13114	0,88	0,33	0	1
TemFace	12632	0,59	0,49	0	1
TemTwit	12629	0,09	0,29	0	1
TemZap	12652	0,67	0,47	0	1
FreqFace	13114	0,55	0,50	0	1
FreqTwit	13114	0,07	0,26	0	1
FreqZap	13114	0,64	0,48	0	1
FreqPolFace	13114	0,42	0,49	0	1
FreqPolTwit	13114	0,06	0,24	0	1
FreqPolZap	13114	0,28	0,45	0	1
Female	13107	0,48	0,50	0	1
Age	13106	39,29	16,38	16	95
Years of education	12945	10,16	4,23	0	18

Source: the author, 2023

Note: adapted from LAPOP (2018/2019)

The strategy used to measure the impact of digital social media use on political attitudes was the application of logistic regression. This type of test is ideal for assessing the effect of a set of independent variables, *Ceteris Paribus*, on a qualitative dependent variable, divided into two response categories (Wooldridge, 2010).

Table 3 shows the effect of digital social media use on adherence to democracy, understood as preferring it over any other form of government. Four explanatory models were applied: Model 1 considers having an account or using digital social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Whatsapp, and the sociodemographic variables being Female, Age, and Years of education as control variables; Model 2 presents the logistic regression coefficients for the indicator variables of the frequency of network use and control variables; Model 3 applies the frequency of use variables for networks specifically for accessing political information; Model 4 includes all the variables used in a single model.

Model 1 shows that having an account and using any of the analyzed digital social networks is statistically significant and increases the likelihood of considering democracy the best form of government compared to those who do not have an account or do not use digital social networks. Thus, it can be stated that the mere use of a digital social network does not directly harm adherence to democracy as might be expected from the literature suggesting that access to digital social networks is an element that favors the democracy crisis (Calderon &

Castells, 2021; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Mounk, 2018; Nicolau, 2020; Przeworski, 2019).

Table 3
Adherence to democracy by access to digital social networks

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
TemFace	0,116** (0,0514)			0,220 (0,143)
TemTwit	0,165** (0,0680)			0,256* (0,154)
TemZap	0,259*** (0,0521)			0,436 (0,275)
FreqFace		0,0806* (0,0477)		-0,136 (0,145)
FreqTwit		0,170** (0,0727)		-0,247 (0,212)
FreqZap		0,239*** (0,0485)		-0,202 (0,275)
FreqPolFace			0,129*** (0,0429)	0,0410 (0,0597)
FreqPolTwit			0,210*** (0,0804)	0,166 (0,170)
FreqPolZap			0,124***	0,0599
Female	-0,154*** (0,0372)	-0,140*** (0,0361)	-0,128*** (0,0361)	-0,151*** (0,0372)
Age	0,0182*** (0,00130)	0,0173*** (0,00125)	0,0164*** (0,00122)	0,0183*** (0,00131)
Years of education	0,0413*** (0,00502)	0,0396*** (0,00483)	0,0445*** (0,00470)	0,0407*** (0,00504)
Constant	-1,014*** (0,0861)	-0,921*** (0,0821)	-0,829*** (0,0796)	-1,017*** (0,0862)
Observations	12.260	12.937	12.937	12.260

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; Standard errors in parentheses

Source: the author, 2023

Note: adapted from LAPOP (2018/2019)

Regarding the effect of control variables, being female is statistically significant and reduces the chance of preferring democracy to any form of government compared to being male. Years of education, as well as age, are also statistically significant and increase the chance of preferring democracy, contradicting the expectation built from the prevailing literature (Calderon & Castells, 2021; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Mounk, 2018; Nicolau, 2020; Przeworski, 2019).

Model 2 shows that frequent use of any of the analyzed digital social networks also increases the likelihood of preferring democracy. The control variables maintain similar effects to the previous model. The same occurs regarding the specific use of these networks to access political information, as per model 3. However, in model 4, when all independent and control variables are simultaneously entered into the logistic regression, there is a significant loss of statistical significance, probably

due to lack of parsimony and the fact that the variables measure very similar concepts.

Table 4 shows the effect of the same previous models applied to the dependent variable satisfaction with democracy.

Table 4
Satisfaction with democracy by access to digital social networks

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
TemFace	-0,00859			-0,0903
	-0,0517			-0,143
TemTwit	0,173***			0,289*
	-0,0666			-0,148
TemZap	-0,1000*			0,174
	-0,0524			-0,266
FreqFace		0,0205		0,0419
		-0,0482		-0,145
FreqTwit		0,148**		-0,389*
		-0,0714		-0,21
FreqZap		-0,0875*		-0,312
		-0,0489		-0,266
FreqPolFace			0,0164	0,0662
			-0,0435	-0,0606
FreqPolTwit			0,196**	0,297*
			-0,0782	-0,173
FreqPolZap			0,0441	0,0801*
			-0,0444	-0,0485
Female	-0,248***	-0,236***	-0,235***	-0,245***
	-0,0374	-0,0365	-0,0365	-0,0375
Age	-0,00087	-0,00085	-0,00011	-0,00071
	-0,00127	-0,00123	-0,0012	-0,00128
Years of education	-0,0388***	-0,0426***	-0,0469***	-0,0398***
	-0,00501	-0,00484	-0,00471	-0,00503
	0,167**	0,164**	0,113	0,167*
Constant	-0,085	-0,0815	-0,0792	-0,0851
Observations	12.260	12.937	12.937	12.260

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; Standard errors in parentheses

Source: the author, 2023

Note: adapted from LAPOP (2018/2019)

The logistic regression model coefficients in Table 3 show that although the use of the analyzed digital social networks does not reduce the likelihood of adherence to democracy, understood as the best form of government; having and using Whatsapp more frequently, compared to those who rarely use it, is statistically significant and reduces the chance of satisfaction with democracy in one's country.

Variables related to Twitter, on the other hand, are statistically significant and have positive effects on the likelihood of being satisfied with democracy in all four models analyzed, going against studies that suggest access

to digital social networks contributes to the democratic crisis. This indicates that this digital social network actually contradicts the hypothesis that accessing it contributes to the democratic crisis, which was expected from the studies in this field (Calderon & Castells, 2021; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Mounk, 2018; Nicolau, 2020; Przeworski, 2019). Facebook, however, did not show statistical significance in any of the explanatory models of democratic satisfaction.

Regarding the control variables, in all four models, being female was statistically significant and reduced the chances of being satisfied with democracy compared to males by -0.248. The years of education also increased the chances of dissatisfaction, which is attributed to the rising expectations and critical capacity of individuals with higher education, as frequently seen in the literature (Norris, 1999). Age did not show statistical significance in any of the models.

Table 5
Trust in institutions by access to digital social networks

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
TemFace	-0,000239			0,120
	(0,0506)			(0,139)
TemTwit	0,00994			0,0376
	(0,0659)			(0,147)
TemZap	-0,212***			-0,152
	(0,0514)			(0,265)
FreqFace		-0,0106		-0,257*
		(0,0471)		(0,141)
FreqTwit		0,0121		-0,100
		(0,0707)		(0,206)
FreqZap		-0,181***		-0,0918
		(0,0479)		(0,265)
FreqPolFace			0,0482	0,188***
			(0,0425)	(0,0593)
FreqPolTwit			8,91e-05	0,0657
			(0,0776)	(0,168)
FreqPolZap			0,00798	0,0802*
			(0,0434)	(0,0474)
Female	0,0479	0,0463	0,0439	0,0555
	(0,0367)	(0,0357)	(0,0357)	(0,0368)
Age	0,000140	0,000586	0,00242**	0,000521
	(0,00125)	(0,00120)	(0,00118)	(0,00126)
Years of education	-0,0430***	-0,0451***	-0,0537***	-0,0446***
	(0,00492)	(0,00474)	(0,00462)	(0,00495)
	0,394***	0,370***	0,242***	0,385***
Constant	(0,0836)	(0,0801)	(0,0776)	(0,0838)
Observations	12.260	12.937	12.937	12.260

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; Standard errors in parentheses

Source: the author, 2023

Note: adapted from LAPOP (2018/2019)

Table 5 replicates the same previous models, with trust in institutions as the dependent variable. The logistic

regression models in the table show that only the variables related to Whatsapp have statistical significance, reducing the chance of trust in institutions for those who use it compared to those who do not, and those who use it frequently compared to those who use it rarely, and for accessing political information compared to those who do not use it in this way. The exception is in model four regarding the variable indicating the use of Facebook to access political content, which is statistically significant and increases the chance of trust in institutions compared to those who do not access political content through this digital social network.

Table 5 shows that having Whatsapp, as hypothesized, indeed reduces trust in institutions. This can cause greater concern for democratic institutions due to it being a more widely used social network compared to Twitter. After all, LAPOP (2018/2019) data indicate that while only 9.24% of respondents in the surveyed countries had a Twitter account, 66.84% had a Whatsapp account. Therefore, even though not all social networks harm institutional trust, the one that is more widespread, which enables more direct and intimate contact among users and has the capacity to disseminate information, including false information, at high speed, reduces trust in political institutions (Calderon & Castells, 2021). These characteristics of this social network may cause its effects to prevail over those of others regarding institutional trust.

Regarding the control variables, being Female and Age lose statistical significance compared to the previous models, while years of education maintain the pattern of the previous models, reducing the chance of institutional trust.

Table 6 presents the same explanatory models for the dependent variable of perception of political corruption. The variables related to Twitter, having an account, or using it frequently, are statistically significant and reduce the chance of perceiving politicians as corrupt compared to those who do not have an account and those who use this social network rarely.

In model 4, having a Facebook account is statistically significant and decreases the chance of perceiving corruption compared to those who do not have one, although using it frequently increases this chance compared to those who use it rarely. This result is contrary to what was expected from Bonifácio & Fuks (2017) since experience or greater exposure to corruption tends to increase tolerance towards it. This also helps to understand the negative impact of life years on the perception of political corruption. Other variables related to the use of digital social networks did not show statistical significance in the models of Table 5. As for the control variables, being Female tends to increase the chances of perceiving corruption, as well as years of education, due to increasing individuals' criticality (Norris, 1999).

Table 6
Perception of political corruption by access to digital social networks

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
TemFace	0,00908 (0,0783)			-0,403** (0,189)
TemTwit	-0,233** (0,0986)			-0,348* (0,209)
TemZap	0,116 (0,0783)			0,552 (0,473)
FreqFace		0,0830 (0,0723)		0,496** (0,193)
FreqTwit		-0,197* (0,107)		-0,0574 (0,290)
FreqZap		0,102 (0,0725)		-0,404 (0,473)
FreqPolFace			0,0479 (0,0661)	-0,0797 (0,0946)
FreqPolTwit			-0,109 (0,119)	0,264 (0,238)
FreqPolZap			-0,0553 (0,0672)	-0,112 (0,0745)
Female	0,0931* (0,0562)	0,0863 (0,0544)	0,0909* (0,0544)	0,0855 (0,0563)
Age	-0,00797*** (0,00186)	-0,00761*** (0,00178)	-0,00882*** (0,00175)	-0,00813*** (0,00187)
Years of education	0,0191*** (0,00738)	0,0190*** (0,00706)	0,0244*** (0,00686)	0,0200*** (0,00741)
Constant	2,020*** (0,126)	1,964*** (0,120)	2,052*** (0,117)	2,026*** (0,126)
Observations	12.260	12.937	12.937	12.260

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1; Standard errors in parentheses

Therefore, the results presented demonstrate that access to digital social networks does not directly compromise adherence to democracy. On the contrary, Twitter and Facebook in many cases may favor other civic attitudes supportive of democratic sustainability beyond explicit preference for democracy. However, the potentially more harmful nature of Whatsapp should be noted, as it not only reduces the chances of adherence to democracy but also compromises satisfaction with its performance and trust in institutions. Its widespread use, enabling more intimate contact among users and the rapid dissemination of information, both false and true, may cause the effects of its use to prevail over those of other analyzed digital social networks.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article tested the effects of digital social networks on political attitudes regarding adherence to and satisfaction

with democracy, trust in institutions, and perception of political corruption using LAPOP (2018/2019) data in 18 Latin American countries.

The findings suggest that the use of any of the analyzed digital social networks, i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Whatsapp, whether having an account or using the platform, frequency of use, and use for accessing political information, does not compromise the preference for democracy over any other form of government. Instead, these uses increase the chance of preferring democracy.

However, the use of Whatsapp impacts some political attitudes that could undermine the legitimacy of democracy over time, as its general use – compared to non-use; frequent use – compared to rare use – tends to reduce the chances of trust in institutions, as well as satisfaction with democracy. Conversely, Twitter decreases the chances of perceiving politicians as corrupt and increases the chances of satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions.

At first glance, these results seem contrary to expectations from studies that place access to digital social networks at the heart of the democratic crisis (Calderon & Castells, 2021; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Mounk, 2018; Nicolau, 2020; Przeworski, 2019). However, the observed effects of access to the Whatsapp network on the political attitudes analyzed have the potential to make its effects prevail due to the typical characteristics of this digital social network.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is still much to explore about the impact of digital social networks on democracies. The LAPOP (2018/2019) data, related to Latin American countries, show that these networks, per se, do not directly compromise the preference for democracy. On the contrary, they increase the chances of preference for the regime. In the case of Twitter, it promotes a virtuous understanding of the political system as a whole, also favoring satisfaction with democracy, trust in institutions, and reducing the perception of politicians as corrupt.

On the other hand, Whatsapp, which is considerably more widespread, tends to produce opposite effects, which should be observed carefully by democrats, given its capacity to instantaneously disseminate information, whether true or not. As for Facebook, it showed to have lesser importance in the region and during the period studied.

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