

Social representations of democracy in Colombia: a dimensional and territorial approach

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Acceso abierto diamante

Abstract

The objective of this study was to understand the organizing principles of the social representations of democracy in higher education students in Colombia, and their anchoring in sociodemographic and territorial variables. In three periods of time (2010, 2012 and 2017) students at university and technical/technological careers (total number: 12,171) from the 32 capital cities of each department in Colombia responded to a Scale of Social Representations of Democracy (ERSD) and to a list of sociodemographic variables. In a macro-level analysis, departmental averages of Democracy Balance were crossed with macro indicators of crime, extreme poverty, life expectancy and indigenous population percentage. Results show a seven dimensions factorial structure without significant relationships with age, gender or social class. At a macro level, regions with a high proportion of indigenous population showed a more positive evaluation of democracy over time, while higher crime rates are associated with a more negative evaluation of democracy.

Keywords: SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS, DEMOCRACY, INDIGENOUS POPULATION, CRIME, SOCIAL FABRIC.

Introduction

Democracy, forms of political participation, social mobilizations in the decade 2010-2020, somehow interrupted by the isolation measures due to Covid19, generates an important academic reflection in Latin America, expressed in a relatively high academic production from different perspectives in Mexico (Fernández-Poncela, 2018; Jiménez-Yañez, 2020), Peru (Goñez Cruz & Cueto Saldívar, 2022; Rosales Zanabria & Guillén Zambrano, 2022) or Chile (Pleyers, 2023).

This topic, democracy, has also been approached from the theory of social representations (Tileagă, 2013; Howarth et al., 2014) since it meets several of the characteristics attributed to objects susceptible to give rise to social representations: it has implications in social life, influencing relationships between people and communities and is related to social identity. Thus, we find works that study democracy in Mexico (Tapia & Salazar, 2021), in Greece (Magioglou, 2003), or with international data, such as the work of Grecu (2021) with aggregate data from 34 countries. On the other hand, also in Latin America we find studies based on the theory founded by Moscovici. For example, Bruno and Barreiro (2015) studied social representations of democracy in Argentinean adolescents, using the free association of words technique, finding that the central core is composed by terms such as vote, freedom, equality, rights or participation, with “freedom” and “equality” being also central core elements of the representation of democracy in young Latin Americans (Ruiz & Pineda, 2021), while among Chilean university students (Herting & Chacaltana, 2017) they seem to differentiate a representation of democracy in general in positive terms (including again, terms such as freedom and equality in the hard core) from a more negative vision when democracy is referred to the Chilean context itself. In this case, the terms most frequently associated with Democracy in Chile were “inequality”, “right” and “injustice”. This differentiation between a social representation of democracy in an abstract, positive or idealistic sense and a negative social representation of democracy in specific contexts, associated with contexts of economic crisis or corruption, has been found in other studies (Magioglou, 2003).

In the case of Colombia, there is also a body of works based on the theory of social representations about democracy, most of them taking young people, high school or university students as samples or participants and using qualitative techniques such as open-ended questions, group interviews or free association of words. Thus, Díaz (2005), through a questionnaire of open-ended questions studied this topic in young people participating in a training process on democracy, while Osorio (2009) studied citizen participation through a questionnaire and a focus group with members of a Local Administrative Board (JAL, formal entity whose members are elected by vote among neighborhood residents for the management of community affairs), and a hydroelectric plant, in relation to the provision of energy service to the community, thereby showing that democracy and participation go beyond the scope of political elections, although the latter has been the topic most frequently addressed in research published in Colombia. In this line, Rondón and collaborators (2014) used interviews to investigate the social representations of democracy in students from two universities in the department of Santander (Colombia), while Hernández López (2018) used open-ended questions with high school students in Bogotá, and other authors used free association of words as an initial data collection strategy (Caballero et al., 2020; Ayola Betancourt, 2021). Within this framework, it is worth highlighting a study on democratic participation focused on a Colombian indigenous community, the Wayuu, since there are few psychosocial studies that include participants from indigenous communities in Colombia (Márquez-Ramírez, 2019). On the other hand, although less frequent, there have been studies that have used Likert-type scales instead of associative or interview techniques, to study the social representations of democracy in Colombia (Ruiz et al., 2016; Humanez, 2021), while the work of Rondón and collaborators (2014) integrates both qualitative techniques such as interviews and focus groups with the use of a Likert-type scale.

Elsewhere (Ruiz-Pérez & Pineda, 2021) we have stated that dissatisfaction with democracy can lead citizenry sectors to devalue their country’s democratic system and opt for political options that promise

security or employment to the detriment of civil liberties. In this regard, the government or political parties are associated with corruption in several Latin American countries (Caballero et al., 2020; Humánez, 2021), while fear of crime can lead to a negative perception of the police and the judicial system, with effects on distrust in the social fabric (Ruiz-Pérez, 2019), opening expectations for political options related to a tough line against crime.

In this framework, and taking into account the armed violence history that Colombian society has suffered for decades, violence that is still in force, and that most studies on social representations of democracy in Colombia have been carried out with relatively small samples, transversally and in a single municipality or department, the objective of this study aims to show a quantitative, broad territorial scope, and longitudinal overview of social representations of democracy in the young Colombian population.

Methodology

Participants

The survey was applied to university and technical and technological career students in three different periods: 2010, 2012 and 2017, as shown in Table 1. Most of the students were women in the three applications, partly because the most frequent type of studies among this population was psychology, and in Colombia this is a career mostly studied by women than men. For the whole of the years, it is found that the sample is made up of young people and, consequently, single. In the same way, most of the participants perceive themselves as lower class in correspondence with the socioeconomic reality of the country. Students come from both, universities and training centers in technical or technological careers of two to three years' duration. However, for the 2017 survey wave, most of the participants were pursuing a university degree, this, due to the difficulty of accessing samples of technical or technological careers. On the other hand, while university students come from different universities distributed throughout the country, most technical career students belong to the same institution, the National Learning Service (SENA, for its acronym in Spanish), which is public and has branches in all capital cities as well as in medium-sized municipalities.

Table 1

Year:	2010	2012	2017
N	4073	3891	4278
Mean Age (SD)	21.7 (4.4)	22.3 (5.5)	22.06 (6.01)
% women	62.0	70.5	58.5
% singles	85.2	80.7	82.8
Low social class	60.4	62.5	61.6
% university students (versus technical careers)	47.2	51.4	60.4

Sociodemographic and Economic Status of samples per year:

Instrument

Participants make up a non-random sample and responded to a survey composed of several sections about the perception of the social fabric. For the purposes of this survey, the Social Representations of Democracy Scale (ERSD, Ruiz et al., 2016) is highlighted, which consists of 20 items in Likert format on different aspects of democracy, with 4 response options: from "Total disagreement" (1) to "total agreement" (4). From this scale, and in addition to the item-by-item analysis, three scores are obtained: positive aspects of democracy

(with scores between 1 and 4), negative aspects of democracy (with scores from 1 to 4) and, from the subtraction between the previous ones, the “Balance of democracy” is obtained, with possible scores between -3 and +3. Negative scores indicate that more negative than positive aspects of democracy in Colombia are perceived, while positive scores indicate that more positive than negative aspects are perceived. By opting for the use of a closed scale on democracy SRs, the present study is mainly located in the quantitative and multidimensional perspective proposed by the Geneva School (Doise et al., 1992).

On the other hand, the survey included questions on sociodemographic variables: age, gender, marital status, socioeconomic status, type of studies (university or technical), major and semester.

This study also presents macro-level analyses based on the average calculation of the Democracy Balance for the sample of each department (32 cities, including Bogotá) and its cross-checking with a series of macro indicators of Colombian society:

Extreme Poverty Population Percentage: data for 23 departments of Colombia (Cepeda et al., 2019)

Life expectancy (Expansión, s/f).

Crime rates based on data on arrests for crimes at the departmental level, from the Colombian National Police, weighted per 100,000 inhabitants (Colombia National Police/Policía Nacional de Colombia, 2011, 2013, 2018).

Indigenous Population Percentage at departmental level. From the 2005 population census (National Administrative Department of Statistics, 2007). This variable was included because in several departments of the country the indigenous or Afro-descendant population constitutes from 40% to more than 80% of the total population of those departments. Specifically, the population belonging to one of the indigenous or native peoples of Colombia had a strong presence in the departments of Amazonas (43.43%), Vichada (44.35%), La Guajira (44.94%), Guainía (64.90%) and Vaupés (66.65%), almost all of them in the Colombian Amazonian area, bordering Venezuela or Brazil. Due to the strong ethnic social identity of these communities, it is possible that conceptions of democracy could present some particularity in these territories, where the current president of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, had important support in the Colombian presidential elections (Wallis, 2022).

Data Analysis

First, the ERSD dimensional analysis was carried out by means of confirmatory and exploratory factor analysis, in addition to internal reliability calculation according to factors found. Next, the difference in Democracy Balance was analyzed, according to the participants sociodemographic level, age and gender. Following, Democracy Balance is projected in a georeferenced manner at the departmental level, and Spearman correlations are established between the Democracy Balance departmental average with macro indicators.

Bioethical considerations

Implementation of each of the survey waves (2010, 2012 and 2017) followed specific instructions requested to the Colombian College of Psychology (COLPSIC) and general principles of seeking beneficence and non-maleficence of Law 1090 of 2006 for the practice of Psychology, and in COLPSIC’s Bioethical Manual of Psychology (2017).

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in this research.

Results

ERSD Dimensionality

From the initial study by Ruiz-Pérez and collaborators (2016), the aim is to find the same factorial structure, which is shown in Figure 1. In this regard, confirmatory factor analysis yields moderate results: CFI: 0.865; TLI: 0.840, RMSEA: 0.0764 (90% CI 0.075 . 0.078), SMRS: 0.060, χ^2 : 10824/144= 75.17, p <.001.

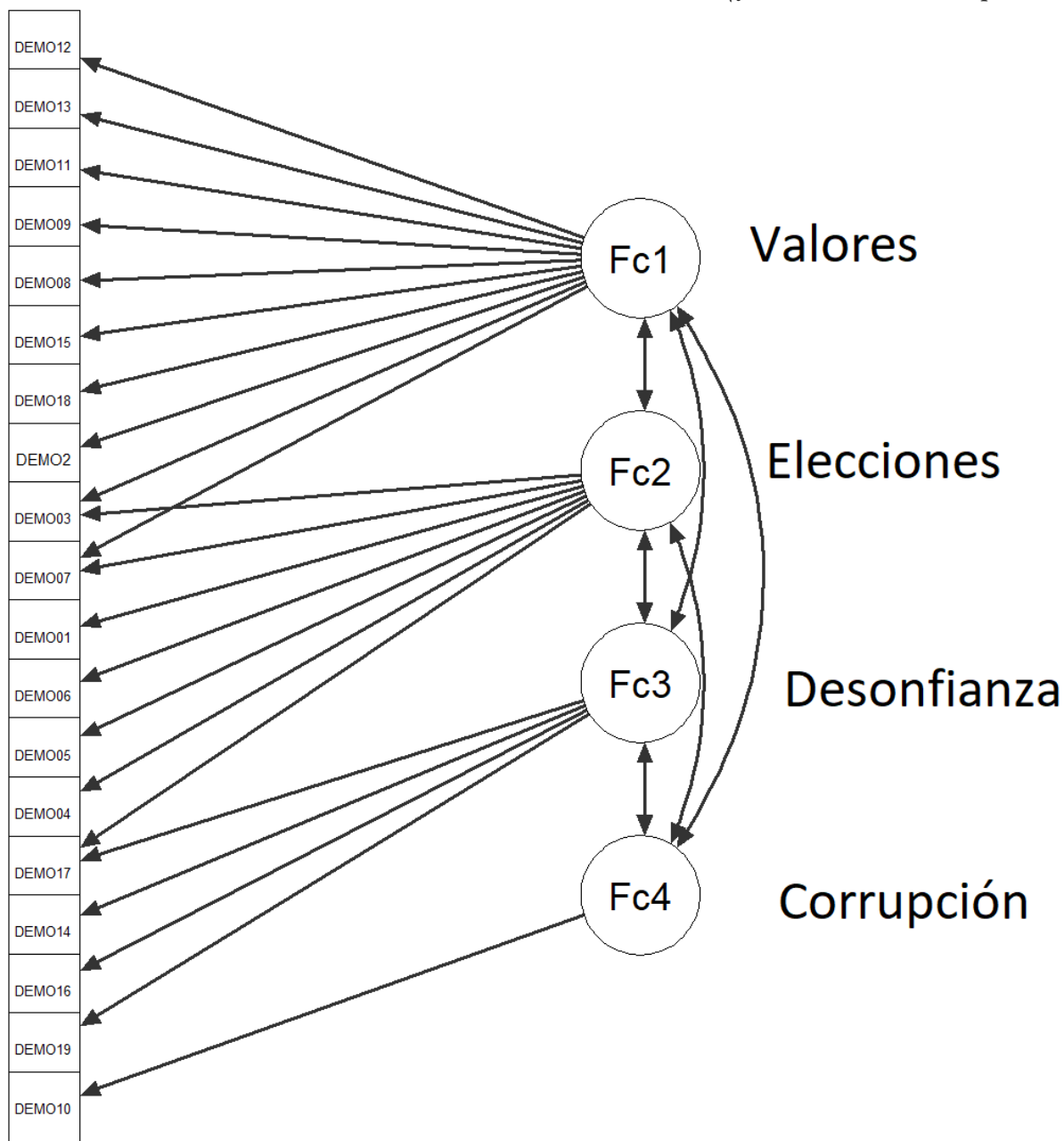


Figure 1.
Expected ERSD dimensional model (Ruiz-Pérez et al., 2016).

Given these results, which indicate a low fit to the model, an exploratory factor analysis of the scale was carried out, with parallel analysis and maximum likelihood extraction method and promax rotation. Coefficients that support the exploratory analysis were: KMO: 0.925 and Bartlett's test of sphericity χ^2 (190): 23.15, p <.001. Regarding coefficients of the resulting factorial model, a TLI value was obtained: 0.974, BIC: 159, RMSEA: 0.032 (90% CI 0.030 – 0.034), with χ^2 /df: 816/79=11.49, p <.001.

The factor solution obtained is seven factors, which explain 50.9% of the variance. Regarding its composition, it largely corresponds to the structure found by Ruiz-Pérez and collaborators (2016), although with more factors and fewer items per factor (see table 2). For the entire scale, a high internal reliability is found, with a Cronbach α : 0.824 and a coefficient ω : 0.854, with the recoding of items of factors 6 and 7.

Table 2.

Item	DV	EL	FS	BD	PP	DD	CD	Uniqueness
DEMO13	0.938							0.293
DEMO12	0.866							0.318
DEMO11	0.667							0.423
DEMO15	0.347		0.306					0.524
DEMO02		0.937						0.337
DEMO01		0.694						0.466
DEMO03		0.606						0.484
DEMO04								0.689
DEMO20			0.785					0.405
DEMO18			0.634					0.479
DEMO17			0.395					0.639
DEMO08				0.831				0.306
DEMO09				0.719				0.347
DEMO05					0.736			0.622
DEMO06					0.667			0.432
DEMO07				0.387	0.395			0.524
DEMO16						0.657		0.616
DEMO14						0.641		0.604
DEMO19			0.344			0.390		0.621
DEMO10							0.450	0.690
Eigenvalue	2.59	1.73	1.61	1.59	1.14	1.06	0.47	
% Variance	12.95	8.62	8.07	7.96	5.69	5.28	2.34	
Cronbach α	0.837	0.751	0.678	0.757	0.624	0.55		
ω	0.84	0.761	0.689	0.77	0.632	0.563		
Mean	2.81	2.85	2.73	2.57	2.63	2.44	3.21	
SD	0.74	0.75	0.70	0.75	0.71	0.70	0.98	

SRDS Exploratory Factor Analysis and Internal Reliability

Note: DV: Democracy values, EL: Elections and Laws, FS: Freedom of Speech, BD: Benefits of Democracy, PP: Political Power, DD: Distrust in Democracy, CD: Corruption of Democracy.

Thus, the first factor called Democracy Values, covers references to values such as equity, loyalty, equality, justice and freedom. The second factor, Elections and Laws, refers to democracy as a system of elections, rights and duties translated into laws based on the Constitution, and values to organize the future of society. For its part, the third dimension highlights expressive aspects of democracy, such as the expression of freedom and diversity that translates into representations in parliament. The fourth factor refers to Benefits of Democracy, such as social harmony, well-being, tranquility, autonomy, while the Political Power factor includes items that refer to politics and the results of the work of politicians. Finally, the last two factors bring together negative aspects of democracy, such as that democracy does not really exist or is a form of control to maintain inequality (Distrust in Democracy factor), or is seriously affected by corruption (last factor).

Sociodemographic and territorial anchoring of democracy

One-way ANOVAs were calculated to cross factorial scores saved from the preceding analysis, with gender and age grouped into intervals. In relation to gender, the Kolmorov-Smirnov test was significant for all factorial scores indicating with this, that such scores are not normally distributed: KS, between 0.014 for the seventh factor, with $p < .05$, and 0.044, with $p < .001$ for the other six factors. On the other hand, Levene's statistic to compare variances homogeneity was not significant for any of the factors. And as for the means comparison, Table 3 shows comparison statistics without practical differences between men and women because, although the latter associate democracy more with elections and laws and with corruption, the effect sizes are not significant for any factor.

In relation to Age, there is a tendency for older participants to score higher in the Democracy Values dimension, participants between 31 and 40 years old, in “Political Power”, and young people between 21 and 30 years old, as well as people over 41 years old in Distrust in Democracy. However, at the effect size level, differences between age groups on democracy are marginal (see table 4).

At the social class level, a low effect size (η^2p : 0.007) is found in the corruption factor, with higher scores in people from a high social class (Mean: 0.1668, SD: 0.958, n: 531), followed by the middle class (Mean: 0.1013, SD: 0.967, n: 3557), and the lower class (Mean: -0.0524, SD: 1.006, n: 5913), for an $F(2, 1464)$: 34.04, $p < .001$. In other words, lower social class participants have a more positive social representation of democracy, considering that it is less affected by corruption than other social classes.

Table 3.

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	EE	F	η^2p
Democracy Values	Women	6484	0.01139	1,004	0.0125	1.44 ns	0.001
	Men	3721	-0.01323	0.993	0.0163		
Elections and Laws	Women	6484	0.02562	0.991	0.0123	7.94**	0.001
	Men	3721	-0.03250	1,009	0.0165		
Freedom of Speech	Women	6484	0.00729	0.995	0.0124	0.72ns	0.001
	Men	3721	-0.01014	1,005	0.0165		
Benefits of Democracy	Women	6484	-0.01080	0.992	0.0123	1.47 ns	0.001
	Men	3721	0.01426	1,014	0.0166		
Political Power	Women	6484	0.01640	1,001	0.0124	3.57+	0.001
	Men	3721	-0.02249	1,001	0.0164		
Distrust in Democracy	Women	6484	-0.00561	1,008	0.0125	0.55ns	0.001
	Men	3721	0.00958	0.983	0.0161		
Corruption	Women	6484	0.02669	0.983	0.0122	5.77*	0.001
	Men	3721	-0.02305	1,021	0.0167		

Democracy Dimensions and Gender: ANOVA

Note: SD: Standard Deviation; EE: Error estimation; η^2p : Effect seize Squared partial Eta.

+ $p < ,010$; * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 4

	Age	N	Mean	SD	EE	F (3, 552)	η^2p
Democracy Values	14-20	4995	-0.01683	0.967	0.0137	4.13** Levene: 5.25***	0.001
	21-30	4427	-0.00132	1,030	0.0155		
	31-40	470	0.11753	1,036	0.0478		
	41-60	140	0.18311	0.980	0.0828		
Political Power	14-20	4995	-0.04652	0.982	0.0139	7.90*** Levene: 3.78**	0.002
	21-30	4427	0.04752	1,010	0.0152		
	31-40	470	0.07660	1,047	0.0483		
	41-60	140	-0.04525	1,126	0.0952		
Distrust in Democracy	14-20	4995	-0.03083	0.989	0.0140	6.37*** Levene: 1.45 n.s	0.002
	21-30	4427	0.03026	1,007	0.0151		
	31-40	470	-0.05515	1,023	0.0472		
	41-60	140	0.24297	0.960	0.0811		

Democracy Dimensions and Age.
 Note: SD: Standard Deviation; EE: Estimation Error, η^2p : Squared partial Eta.
 ** p <.01 *** p <.001

In relation to territorial anchoring, that is, the projection of the samples average of the departments in Colombia in the Democracy Balance for each period covered in this research, Figure 2 is obtained.

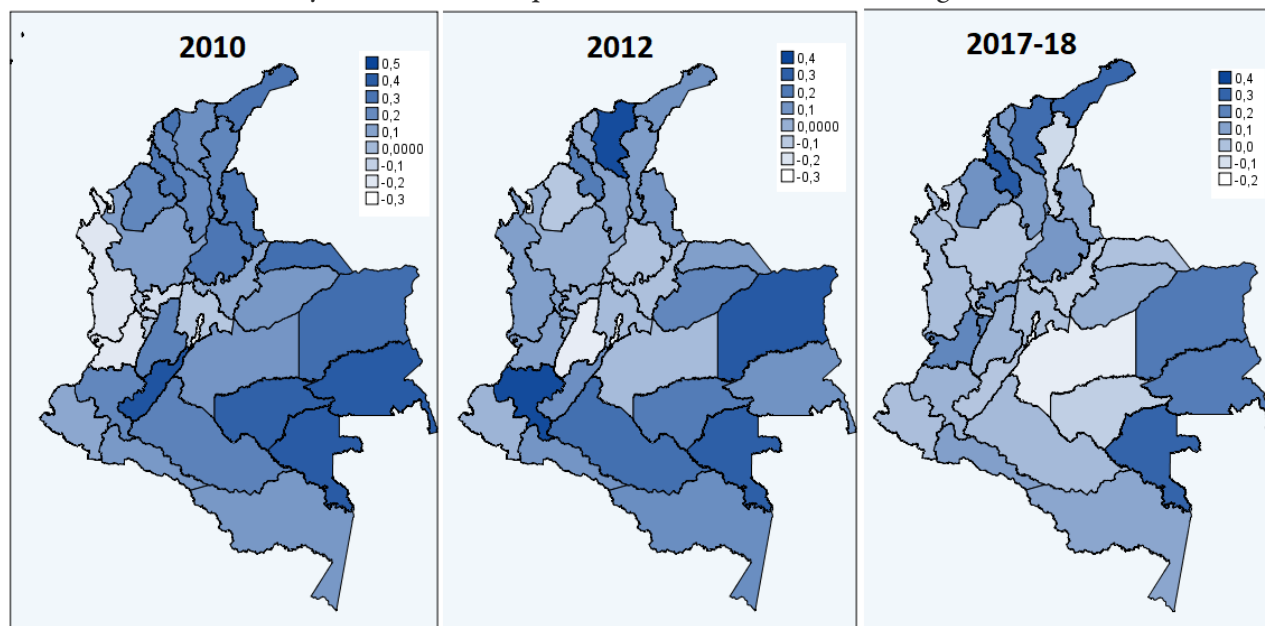


Figure 2
 Democracy Balance Indicator Georeferencing at departmental level in Colombia.
 Note: darker areas indicate a more positive balance of Democracy SRs.

It must be remembered that the samples from each year are not random and therefore, results are difficult to compare. Despite this, a certain coincidence is found between each period in several regions with a more positive perception of democracy, particularly in the eastern departments of Vaupés, or Vichada. As for the departments with the most negative evaluation (lighter tones), for 2010, western Colombian departments stand out, such as Valle del Cauca and Cauca, areas of presence of various armed groups at the time, including drug trafficking organizations. For 2012, the department with the most negative balance is Tolima, towards

the center of the country, with a strong presence in previous years of paramilitary groups. For that year, Colombia was experiencing many expectations with the beginning of peace talks between the government chaired by Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC guerrilla, which could explain that there were fewer areas of very negative perception of democracy. By 2017, these positive expectations of peace had partially transmuted into disappointment, because even though the peace process began, certain FARC fronts withdrew from the peace process, contrary to the agreement signed by the central committee of that organization, and armed violence intensified in several regions of the country, including the appearance and strengthening of the so-called Criminal Gangs (BACRIM), which in reality were paramilitary groups of a mafia nature that were nourished by former paramilitary combatants who had participated in processes demobilization in the years 2003 to 2006.

Correspondingly, relationships between Democracy Balance departmental averages and crime, poverty and ethnic composition macro indicators were analyzed using Spearman correlations (n: between 23 and 32). Results are shown in table 5.

Table 5

	2010	2012	2017
% Population in extreme poverty (n=23)		0.455*	
Life expectancy (n: 32)	-0.341+	-0.494**	
Security crime rate (n: 32)	-0.426*		
Drug crime rate	-0.421*		
Theft rate	-0.421*		
Sexual crime rate			0.371*
Crimes against freedom rate	-0.408*		
% Indigenous population		0.478**	0.383*

Correlations between Democracy Balance and crime, poverty, life expectancy and indigenous communities' presence indicators, in years 2010, 2012 and 2017.

+ p <.010; * p <.05 ** p <.01

In general, although there are no stable correlations between the indicators over the years, the significant correlations are consistent with the processes that can socially affect democracy perception. Thus, for 2010, higher crime rates are related to a more negative democracy assessment. For 2012 and 2017, a higher percentage of indigenous population is related to a more positive democracy assessment. These regions, with a greater presence of indigenous peoples, have a lower level of socioeconomic development than other areas, including large Colombian cities such as Bogotá or Medellín. Also, these indigenous presence regions have suffered the action of all kinds of armed groups, in relation to attempts to forced recruiting for their youth, plunder of their natural resources, population displacement in relation to the presence of said armed groups, for the purpose of land dispossession, coca leaf crops planting and/or the establishment of drugs transportation and control of corridors in the territory. Finally, the positive relationship between rates of sexual crimes and balance of democracy in 2017 may be a spurious result of the highest recorded rate of sexual crimes in indigenous communities in Colombia, which may be related to the worldview of indigenous peoples regarding the relationship between women and territory (DE Justicia, s/f) or by action of armed actors themselves (Canal Laiton, 2023).

Discussion and Conclusions

Social representations of democracy seem to be organized around six dimensions, following the approach of Doise and collaborators (1992), highlighting democracy constitutive values, electoral devices, democracy benefits or diversity expressiveness allowed by democracy in the election of its representatives. However, it also

presents negative aspects, connecting with Maggioglou 's (2003) finding that an idealistic democracy vision can coexist with negative visions when that democracy is grounded in the national context. Thus, although Distrust in Democracy dimension (which includes conceptions that democracy does not really exist or that it is a mechanism to control people and maintain inequalities) presents the lowest average, corruption dimension (mono-factor item) has the highest level, coinciding with Latin American indicators on the discredit of political and judicial institutions related to corruption (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018).

On the other hand, macro-level correlations confirm what other studies have shown, that is, the negative influence of crime on the valuation of democracy (Valencia & Cuartas, 2023), although these relationships are not found for all periods covered in this investigation. In this regard, it should be noted that several crimes experienced a decrease in the 2012 period compared to 2010, in police statistics (National Police of Colombia, 2011, 2013), but there is no evidence that there was a real decrease in said crimes or that it was a decrease in the effectiveness of the police in capturing criminals.

On the other hand, the positive relationship between indigenous population rate and a more positive assessment of democracy may reflect the possibility that minority groups in Colombia, such as indigenous peoples, see that democratic mechanisms allow them quotas for representation and political participation that allow them to overcome and change historical conditions of inequality, discrimination and violence suffered, caused by the different violent actors of the armed conflict in Colombia.

Finally, it is worth mentioning some limitations of this research. On the one hand, the Balance of Democracy averages georeferencing at the departmental level masks the fact that such averages generally come from non-random samples of the capitals, that is, they are not samples drawn from the entire department: capital, intermediate cities and/or rural areas. In this sense, georeferenced maps and their usefulness are based on data quality, of which may present biases (Ruiz-Pérez, 2014) such as those identified here. All in all, macro-level analyzes allow connecting people's social perceptions and representations with objective contextual variables that may have remote origins, such as the armed conflict and crime rates that affect the social fabric of Colombia.

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Información adicional

Correspondence Author: José Ignacio Ruiz-Pérez, email: jiruizp@unal.edu.co. This paper was funded by project No. 33745-2017 registered at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, and by a grant from Young Researchers Program of the Ministry of Science and Technology of Colombia.:



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dimensional and territorial approach**

PSOCIAL

vol. 9, núm. 2, 2023

Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina

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/ **ISSN-E:** 2422-619X