



**Partecipazione e CONflitto**  
*\* The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*  
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>  
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)  
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)  
**PACO, Issue 10(1) 2017: 65-88**  
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v10i1p65

Published in March 15, 2017

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# DEMOCRACY AND REPRESENTATION IN PARAGUAY

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reviews the electoral accountability dimension as a constitutive mechanism of Paraguayan democracy since 1989, analyzing the factors that limit the representation contained in the administration of the Paraguayan government as a result of the electoral process. We provide an analytic contrast between the democratic principles that guide the Paraguayan electoral institutions and the way their designs are enforced, identifying the gap between formal and informal rules as determinants of political representation. We also describe the barriers that prevent effective access of the population to political participation and competition, the advantages possessed by traditional political parties and interest groups, as well as their implications for democracy. We also review the degree to which elected officials are representative of historically excluded social groups as a result, emphasizing the way women, indigenous and peasant communities have potentially limited power to exercise political influence due to limitations to participation by structural and institutional factors.

**KEYWORDS:** representation, quality of democracy, electoral accountability, participation, competition

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## 1. Introduction

The overthrow of the military regime that took place in Paraguay in 1989 marked the outset of transition towards democracy in the country. Regime change was materialized institutionally after a new National Constitution was drafted in 1992, inscribing

principles of civil, political and social citizenship (Marshall 1998) in Paraguayan positive law, in coincidence with the values of a representative democracy that began to be practiced. However, observance of such constitutional designs has been irregular throughout the democratization years, in light of the uneven levels of compliance shown by the consecutive civilian governments and the irregular quality of democracy perceivable in its different dimensions (Morlino 2011; 2014).

Detailed analysis about the quality of democracy in Paraguay (Barreda and Bou 2010; Abente-Brun 2007, 2012; Duarte-Recalde 2015) indicate that this regime is characterized by deficiencies in all of its dimensions<sup>1</sup>, which ultimately comes to erode its legitimacy. Challenges facing the democratically elected governments after decades of dictatorial rule included “a socially exclusive development trajectory, an authoritarian tradition with associated weak civil society, judicial corruption and impunity for wrongdoers, and low levels of transparency and accountability” (Nickson 2011, 11).

However, the character of the Paraguayan political system can be stated as democratic from a procedural standpoint as it has allowed the regular replacement of public officials through minimally free and fair electoral processes, though party alternation on the executive power –as a key determinant of democracy, since “a regime should not be classified as democratic if it fills executive and legislative offices by elections, but the ruling party never loses elections” (Przeworski *et al.* 2000, 27)– was only achieved in 2008. The Superior Court of Electoral Justice has performed as an autonomous institution, organizing elections throughout the country in a regular and predictable manner since 1998<sup>2</sup> (Martini 2003, Duarte-Recalde 2015). There has also been freedom of party organization as well as presence and stability of political alternatives throughout the period. Thus, electoral accountability as a process through which “the voter decides and either rewards the incumbent candidate or slate of candidates with a vote in their favor, or else punishes them by voting for another candidate, abstaining from the vote, or by nullifying the ballot” (Morlino 2011, 200) appears as the dimension of highest democratic quality in the Paraguayan political system, followed closely by participation and competition (Morlino 2014, 59).

On the other hand, the electoral processes in this country have also been characterized by deficient compliance with the rules. Electoral integrity has been questioned re-

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<sup>1</sup> Following Leonardo Morlino (2011, 2014), we understand that the democratic dimensions or qualities necessary to assess the regime include procedural dimensions (rule of law, electoral and inter-institutional accountability, participation and competition), substantive dimensions (freedoms and equality) and government responsiveness.

<sup>2</sup> The 1996 municipal elections organized by this institution have been considered the first effectively democratic elections in the history of the country (Martini 2003, 181).

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peatedly (Duarte-Recalde 2015) and, while lack of full compliance with democratic procedures has not fundamentally altered “the playing field between government and opposition” (Levitsky and Way 2002, 53), access to electoral competition systematically excludes social sectors poorly represented by traditional parties, which challenges the legitimate origin and level of representation of elected officials. Taking into consideration literature indicating that “Institutions do not necessarily function as intended (...) but they are essential for establishing accountability” (Mainwaring and Welna 2003, 5), that “many Latin American democracies are characterized by weak institutional environments in which enforcement of the rules is low (...)” (Levitsky and Murillo 2013, 93), and that infringement of formal rules may be due to their limited relevance or lack thereof to influence behaviors and processes, or they may show the relevance of such rules as facades to achieve other political objectives (Acuña and Chudovsky 2013), we now propose to revise that gap between the formal design of electoral rules and their effective enforcement in the Paraguayan case. We do so in order to assess the democratic character of political representation in Paraguay, looking into the nature of government oversight by the citizens.

This article explores the boundaries of electoral governance in Paraguay beyond the system's institutional design. In order to review the extent to which electoral rules are enforced impartially and allow for effective electoral participation and competition of the population, we take into consideration testimony of political actors that don't belong to traditional political parties but who have been involved in the public sphere through means of unconventional political participation during the democratization period<sup>3</sup>, exercising their freedom of speech and association to channel interests of traditionally excluded social sectors, to enhance their political agency, and to promote conditions that could alter the balance of social forces and public perceptions regarding their demands (Carter 2012, 98). In this regard, we will examine the institutional constraints established by the Constitution and electoral laws that shape competition and participation, contrasting them with the perception of their enforcement by social groups that claim not to be fully represented in the electoral process, exploring the gap

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<sup>3</sup> In order to achieve such goal we did semi-structured interviews with key informants. These informants were selected based on their work as representatives of social interests that have remained excluded from electoral competition, but whose claims have had notoriety during the democratization period and have influenced the national political agenda through means of unconventional political participation. The full transcripts of the interviews done to Gabriela Schwartzman (*Kuña Pyrenda* Political Movement), Daniel Gómez (SUNU Group of Intercultural Action) and Eladio Flecha (*Paraguay Pyahura* Party) are available in the database of the organization “*Semillas para la Democracia*” and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as part of the Civil Society Project “*Topu'ã Paraguay*”, which funded the report that precedes this article.

between participatory democratic principles *de jure* and their compliance *de facto*. We will also examine how the main organized social sectors of the country remain discriminated against through such ineffective enforcement, contesting the possibility of *substantive representation* and its democratic nature.

## 2. Paraguayan electoral system

The workings of the Paraguayan electoral system, understood as “the way voters express their political preference by means of votes and the way these votes are transferred into executive posts such as the presidential office or legislative mandates in the form of parliamentary seats” (Nohlen 2005, 1-2), are defined in the 1992 Paraguayan Constitution and the legislation that regulates its designs. Paraguay is established constitutionally as a rule of law that assumes representative, participatory and pluralist democracy as its form of government (National Constitution, Art. 1). This Constitution also designs the Electoral Justice as the institution responsible for convening, judging, organizing, directing and supervising the acts and issues arising from general, departmental and municipal elections, as well as the rights and titles of those who are elected. Also falling within its competence are questions arising from all kinds of popular consultation, as well as questions relating to elections and the functioning of political parties and movements (National Constitution, Art. 273). The functioning of the Electoral Justice is regulated by the Law 635/95.

The Paraguayan Electoral Code establishes that voting is a right, duty and public responsibility that empowers the elector to participate in the selection of elective authorities through political parties or alliances (Law 834/96, Art. 1). It indicates that no one can prevent, restrict or disturb the exercise of suffrage, and that the authorities are obliged to guarantee the freedom and transparency of the suffrage and facilitate its exercise (Law 834/96, Art. 3). It is established that the vote is universal, free, direct, equal, secret, personal and non-transferable, as well as being an obligation for all qualified citizens (Law 834/96, Art. 4). Paraguayan citizens and foreigners residing permanently in the national territory who have reached eighteen years of age may act as voters (Law 834/96, Art. 2). By the Constitutional Amendment approved through Referendum on October 9, 2011, Paraguayans living abroad are also voters.

In Paraguay, two rounds of elections are held every five years: a) general elections, where the President and Vice President of the Republic, the Deputies, Senators, MERCOSUR Parliamentarians, Governors and members of the Departmental Council are elected; and b) municipal elections, where the Mayor and members of the Municipal

Council are elected. In case of a constitutional reform, Constitutional Constituents shall also be elected by direct vote.

The President and Vice-President are elected jointly and directly by the people, by simple majority of votes in general elections. The Senate is composed of forty-five titular members directly elected in a single national constituency on a proportional basis. The Chamber of Deputies consists of eighty titular members directly elected by the people in departmental constituencies on a proportional basis. The Governors and the Departmental Councils are elected by direct vote of the citizens residing in the respective departments. The Mayors and the Municipal Councils are elected in direct suffrage by the legally qualified voters in each jurisdiction. For each election, voters cast one vote (ballot) separately for executive and legislative posts, while all collegiate bodies are elected through closed lists presented by each competing party or movement.

Understanding that the size of the constituency can influence political representation, the structure of the party system and power relations (Nohlen 2007, 15), the different sizes of electoral constituencies present in the Paraguayan system generate varying effects on its proportionality as, the smaller the electoral circumscription, the smaller the proportional effect of the electoral system and the opportunities for small parties to access legislative positions will be.

Legislation does not allow for presidential re-election, which inevitably limits the temporal horizons of the executive branch. Legislation doesn't contemplate the procedure of *ballotage* either, which facilitates control of the executive branch by the traditionally majoritarian party that uninterruptedly controlled the government and State's resources from 1954 through 2008: the National Republican Association (*Asociación Nacional Republicana* – ANR) (Abente 2007; Duarte-Recalde 2015).

Despite such procedural conditioning, however, the workings of the electoral system remain closer to that of a polyarchy (Dahl 1971) and distant from an electoral authoritarianism, where rulers “devise discriminatory electoral rules, exclude opposition parties and candidates from entering the electoral arena, infringe upon their political rights and civil liberties, restrict their access to mass media and campaign finance, impose formal or informal suffrage restrictions on their supporters, coerce or corrupt them into deserting the opposition camp, or simply redistribute votes and seats through electoral fraud” (Schedler 2006, 3). The conditioning elements to democratic representation in Paraguay can be attributed, instead, to the irregular enforcement and weak oversight of democratic procedures, as well as the systemic discrimination of traditionally disadvantaged social groups, that define the system's low democratic quality yet allows it to be considered an electoral democracy.

### 3. Conventional participation as a determinant of representation

When considering participation as a democratic quality, we understand it comprises “the entire set of behaviors, be they conventional or unconventional, legal or borderline vis-à-vis legality, that allows women and men, as individuals or as groups, to create, revive, or strengthen group identification or to try to influence the recruitment of, and decisions by, political authorities (the representative and/or governmental ones) in order to maintain or change the allocation of existing values” (Morlino 2011). However, for the purposes of this paper, we limit the analysis to conventional participation in order to assess the way the electoral process is carried out in the Paraguayan case; the electoral process realizes the ideal of political representation in democratic systems, while Paraguayan legislation establishes that the exercise the public power through suffrage by the people.

According to the *formalistic* view of representation that focuses on formal procedures of *authorization*, elections are “a grant of authority by the voters to the elected officials” (Pitkin 1967, 43) that makes representation a transaction that implies “the giving and having of authority”, where a representative “is someone who has been authorized to act” (Pitkin 1967, 38). Also, as “elections serve only as one rather ineffective means for creating or sustaining representation” (Pitkin 1967, 108), a representative democracy where there's a gap between political representatives and citizens “requires the existence of institutional mechanisms to ensure that such separation does not result in unresponsive or illegal governments” (Peruzzoti and Smulovitz 2002) and “for procedural democracy to work —and procedures to be meaningful— there must be inclusive citizenship, access to the political arena that is open on clear and relatively equal lines to individuals and groups, freedom of information and organization, and formal as well as informal means of ensuring accountability” (Levine and Molina 2007).

Furthermore, according to a *formalistic* view of representation that focuses on formal procedures of *accountability* where “a representative is someone who is to be held to account, who will have to answer to another for what he does” (Pitkin 1967, 55), the democratic nature of accountability will be enhanced by the inclusion of diverse interests and identities of the population to the political system. For this reason it's important to review the rules that determine the opportunities for participation and whether they facilitate or hinder the effective integration of the population to this process, advancing towards a pattern of *descriptive representation* where the group of elected authorities “corresponds accurately to that of the whole nation” (Pitkin 1967, 60).

Procedures regarding registration and voting are clear and formally inclusive in the Paraguayan political system, although they are not necessarily accessible in practice. All Paraguayan citizens are constitutionally allowed to vote and are eligible for public office after the age of 18, whether they reside in Paraguayan territory or abroad. They also have the right to freely associate in political parties or movements in order to elect authorities through democratic methods. Automatic enrollment to the Permanent Civic Register has been enforced since 2012<sup>4</sup> (Law 4559/12), but those who turned 18 before that year must still register in person at any post of the electoral institution. The institution responsible for such registration is the Direction of the Electoral Register, which is also responsible for the preparation and transparency of the Permanent Civic Register and parties' electoral registers (Law 635/95, Art. 26).

While it's possible for political parties and movements to audit the voter registration process through their designated representatives (Law 834/96, Art. 134), this recourse has traditionally been abused by parties that possess active officials as members of the electoral institution; they would register voters to the Permanent Civic Register while simultaneously affiliating them to their party. This practice has created confusion among the population that lasted for many years and still endures in parts of the country, because it led people to believe that in order to vote in general or local elections they needed to be affiliated to a political party (Schvartzman 2012).

Requirement to possess an identification document to register and vote also works as a hindrance to participation for many Paraguayans. The only valid document for registration and voting is the identity card (Law 834/96, Art. 98), which works as discriminatory mechanism in light of the number of people with difficulties to reach the Identifications Department offices or the National Police to apply for this document. This requirement mainly excludes from political participation members of traditionally marginalized indigenous or rural communities that need to travel long distances and incur in expenses to join the electoral process. Their marginal situation is thus reinforced and reproduced while exploited by the party machinery, as parties also procure the identity cards while they proceed to register and affiliate members as part of the same process (Gómez 2012).

Considering the electoral process as a means to materialize *symbolic representation* (Pitkin 1967), the levels of electoral participation in Paraguay also display the limitations in the representative nature of elected officials. Although voting is compulsory (Law 834/96, Art. 1), there is a significant number of people that fail to participate in

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<sup>4</sup> This has enhanced the number of registered voters in the country, which has increased in large proportion in the last 15 years; from the 2.049.449 registered voters for the 1996 general elections the number increased to 3.516.275 voters registered in 2013 (Tables 1 and 2 ).

elections (Tables 1 y 2) without apparent consequences. The maximum level of electoral turnout for presidential elections since 1998 happened on that year –reaching 80,54% of participation– while each of the consecutive elections registered participation levels ranging from 60% to 68%. However, considering participation as a percentage of the voting age population, the share that actively elects representatives remains over 45% but below 60% for both parliamentary and presidential elections throughout the period, so the elected authorities are only representative to about half of the voting age population in *symbolic* terms.

**Table 1: Voter turnout – Presidential elections**

Year	Voter Turnout	Total vote	Registration	VAP Turnout <sup>5</sup>	Voting age population	Invalid votes	Population
2013	68.02%	2391790	3516275	57.96%	4126948	2.48%	6623252
2008	60.34%	1726906	2861940	45.94%	3759034	3.50%	6669086
2003	64.20%	1544172	2405108	47.60%	3243812	3.10%	5884491
1998	80.54%	1650725	2049449	59.43%	2777725	1.87%	5137440

Source: International IDEA: <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=186>

**Table 2: Voter turnout – Parliamentary elections**

Year	Voter Turnout	Total vote	Registration	VAP Turnout	Voting age population	Invalid votes	Population
2013	68.24%	2391790	3516275	58.15%	4126948	2.82%	6623252
2008	65.48%	1726906	2861940	49.86%	3759034	1.50%	6669086
2003	64.02%	1544172	2405108	47.47%	3243812	4.30%	5884491
1998	80.48%	1650725	2049449	59.38%	2777725	3.34%	5137440

Source: International IDEA: <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=186>

From the point of view of *symbolic representation* that values the meaning attributed to a representative by the population to be represented, the response invoked by the contending candidates in terms of voter turnout appears as an indicator of the limited degree to which the Paraguayan population feels represented by them. The level of low trust and apparent disenchantment of the Paraguayan population with the electoral practice is also reflected in the statement “No one chooses through the system election in our country (...) and for us the electoral issue, under these conditions, is a trap” (Flecha 2012). The situation is worsened when acknowledging that the legacy of

<sup>5</sup> Voter turnout as the percentage of the voting age population that actually cast a ballot.



the dictatorial regime is still perceivable and that “powerful elite groups that had emerged during the dictatorship jostled to retain their power in the new democratic environment, often through buying congressional votes” (Nickson 2010, 286).

Meanwhile, the level of electoral participation that remains stable is linked to the action of political parties with strong clientelistic bases capable to mobilize their voters on election day. The Survey “*Indicadores de Gobernabilidad Democrática en Paraguay*” on governance, democracy and transparency carried out by the United Nations Development Programme regarding the general elections of 2008 indicated that 25% of voters were taken to their polling stations by political operators, increasing to 41% of voters among the population under the extreme poverty line (PNUD 2009, 33). This situation is also reflected in the experience of indigenous communities in the sense that “there is a high percentage of people from different communities that are going to vote –attendance to vote reaches almost 90%, if not more– who are taken by political candidates; they call them voter hauling and it's done almost at the community level” (Gómez 2012). Throughout the period of time under analysis there had been several cases of indigenous voters retained under lock for days before the elections, until they are taken to vote on election day and only freed afterwards, particularly in the country's northern region (GAT 2013).

The country's legislation also promotes the right to vote as a basis for liberal democratic equality, whereas each person possesses the electoral value of a single ballot. Since suffrage is founded on the universal, free, direct, equal and secret vote according to the Constitution, vote buying, intimidation or withholding identity documents are banned and punishable by law, which could lead to financial penalties or imprisonment (Law 834/96, Art. 320 y 321). Such principles also apply to elections in political parties, labor and social organizations. However, this legal command is void of content in reality as such practices take place regularly; cases of vote buying are usual in municipal and general elections, which shows the lack of effective enforcement of these electoral rules (Duarte-Recalde 2015).

Furthermore, the most recent general and municipal elections have been characterized by cases of malpractice that have included the opening of polling stations without the presence of all appointed members, cases of induction to vote and coercion to voters, retention of identity cards, ballot theft, distortion of electoral data, substitutions of one elector for another, carrying weapons, the use of cameras in the darkroom, the use of badges to identify party operators, the use of vehicles with electoral propaganda, as well as the unofficial disclosure by pollsters and the media of preliminary exit

poll data<sup>6</sup> (El País 2013; OEA 2015). While detrimental to democratic quality from a normative stance, such malpractices that constrain free and equal political participation are regular traits of the stable electoral process that has characterized Paraguayan democracy.

On a final note about participation as a procedural determinant of representation, the very meaning given to political participation is heterogeneous in the Paraguayan experience. On the one hand, grassroots movements and certain alternative political options have advanced towards deliberative ideals of democracy, as they consider that participation is not limited “to cast a vote in the ballot box and stay home afterwards” (Flecha 2012). On the other hand, the very notion of participation belongs to a different paradigm when it comes to indigenous communities, given that the concept of a party as a fragment of society is foreign to the idea of a community, in the sense that “politics, religion and production almost go hand in hand” (Gómez 2012). Thus, a double limitation is posed to the idea of representation contained in the Paraguayan electoral process: i) although the population is formally empowered to be part of the electoral process, their participation does not necessarily correspond to democratic premises in practice if the electoral preferences result from direct or indirect pressure from political parties and officials, or from the manipulation of the electoral laws or institutions; and ii) the very meaning attached to the electoral process is not culturally representative of the entire population of the country, nor it is politically when it is perceived that the system consistently benefits the traditional political interests.

#### **4. Competition as a determinant of representation**

Political democracy consists of “a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representative” (Schmitter and Karl 1991, 4). On the other hand, the mere existence of competition is not enough to make a system democratic given that it requires competition to be free and fair in order to claim the existence of a polyarchy (Dahl 1971). Taking this into consideration we now review the main traits of political competition in Paraguay, which arguably exists as long as

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<sup>6</sup> Although it's not allowed to divulge the result of polls during the voting process identifying the candidates in competition, the media reports such results and tendencies without naming the candidates or using their nicknames, which often defeats the purpose of protecting the people's right to cast their vote autonomously.

“more than one political actor is involved in political decision-making processes” (Morlino 2011).

It's been observed that the number of electoral options in competition has increased since the institutional democratic opening, in coincidence with the formal guarantee of ideological pluralism and legal equality of political parties (Law 834/96, Art. 14). However, the composition of Congress resulting from the latest general elections shows a system that remains close to an imperfect two-party model<sup>7</sup>, while the effective number of parliamentary parties, calculated from the partisan distribution in the Lower Chamber, is 2.2 (Table 3).

**Table 3: Parliamentary distribution in the year 2015**

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<i>Parties</i>	<i>Senators</i>	<i>Deputies</i>
Asociación Nacional Republicana (ANR)	19	46
Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA)	13	28
Frente Guasú (FG)	5	1
Partido Demócrata Progresista (PDP)	3	-
Avanza País (AP)	2	2
Partido Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (UNACE)	2	
Partido Encuentro Nacional (PEN)	1	2
Independents		1

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Source: Duarte-Recalde and González-Ríos (2016)

In addition to the majoritarian effects produced by the D'Hondt method for allocation of parliamentary seats, the persistence of this historic bipartisanship is greatly explained by the factual difficulties to establish alternative parties representing the different interests of the population, as well as their eventual access to power, due both to formal regulations in this respect as well as to structural factors.

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<sup>7</sup>*Asociación Nacional Republicana (ANR) and Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA) are the two traditional Paraguayan parties founded in 1887, two of the oldest political parties in Latin America. Both parties succeeded each other in power almost exclusively since the late nineteenth century until 1989, though during dictatorship of Stroessner (1954-1989) the ANR became a hegemonic party, exercising ample territorial presence and control of resources (Abente-Brun 2012; Nickson 2014).*

The registration of candidates is responsibility of the Electoral Justice. All Paraguayan citizens over 18 years old are allowed to compete for office, while they must be over 25 years old to compete for Deputies and over 35 years old to compete for Senators or the Presidency. It is possible for independent candidates to compete, as long as they are properly authorized by the electoral institution (Law 834/96, Art. 85). Also, there is legal guarantee for political parties to exist, to register and to operate freely (Law 834/96, Art. 9), which confirms institutionally the democratic and pluralistic nature of the Paraguayan party system. There are few restrictions in place to the work of political parties, which include the ban to get funding from foreign organizations or States, advocating violence or threatening the existence of the National Republic or its democratic nature.

Despite the legal assurances that allow all candidates to compete for public office, admission of new players to the electoral competition has been conditioned by the action of agents from traditional parties. Such agents and their parties possess decades of experience in the management of the public bureaucracy and the electoral processes, and they use that experience to dispute every step the new candidates take –acting as stumbling blocks and legally entitled to do so (Schvartzman, 2012)–. They have the empirical know-how about the electoral process that gives them an advantage even before the competition starts.

Another determinant of the electoral competition concerns access to electoral resources and their lack of extensive public accountability. Although it has been argued that “the corruption of politics by money is a structural feature of democracy in economically unequal societies” (Przeworski 2010, 97) assurances of minimum standards for equality in terms of party financing and campaign expenditures are key to pursue fair electoral competition. Paraguayan legislation stipulates that political parties must report their financial statements regularly to the electoral institution (Law 834/96, Art. 66) and disclose all funds received and campaign expenses. However, there is no established limit to private financing or election expenses, nor there is regulation to exercise public accountability of the campaigns, which gives leeway for “large donations by wealthy individuals in exchange for promises to protect their interests or for places on the party list, thus more generally turning the country into a plutocracy” (Nickson 2010, 296). This laxity of rules concerning funding of parties and candidates impact negatively on the intended equal opportunities for electoral competition that would result in the election of representative authorities, which makes economic power the main determinant of the possibility to compete and ultimately limits transparency and fairness.

All political parties receive public funding directly and indirectly; annual contributions depend on the results of the last general elections, while electoral subsidies are awarded according to the amount of votes obtained (Law 834/96, Art. 276). In addition, it is allowed the use of State media for electoral messages. Also, political parties can obtain private financing as long as they justify the origin of their contributions, only banning reception of funds from any State office, autonomous or independent decentralized entities, mixed-economy companies, bi-national entities, companies that provide services or supplies to the State, foreign entities or individuals, unions, business associations or organizations representing any economic sector, or from individual contributions that surpass the equivalent of five thousand minimum wages (Law 834/96, Art. 282). This possibility to obtain private financial support without restrictions other than those mentioned above bind electoral competition to economic power, so financial strength becomes more decisive than programmatic differentiation.

A key part of the competition determined by the difference in resources is the one related to electoral campaigns. The law establishes freedom to campaign and indicates that there will be free access to three per cent of daily spaces in all mass media outlets for the dissemination of the programs, during ten days prior the closing of the electoral campaign (Law 834/96, Art. 302). However, such free space must be shared by all competing options, so it fails to meet the intended function to effectively promote all parties or candidates as they increase in number.

At the same time, private media in Paraguay has played a key role determining the main trends of public opinion. Media coverage generally favors parties and candidates with better resources and those who share political interests with the media owners. Since the number of owners is limited (López and Zárate 2015) and the media is highly concentrated in “seven groupings dominating the newspaper industry, television, and to a lesser extent, radio” (Nickson 2010, 290), dissemination of information and the framing of key issues are near monolithic.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while the electoral legislation tries to establish certain parameters of fairness for the competition, the results are still linked to prior advantages that some political parties maintain in terms of funding, access to State resources and relationships with the owners of private media.

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<sup>8</sup> There is scarce access to pluralistic sources of information, which is not limited to electoral periods. It has been argued that “six of the seven groupings are controlled by families whose fortunes were made through close links with the Stroessner regime” and who remain among the richest individuals in the country (Nickson 2010, 291). The situation is worsened by the precarious working conditions of journalists, who opt for self-censorship in order to avoid disagreements with their employers and keep their jobs (López and Zárate 2015).

This situation facilitates the perpetuation of the traditional political interests in government in detriment of marginalized social sectors that, although may account to an important electoral force on their own, are not able to access electoral competition in order to engage politically with the rest of the population. Limited access to public office, in turn, configures a type of system of low democratic accountability where “the delegative element overshadows the representative one” (O'Donnell 1994, 61).

## **5. Substantive representation**

Elected authorities maintain independence to rule and to enact policies given the absence of imperative mandate in democratic systems, so the exercise of representative government requires them to act consciously on behalf of the people and in accordance with their interests (Manin 1992). Although *substantive representation* does not necessarily require excluded social groups to access decision making instances to protect their interests (Pitkin 1967), it implies that democratic elected officials should not act in a manner that conflicts with the people's preferences unless it's justified in terms of their objective interests, or without a clear explanation of why their positions differ.

The problem of political representation increases in complexity when taking into consideration the social heterogeneity in Paraguay and the weakness that characterizes civil society. Benjamín Arditi and José Rodríguez (1987) already addressed this issue when analyzing the dictatorial government, indicating that society as a whole –and cultural minorities in particular– lacked any real impact in the political agenda or the implementation of public policies. Diego Abente-Brun has also contended that the organization of popular interests faced structural challenges in Paraguay, as the rather traditional socioeconomic structure of the country “hinders the emergence of collective actors capable of developing a collective identity and thus of making a universalistic impact on the political process” and that the “lack of social articulation in a large part of the population favors the emergence of clientelistic politics” (Abente-Brun 2007, 16), constraining the development of social citizenship in Paraguay.

Although democratization changed the potential power of social collectives for agenda setting through electoral competition or unconventional participation –to engage in societal accountability “by exposing and denouncing wrongdoing”, imposing “symbolic sanctions” or as a means to “activate the operation of horizontal mechanisms” (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000, 152)–, minorities are still discriminated against

politically despite the State's responsibility to guarantee equal rights to the people.<sup>9</sup> In this sense women, rural communities and indigenous communities appear to be social groups that have not achieved *substantive representation* in Paraguayan democracy, as their interests have remained unprotected by the different parties that have had access to executive and legislative posts throughout the democratization period, either at national or local level.

In what comes to women, their inclusion to the Paraguayan political arena in terms of gender equality is a pending issue. While it's been asserted that women have equal civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights as men, and that the State is responsible for promoting the conditions to make equality effective (National Constitution, Art. 48), the first barrier to women's political participation relates to the lack of implementation of public policies aimed towards alleviating historical disparities among genders.<sup>10</sup> The legislation establishes a quota system that indicates that one in every five candidates in primary elections should be a woman (Law 834/96, Art. 32), although there are no established rules about placement of candidates in the lists and each party or movement is free to set the order of precedence. There are no set quota requirements for closed lists that compete at the national or municipal level, although some political parties implement them voluntarily, generally establishing a 30% quota for women on their electoral lists (Pereira and González 2008).

Furthermore, it has been claimed that such quotas don't reflect the country's political reality, where women lead the work done with the political bases: "it's really amazing how women are organized throughout the country, in rural as well as in urban areas (they say there are more than five thousand women organizations nationwide)" and "grassroots mobilization rests on the shoulders of women and they are the ones that move the whole community" (Schvartzman, 2012). Thus, while it's perceived that political groundwork is carried out largely by women and that there's assimilation of a par-

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<sup>9</sup> The Paraguayan State has been historically weak and the provision of social welfare has been linked to the work of the ANR party since the dictatorial period, which also gives this party comparative advantage in electoral terms.

<sup>10</sup> A recent salient example of discriminatory policy enacted by the government towards women relates to the legislation that regulates domestic work (Law 5407/15), an economic activity typically done by women. Enacted in response to years of activism of social organizations representative of such interests (Maciel and Zub Centeno 2015), this law made progress in the protection of labor rights for domestic workers such as the right to retire with a pension, to work up to eight hours a day, to rest on weekends and holidays, to get paid for working overtime, to achieve job stability, to unionize, as well as banning employment of children, among others. However, while this law established for the first time a legal reference for the salary appropriate for domestic work, it states that it's worth only 60% of the national minimum wage.

ticipatory political culture among women collectives in the whole country, their importance doesn't translate to the competition level. As a result, in the last general elections women achieved only 18% of seats in Chamber of Deputies and 20% in the Senate, while in the latest municipal elections only 26 out of 250 new majors elected were women,<sup>11</sup> accounting for 10.4% of the total.

Another social group that has not been able to achieve *substantive representation* concerns the indigenous people.<sup>12</sup> Legislation contains provisions for their inclusion to the national political life, constitutionally recognizing their cultural preeminence prior to the formation and organization of the Paraguayan State. Their insertion to the political life is valued by the Constitution, as it claims to guarantee their right to participate in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the country, in accordance with their customary uses as well as the national laws (National Constitution, Art. 65). Indigenous representatives are legally capable to join the electoral process and compete to achieve public office, either by organizing their own political movements or by promoting participation of their members in existing political parties that could acknowledge indigenous demands as their own. In spite of such institutional intent, however, the electoral *praxis* remains alien to the world view of indigenous peoples in Paraguay given that they don't assimilate the idea of the national State as their own, as it is a foreign structure to them (Gómez 2012).

Similar to women, indigenous communities tend to be marginalized from public policies. Until recently, social programs and poverty alleviation measures didn't contemplate indigenous communities as part of their focalization strategies, while policies related to land restitution –that would benefit them directly– are not implemented (Ayala 2015). Lack of government attention to their needs is related to the lack of self-identification of these communities as subjects of the rule of law, given that awareness about their rights, on the one hand, and government accountability related to those rights, on the other, are a fairly new notion to them and it's not always present among the different communities (Gómez 2012).<sup>13</sup> This fragmented relationship between in-

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<sup>11</sup> Most of these women majors belong to the traditional parties ANR and PLRA, while only two represent alternative political movements (Duarte-Recalde and González-Ríos 2016, 308).

<sup>12</sup> According to the National Indigenous Census of 2012 there were 117150 indigenous people living in Paraguay that represented 1.8% of the total population of the country. They are distributed among 19 ethnic groups, 91.3% of which are settled in rural areas.

<sup>13</sup> Power structures that do have an impact on these communities are predominantly religious groups or organized criminal groups, the latter ones even committing acts of aggression against the people with total impunity (Gómez 2012).



indigenous communities and the Paraguayan State coincides, moreover, with the lack of cultural understanding of the indigenous peoples by the rest of the population.

The State recognizes the indigenous right to communal ownership of the land in sufficient extension to preserve and develop their particular lifestyles; it's constitutionally stated that the State is responsible for the free provision of the lands, which shall be banned from commercial exchange and exempt from taxes (National Constitution, Art. 64). The "Paraguayan Indigenous Institute" (INDI, in its Spanish initials) is the institution responsible for safeguarding the interests of indigenous communities, which include procurement of the indicated land to be destined for their subsistence. However, their work has been obstructed by institutional errors<sup>14</sup> as well as administrative limitations beyond their control. Landowners' reluctance to sell back to the State the lands originally belonging to indigenous communities adds to the lack of legislative initiatives to support indigenous claims of restitution, which denotes poor representation of indigenous fundamental needs.

Paraguayan democracy has also failed to achieve *substantive representation* of rural communities, whose demands have been mobilized by peasant organizations. Rural communities have lived in poorer conditions than their urban counterparts throughout the democratization period<sup>15</sup> (Nickson 2011; Duarte-Recalde 2015), remaining particularly susceptible to economic shocks of an eminently agro-exporting productive structure. Although peasant grassroots movements have been politically mobilized since the 1990s, their demands stand in opposition to those of soybean farmers represented by the *Cámara Paraguaya de Exportadores de Cereales y Oleaginosas* (CAPECO) –who also emerged as "a powerful stakeholder" group during the 1990s– and those of the *Asociación Rural del Paraguay* (ARP), an organization of cattle-ranchers with strong ties to the traditional parties who "have become accustomed to a high rate of return on capital as a result of noncompliance with the limited rural land taxation and the non-payment of minimum wage and social benefits to their workers" (Nickson 2010, 290).

The breakdown of a rural subsistence economy in the country dates back to the 1970s, which coincided with the expansion of mechanized agriculture specialized in cotton production; this process led to the installment of the agro-exporting business model as an unchallenged scheme, limiting smallholder farmers' productive autonomy

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, this institution sold twenty-five thousand hectares of land belonging to the Ayoreo people in the year 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Poverty levels and income inequality remain consistently higher in Paraguayan rural areas (Duarte-Recalde 2015); 32.49% of the rural population remained under the poverty line in 2015, compared to 15.44% of the urban area and 22.24% of the entire country.

as they increasingly faced difficulties to access credit (Palau 2009).<sup>16</sup> Their deepening economic vulnerability shaped their decreasing power to exercise influence over traditional political parties, whose leaderships maintained close ties with powerful stakeholder groups, making their *substantive representation* through these parties a fallacy. Furthermore, peasant organizations are now criminalized for their activities as social movements that seek to enact social accountability in a democratic context.<sup>17</sup>

Peasant movements have had prominence in setting the political agenda in recent years, promoting discussions about the need for land reform<sup>18</sup>, the elimination of unproductive latifundia<sup>19</sup> or, more recently, the use of toxic products for agriculture (Fogel 2009).<sup>20</sup> They have done so through means of unconventional participation without necessarily adopting anti-system stands, acknowledging the electoral process as a strategic option to achieve their goals that can be used eventually (Flecha, 2012).

Advocating the idea that “a collectivity governs itself when decisions implemented on its behalf reflect the preferences of its members” (Przeworski 2010, 18), Paraguayan peasant movements' main objections to the electoral process relate to their perception

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<sup>16</sup> Tomás Palau (2009) indicated that social conflict in the Paraguayan countryside broke out in the late 1980s as a direct result of the decline of cotton prices on the international market, which left smallholder farmers without the means of subsistence.

<sup>17</sup> There are numerous reports of murder, torture and cruel treatment of peasant protesters as a result of clashes with the police. These clashes are part of the decades-long struggle for access to land in the county, linked to the concentration of 85.5% of agricultural land in 2.6% of farms (Palau 2009) and the existence of more than seven million hectares of ill-gotten lands –public lands distributed during the Stroessner regime and successive ANR governments to people who didn't qualify as beneficiaries of the land reform according to the Agrarian Act (CVJ 2008)–. According to the Chokokue Report of the Human Rights Coordinator of Paraguay, between the years 1989 and 2013, 115 members of peasant grassroots organizations have been executed or disappeared (CODEHUPY 2014).

<sup>18</sup> The Constitution declares that agrarian reform –effective incorporation of the peasant population to the national economic and social development– is a key factor to achieve rural well-being. In order to achieve the reform there shall be equitable systems of distribution, property and tenancy of the land in place, promotion of credit for farmers, as well as technical, educational and sanitary assistance, the creation and promotion of agricultural cooperatives and similar associations, and the production, industrialization and rationalization of the market for the integral development of the sector (National Constitution, Art. 114).

<sup>19</sup> In turn, the Constitution also states that in order to progressively eliminate unproductive latifundia, the law will attend to the natural aptitude of the lands, to the needs of the population linked to agriculture and desirable specifications for the balanced development of agriculture, farming, forestry and industrial activities, as well as to the sustainable use of natural resources and the preservation of ecological balance (National Constitution, Art. 116).

<sup>20</sup> Ramón Fogel (2009) finds relation between the use of such chemicals and the rising mortality rates, birth defects or spontaneous abortions in the area where they are applied, based on data by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare.

that work done by traditional political parties doesn't reflect popular interests. Policies implemented by the elected governments throughout the democratization period have arguably intended to avoid an agrarian reform that would benefit large parts of the population and have supported the vested interests of agro-industrial businesses in detriment of those of rural families, so peasant organizations remain skeptical about how representative elected officials truly are. Thus, while the Paraguayan political system's institutional design is based on democratic principles and formally allows broad political participation of the population in the definition of their collective destiny, structural and cultural inequalities with historical roots stand as barriers to the equitable participation of various social sectors in the electoral process, undermining political equality and the principle of democratic representation contained in the system.

## **6. Final remarks**

Democratic electoral accountability, as a mechanism of citizen control over the government, endures in Paraguay since 1998. While this mechanism has determined the procedural democratic nature of the political system, it has also allowed the continuous representation of political interests established during the dictatorial regime by the elected governments. Not only have traditional parties and their vested interests remained in control of the political system with partial turnover of political actors, but entire communities have remained marginalized from exercising influence over public policy. Thus, political citizenship remains limited in practice as social collectives face material and cultural constraints that inhibit their capability of taking part in the electoral process, hindering the regime's democratic quality and the representative nature of the Paraguayan government.

Though the institutional framework of the electoral system is based on democratic principles, the uneven enforcement of electoral rules allow informal practices to define political behavior, while lack of punishment for transgressions benefits political sectors accustomed to taking advantage of institutional loopholes. Practical knowledge about the workings of the system is supported by few limits on campaign spending and lax rules concerning the financing of parties and candidates, which adds to the historical social inequalities that ultimately limit popular access to the electoral process. Thus, the intended equality expressed by the institutions is not mirrored by systemic conditions for equitable participation or competition. It would be fundamental to continue an analysis about the exercise of political power in Paraguay, besides the access to

power here presented, in order to further assess the way democratic representation is restricted through the actual workings of the State bureaucracy in this country.

The representative quality of democracy in Paraguay is limited because citizens have the legal opportunity to participate in the process of promoting and electing authorities but only part the population is fully able to do so. There is lack of conversion of organizational grassroots experience by women, indigenous or rural collectives into electoral options. Societal accountability initiatives don't appear to be effective instruments of control of public officials either, as there isn't evidence they would act out of fear of the penalties civil society might inflict on them beyond the electoral process. Hence, procedural democracy in Paraguay results in weak *descriptive* and *substantive* representation of the country's social heterogeneity which, in turn, results in scarce public policies targeted to the needs of marginalized social groups.

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