

Are All Democracies Created Equal?

An Analysis on Political Systems in Ecuador and The United States

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July 29, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, for the most part, is thought of to be the most desirable political system by virtue of allowing citizens say in government. Holding both intrinsic and instrumental values, citizen involvement in government takes away centralized power from the few and gives it to the majority. But as civilizations have grown and been created, it is clear that a system of democracy on its own does not necessitate the security of fundamental freedom and rights. There are many aspects of democracy, that if not implemented correctly, can yield the opposite of what democracy intends to achieve. With this in mind, this paper hopes to investigate exactly what forms of democracy are not successful. I hope to investigate the fallbacks in both the United States and Ecuador, both democratic countries. The goal of this paper is to analyze what functions of democracy are most helpful, and which are least helpful in a community. To see how alternate aspects of democracy can lead to different political cultures, we will be comparatively noting differences between the two democratic countries. Although this study will compare Ecuadorian and American politics, this paper does not have the intention of granting one country's political system better than the other. On the contrary, this paper will flesh out both the negative and positive of each respective system in a way where both parties can learn from each other.

As an American citizen who has been adequately involved in politics, the analysis of democracy in the nation will be mainly informed by personal experiences and supplemental research. This will give a good the reader a good idea of what American democracy is, and how it is perceived amongst American citizens. For analysis in the Ecuadorian political system, I will be traveling to Ecuador to interview 7 family members, all citizens of Ecuador with various demographics. These interviews will be supplemental to the research I will also be conducting to get concrete, positive analysis of the history of politics in Ecuador and how it has affected public opinion.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A DEMOCRACY?

Before getting into comparing democracies, we need to establish a concrete definition of a democracy. A democracy is commonly known as a political system that allows people to elect their leaders: "Elected by the people, for the people."¹ Democracy necessities an intrinsic and instrumental value because people are allowed to elect their leaders, which in turn leads to a society that achieves what the people want. It recognizes citizens as autonomous beings and does not constrict them against their well. Democracy's aim is to take away power from the few and give it to the majority. But through time and time again, it is apparent that a democracy on its own does not necessitate the security of these liberties, nor does it efficiently recognize people as autonomous beings. As the reader advances through this essay, they will realize what kind of democracies are more efficient in conserving the securities that a democracy is intended to provide. By this definition, we can conclude that although a democracy holds the value of allowing people to practice this self autonomy, it does not conclude that fundamental freedoms and fundamental rights² are met. In the following sections, we will see how it is that a democracy can fail to meet these desirable outcomes.

¹ Paula Becker and Jean-Aimé A Raveloson, "What Is Democracy?," trans. Andriakamelo Rarivoarisoa Alice, September 2008, 4.

² Becker, 4

CORRUPTION THROUGH A COMPARATIVE LENS

A Study of American Politics

The United States is one of the larger global superpower. Economically, politically, and socially the United States has been influential to many other countries, “leading by example”. The kind of democracy that is practiced in the United States is a representative one which most other democratic nations also practice. Forms of a representative democracy may vary, such as the UK who has a parliamentary constitutional monarchies.³ Despite the different forms in which a representative democracy may manifest itself, one point is clear: a representative democracy allows for people to elect representatives that will represent their constituents’ desires and reflect them in policy. This is different from a direct democracy, which accounts for each individual citizen when it comes to the voting process. Due to the United States’ larger population, a representative democracy is better, but that does not mean that a representative democracy comes without any faults. Many other countries follow a representative democracy, and it is most likely that any democratic country practices a representative one due to the large sized of countries.

In the United States, there are two parties that dominate politics: one Republican, the other Democrats. When it comes to state, local, and national elections these two parties dominate them. Although other parties may run for elections, it is very rare for them to succeed. In the Senate and the House, all representatives are allowed to run for either a democratic or republican position. These two parties run deep into the political system. Because there are only two parties, polarization is one of the most pressing issues in the United States which has doubled in the past decade, according to a study done in 2014.⁴ This polarization stalls many developments that either party may attempt to achieve.

In addition to extreme polarization, there are many self-interested politicians in American politics. A recent poll shows that about 65% of Americans believe that politicians run for their own personal gain. And in many cases, that is the truth. A popular way in which America’s politicians serve for their own benefit is through lobbying. Politicians are incentivized to lobby for special interest groups which ultimately leads to asymmetrical representation of what the people actually want. As many politicians lobby for interest groups, the few elected have incentive to follow their own desires as opposed to what the people want.

A Study of Ecuadorian Politics

Ecuador is a nation that is regarded as a middle-income, developing country.⁵ Despite its “lesser” prestige, a democracy is a liberty that people practice in Ecuador. This liberty allows for people

³ Jonathan Day, “Representative Democracy and Government: Definition & Future,” European Liberties Platform, accessed July 2022, <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/representative-democracy/43508>.

⁴ “Political Polarization in the American Public,” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, April 9, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

⁵ “Ecuador,” JICA, <https://www.jica.go.jp/ecuador/english/index.html>.

to practice their democratic duty of voting. For a good period of time until 1996, Ecuador had a stable democracy. There was an efficient system of check and balances. But by the time Abdalá Bucaram was elected in 1996, Ecuador had developed a plethora of financial problems ranging but not limited to: a 37% percent inflation, higher taxes, and increases in foreign debt.⁶ Since then Ecuador's economics has been difficult to manage with more and more presidents taking advantage of their positions to accumulate their own personal wealth. Additionally, since Ecuador does not have a strong system of checks and balances it is easier for those politicians to get away with actions, letting various officials get away with their unnecessary power.

In light of how democracy has developed in Ecuador, I have decided to interview family members who have been citizens of Ecuador. The age range for the interviewees fall from 38 - 80. The questions are used in this paper to gauge what political sentiments, along with some polls. The following are the sets of questions I asked my interviewees, translated from Spanish:

Please indicate your name, age and in which part of Ecuador you live.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how involved would you say you are in politics in Ecuador?
What experiences have shaped your judgment?

Do you think Ecuador is corrupt? If so, how?

If you could compare Ecuador with any other country based on its political system, which one would it be and why?

How has political culture influenced your daily life?
How do you think life would be different if Ecuador had a better or worse political system?

How has Ecuadorian politics changed throughout your life? What have been some very high moments and what have been some very low moments?

If there was one thing you could change about Ecuadorian politics, what would it be?

The responses to the questions were all similar to each other. All interviewees claimed that they had not been involved in politics; the highest number to the first interview question was 3. The reasons as to why they were not involved were shown through responses to other questions. Below are just some reasons why:

"I'm not that involved in politics because there is no point. No change ever comes" - Interviewee 1, age 76

"I think act Ecuador is too far behind to ever create change. There has been ... an established corrupt state for way too long" - Interviewee 7, age 38

⁶ Lauderbaugh, George M.. 2012. *The History of Ecuador*. Westport: ABC-CLIO, LLC. Accessed July 29, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

“I cannot remember the last time I even did research on politicians. I just go by what my friends tell me since we have all have the same interests. “ - Interviewee 3, age 41

These are just a few responses. But the overall sentiment amongst Ecuadorian citizens in democratic government is apathy. According to studies done in the past few years, tolerance towards corruption has risen over the years, with up to 45% of the public believing that public officials are corrupted.⁷ This apathy was reflected as well throughout the interviews, as shown above.

One particularly interesting thing about the democratic duties in Ecuador is how institutionally valuable voting is in allowing citizens freedoms. For example one interviewee says that it is required to register to vote: “If you don’t register to vote, it is hard to accumulate credit, wealth ... and those are some things you need to live. But it is not required to vote.” This is different from the United States, which does not require you to register. It is still a democracy, but showed out in different forms.

ANALYSIS

After extensive research about both nations and their political systems, there are some obvious fallbacks to both the Ecuadorian and American form of democracy. With an analysis of previous research and direct conversations with Ecuadorian citizens, along with personal involvement in American politics, it is apparent that there is no one single form of democracy. Democracy can manifest itself in several ways, some more desirable than others. Despite both nations following a system of democracy as defined previously, the manner in which democracy is practiced can yield different outcomes in terms of political efficiency: are these forms of democracy both In both Ecuador and the United States the most fundamental and valuable aspect of democracy is the power to vote, but often the power to vote often feels like it does nothing in return for citizens.

In order to create a democracy that best supports citizens of a nation as autonomous beings, Ecuador can learn from the United States by implementing a stronger system of checks and balances. This can ensure citizens and transform their apathy into passion. When a group of citizens can trust that powers are not centralized, then they are more confident that the government will do its job and not keep the power that citizens grant them. In turn, this can motivate citizens to be more involved in politics.

On the other hand, The United States can improve its democracy by creating a similar system as Ecuador when it comes to voting. Voter turnout has been infamously low for past various elections. But with a system that requires people to vote, which inherently requires people to know more about the political culture/candidates, can make more people eager to participate in the nation’s democracy which can lead to a more accurate representation of what it means to obtain and follow democratic duties.

Both the United States and Ecuador suffer from the disappointment of empty promises. Both people in Ecuador and the United States notice that their leaders often make empty promises, or

⁷ Paolo Moncagatta et al., *The Political Culture of Democracy in Ecuador and in the Americans, 2018/19: Taking The Pulse of Democracy*, n.d., <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ecuador/AB2018-19-Ecuador-Country-Report-Eng-V2-W-200903.pdf>, Chapter 6.

if often takes too long to grant them. Although the reason for these “empty promises” exist for different reasons, the problem exists nonetheless. While this happens in the United States due to high polarization, in Ecuador empty promises are due to corruption which leads to many government officials act on their own self-interest. The solutions offered above can help alleviate people’s perception of the empty promises made, although there is a need for a more comprehensive solution to fix the root of the problem that lets self-interest politicians succeed. Although I have not definitive answer to this problem, it is important to begin this conversations. The ultimate utopia would be a world with no corrupt politicians, but we have some work to do beforehand.

CONCLUSION

A democracy is a system that allows for people to participate in all sectors of government. With this political system it is apparent that despite a nations’s best efforts, it does not always yield the outcomes that are best for the community. The United States and Ecuador are both democratic nations that practice a representative democracy, although there are many aspects in which a democracy fails to achieve the rights and freedoms it promises its citizens. For example, in the United States, extreme polarization inhibits citizens from feeling the benefits of comprehensive policy; often times representatives can’t reach agreements. From fixing climate change to raising/ lowering taxes, solutions to these problems are made unobtainable by lack of partisanship. On the other hand, Ecuadorians citizens feel defeated by longstanding corruption that has most affected their economic state. In both nations, democracy can improve by implementing changes as mentioned previously throughout this essay. This is an important takeaway for scholars and other nations: simply implanting a system of democracy does not automatically make a nation flourish. Without standards and rules, a democracy can do the complete opposite of what it intends to do.

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