The role of Macrosocial Structures, Political Institutions, and Elites in the Process of Autocratization in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Objective: To explore the causal factors of democratic decline in Ecuador during the period 1996-2019, with a focus from 2007 onwards, paying attention to the levels of social reality: structures, institutions, and political actors. Methods: Based on the political sociology approach, the multivariate techniques of Co-inertia and Statis were applied, using three tables with sets of variables from each level of social reality. Their joint variance was analyzed. The observation units were each year of democratic regime governance, aggregated into the country-year unit. Results: Both Co-inertia and Statis give greater explanatory weight to the variables of political actors in the process of democratic decline, distinguishing three sets of variables that explain three different government periods of the decline. Discussion: The electoral variety of democracy contradicts the egalitarian variety in the Ecuadorian case. Statis has a greater capacity to represent the variance of the variable tables. Conclusions: Statis and Co-inertia highlight the influence of actors. There is a critical juncture in 2007-2008 related to electoral democratic decline and an increase in egalitarian variety. Radical parliamentary elites and most of the president's party influence the decline, while the radicalism of parliamentary elites is related to an increase in equality and the Human Development Index, especially in 2009-2012.

Keywords: Democracy, Democratic decline, Political elites, Co-inertia, Statis

Introduction

Democratic decline is a current phenomenon in the twenty-first century, the literature enunciates it as "third wave of global autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) although they have questioned whether every democratic decline is linked to a historical wave (Tomini, 2021), this observation gained strength when in the third wave of democratization identified by Huntington (1994) there were deviant cases after the end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe that the wave did not explain. Therefore, instead of pigeonholing all countries in a global trend, it is called for attention to authoritarian trajectories in similar geographical or historical cases or regions (Cassani & Tomini, 2019). Ecuador was identified as a case of accelerated democratic decline in the *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem) reports (Maerz et al., 2020), as well as an iconic case of the Latin American region both in its autocratic trajectory between 2006 and 2016 as well as for its ability to return to previous democratic standards in 2017 (Cassani & Tomini, 2020). However, here it will be addressed temporarily until 2019 to assess whether the decline continued after Rafael Correa's periods of Government.

The explanations of the case have ranged from factors of the international community and external interests (de la Torre, 2017, 2018), as well as to the economic and institutional structural conditions of erosion of horizontal responsibility (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Ulloa, 2017; de la Torre, 2013), as well as Rafael Correa's personalistic strength as a charismatic leader in alliance with political elites (Bull & Sánchez, 2020; Sanchez, 2022; de la Torre, 2019; Freidenberg, 2012), as well as in the electoral strength of the re-elections of presidential leaders that limit the alternation of power to the point of caudillismo in the trajectories of power administration within the framework of the political cycle of the turn to the left in Latin America (Torrico & Diego, 2019; Treminio Sánchez, 2019; Sánchez López & García Montero, 2019). The following is a summary of the main arguments linked to the variables of the three levels of social reality: structures, institutions, and political actors.

Structural Variables

Variables related to the economic and structural conditions of a country are addressed. These variables include economic inequality, international cooperation, foreign debt, among others. Economic inequality is debated as a factor that can lead to both democratic decline and the strengthening of democracy. It also considers the distribution of wealth and its impact on support for authoritarian leaders and regimes. In addition, the relationship between the Human Development Index (HDI) and democratic decline is observed, and it is suggested that countries with medium human development may experience democratic decline earlier than poorer or richer countries (Przeworski, 2019; Epstein et al., 2006; Boix & Stokes, 2003; Cheibub et al., 1996; Przeworski, 1981).

Institutional Variables

Political institutions and their role in democratic decline are analyzed. It examines the relationship between parliament and the president, as well as the control of parliament through parliamentary majorities or governing coalitions. In addition, the importance of coercive state capacities, including alliances with the Armed Forces and repressive apparatuses of the state, is highlighted. It also considers the bureaucratic state capacity to extract resources and improve the well-being of the population through economic policies and the quality of service of public officials (Croissant & Pelke, 2022; Fortin-Rittberger, 2014; Hanson, 2018; Hendrix, 2010).

Stakeholder Variables

Actors are considered political elites and have a central role in the decline of democracy. According to some research, it is the actors and their mobilization based on rational calculation or normative preferences about democracy that explain the political process of democratic decline or its sustainment. The parliamentary elites' support for democracy and their radicalism are cited as determining factors in the electoral variety of democracy (Bull & Sánchez, 2020; Thiébault, 2018; Dargent, 2014; Freidenberg, 2012). The main objective of the study is to measure the relationship between these variables and democratic decline in Ecuador during the period 1996-2019. A specific definition of democratic decline based on the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) is used. The varieties of egalitarian and participatory democracy are also included as control variables (Bohigues, 2021a).

Method

The analytical framework of political sociology is used, which looks at factors from sociology and political science in independent variables or causal conditions to explain the dependent variable or outcome (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Sartori, 1969). In addition, three levels of social reality are addressed (Sztompka, 1995a): A) the structural level where there are macro-level variables such as international cooperation that does not depend on local actors or citizens, B) the medium level that addresses national and institutional variables such as spending on the armed forces or state capacity. and C) the micro level that observes the actors understood as political elites. The method of political sociology sets in motion and analyzes the interaction between the levels of social reality (Sztompka, 1995b), as well as between variables of sociology and political science (Sartori, 1969). In order for this interaction to be clearly shown, two multivariate statistical techniques were chosen that allow the analysis of covariance between the different levels and fields of the social sciences: Co-inertia and Statis. Co-inertia comes from biology whose purpose is to analyze the relationship between species and environments in various types of climatic floors (Chessel & Mercier, 1993). Based on previous applications in other fields of science (Bady et al., 2004; Culhane et al., 2003; Dray et al., 2003), here it is proposed to use co-inertia in a creative and innovative way to analyze the relationship between the levels of social reality (structures, institutions and actors). In summary, co-inertia allows us to find the common structure of two groups of variables based on Escouvier's Rv coefficient (Robert & Escoufier, 1976). Co-inertia allows us to identify the maximum shared variability between the set of variables in one table and the other, the high values (>.70) indicate that the two structures vary simultaneously, directly or inversely, and it is low or null when the structures vary independently or do not vary. In the case of the data of the present research and given that the technique allows the analysis of only two pairs of tables, a cross was made between the variables of actors and structures (act. x est.), institutions and structures (inst. x est) as well as actors and institutions (act. x inst.).

On the other hand, Statis is a multivariate technique that allows a 3-way analysis, i.e. three tables with different groups of variables (L'Hermier des Plantes, 1976). In addition, its versatility allows the same number of

individuals, measured on the same set or different variables, to be analyzed at different times; even different individuals with the same set of variables at different times. Again, the previous application in other fields of science such as mathematics, ecology, biology, computing or education (Bauz-Olvera et al., 2019; Caballero-Juliá et al., 2017; Ramos et al., 2021; Ruiz-Toledo et al., 2022; Taranto-Vera et al., 2021) offer a guide to using this technique creatively and innovatively in the social sciences. Here it is no longer analyzed by pairs of sets of variables, but a matrix of vector correlations is found between the matrices, they are decomposed based on the vector correlations to project them in a low-dimensional subspace (biplot) and a consensus matrix is calculated as a weighted average, this presents the distribution of the individuals according to their relationship with the groups of variables. At the end, their trajectories should be analyzed according to vector projections in the low-dimensional subspace. The result is a table of vector correlations between the k-tables expressed by the Rv coefficient of Escoufier (1976). Then, the relationship between the groups of variables and the distribution of individuals in the consensus table is analyzed. In the present research, each k-table collects variables from each level of social reality: structures, institutions and actors, and the observations are each year of government in a country.

Sources of Information

The main sources of information are presented in the following table, which indicates the level of reality to which it theoretically belongs according to the literature of political sociology, as well as its theoretical-analytical dimension, the name of the variable and the abbreviation that was used to visualize in the software

Table 1. Variables of the levels of social reality*

Level	Dimension	Variable	Abbreviation	Fountain
Structure	International enclave of the regime	International cooperation	coop.int	World Bank
Structure	International enclave of the regime	External debt	deu.ext	World Bank
Structure	Economy and development	GDP per capita	pib.c	World Bank
Structure	Economy and development	Inequality	gini.w	World Inequality Database
Structure	Economy and development	Human Development Index	idh	PNUD
Institutions	Quality of Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy Index	edi	V-Dem
Institutions	Participatory democracy	Participative democracy component	d.part	V-Dem
Institutions	Egalitarian democracy	Egalitarian democracy component	d.ig	V-Dem
Institutions	State Powers	Balance of power	eq.p	Polity5
Institutions	State Powers	Legislative with presidential majority	leg	Election results
Institutions	State Powers	Duration of the scheme	t.dur	Polity5
Institutions	Coercive capacities	Coercive capacity	pib.mil	World Bank Military expenditure (% of GDP)
Institutions	Coercive capacities	Security Capability	in.seg	World Bank Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people).
Institutions	Infrastructural capacity	Effective Government-Degree of Bureaucratization	bur1	World Bank
Actors	Executive Elite	Presidential Re-Election	re.pres	Election results
Actors	Executive Elite	Political alternation	alt	Alcántara, Buquet y Tagina (2018)
Actors	Parliamentary Elite	Political alternation	elt.a	PELA-USAL
Actors	Parliamentary Elite	Political radicalism (polarization)	rad	PELA-USAL

* Data were scaled to have similar units. Thus, the values expressed in billions of dollars of foreign debt can be compared with the indices of democracy ranging from 0.01 to 1.00.

Information Processing

Each database was compiled in its original version established by each institution, then the data were transferred to an Excel file to systematize the data and order them according to the theoretical orientation of the levels of social reality. Once the database was ready for the research on democratic decline for the Ecuadorian case, the "Multibiplot" software (Vicente-Villardón, 2015) from the Department of Statistics of the University of Salamanca was used, as well as the "R" software with the RStudio version 2023.06.0+421.In the case of co-inertia, both softwares were used to obtain the algebraic results, but only Multibiplot was used to elaborate the graphs. In the case of the Statis, R was used exclusively.

Results and Discussion

Co-inertia: Institutions and Structures

The co-inertia analysis yielded the following results for the crossover between institutions and structure. Escoufier's Rv coefficient of vector correlation between X and Y is close to 0.7 (0.63), indicating shared covariance. It doesn't exceed the theoretical threshold, but it doesn't go low either. The p-value of the Monte-Carlo test is <0.05 (0.001), that is, there is enough statistical evidence to affirm that there are significant differences, so "H0" is rejected, which says that there is no co-structure between X and Y, "H1" is accepted, which indicates that there is co-structure. Based on the first two eigenvectors, 99.53% of the shared variance can be explained, which guarantees a good representation (Figure 1 & 2).
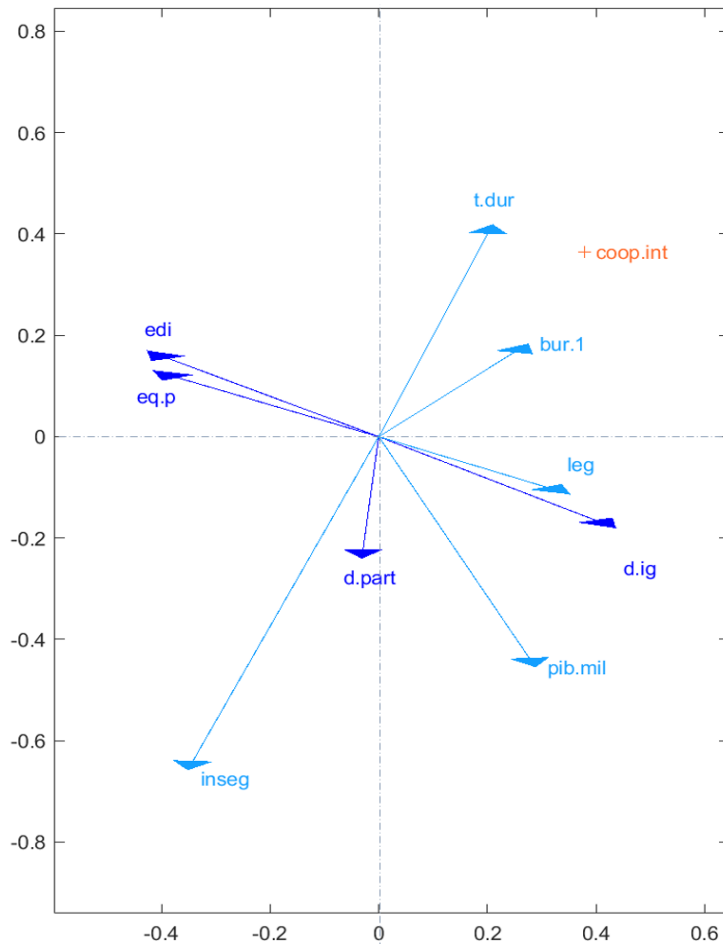

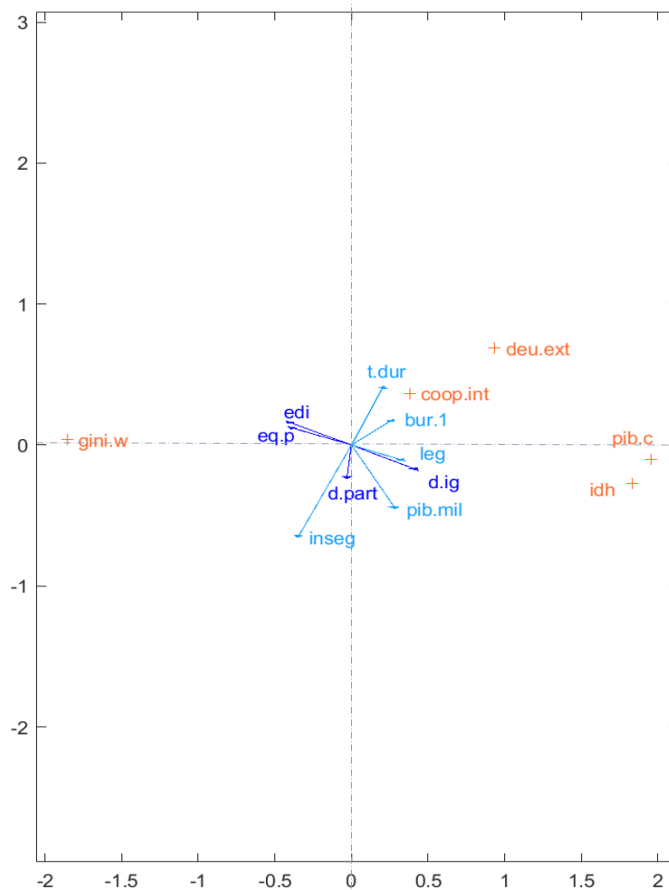Figure 1. Biplot of institutions and structure, focus on institutions.

Figure 2. Biplot of institutions and structure, total vision.

High values in electoral democracy (EDI), which indicate democratic quality, are strongly correlated with the balance of power variable (eq.p); At the same time, the structural variable of inequality (GINI.w) also increases with these institutional variables. On the other hand, egalitarian democracy (e.d.) is negatively and inversely correlated with electoral democracy and the balance of powers. While it is positively and directly correlated with a legislative with a partisan majority of the ruling party (leg), while it has a positive but not as strong correlation with the percentage of GDP for the military (pib.mil). These last institutional variables present high values together with the economic structural variables of GDP per capita (GDP) and the Human Development Index (HDI). Insecurity (in.seg) and participatory democracy are slightly correlated, the vector of the latter is very low. On the other hand, insecurity is negatively and inversely correlated with the duration of the regime (t.dur), where it stands out that the external debt presents structurally high values that coincide with the years that a regime lasts.

Co-inertia: Institutions and Actors

The representation of the vectors remains the same for the variables of the political actors, with the exception of pib.mil and d.part. The edi and eq.p are associated with high values in alternation (alt), while d.ig and legi are associated with the radicalism of parliamentary elites (rad) and presidential re-election (re.pres). In addition, the triplot (Figure 4) shows that two periods of government are presented with these two combinations of institutional and actor variables. The 2013-2016 period is inversely correlated with electoral democracy and the balance of powers, but the egalitarian variety of democracy increases, as well as the power of the president's party in parliament, while there are high values in the radicalism of parliamentary elites and presidential re-election.

The 2017-2019 period constitutes a transformation of the regime from an egalitarian democracy to an electoral one, based on the support of the parliamentary elites for democracy, accompanied by GDP for the military, as well as the bureaucratic quality of the institutions and the duration of the regime. The period 2009-2012, which theoretically also belongs to the decline, does not present higher average values to affirm that it clearly belongs to a set of variables, but it is associated more with the period 2017-2019 than with 2013-2016.
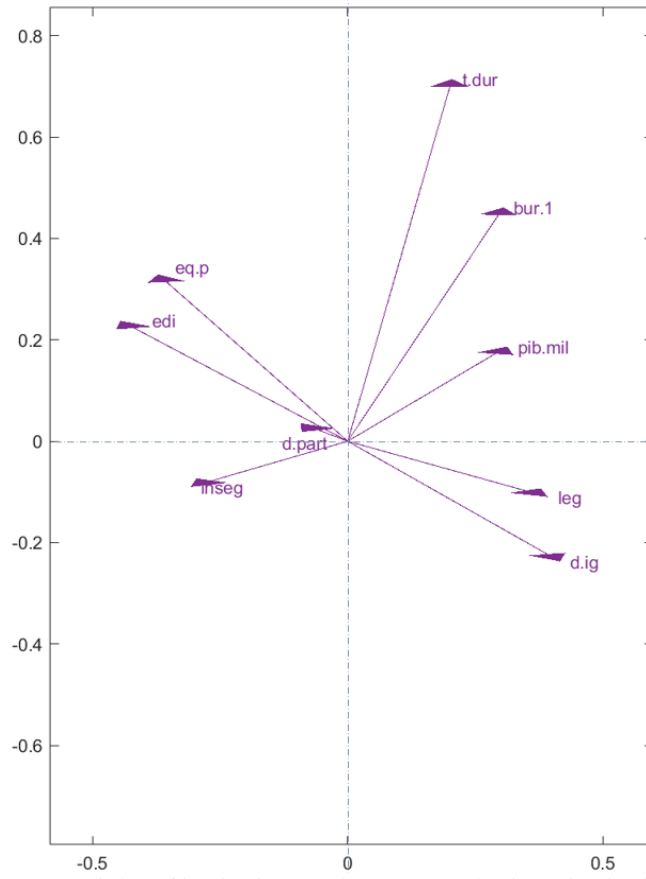
Figure 3. Biplot of institutions and actors, emphasis on institutions.
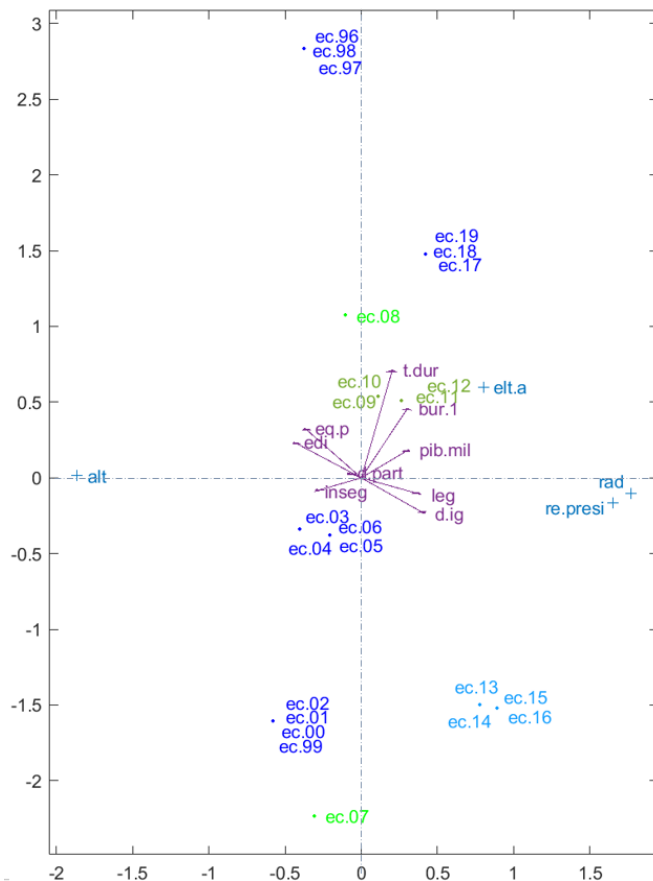

Figure 4. Triplot of institutions and actors, total vision (includes country-year).
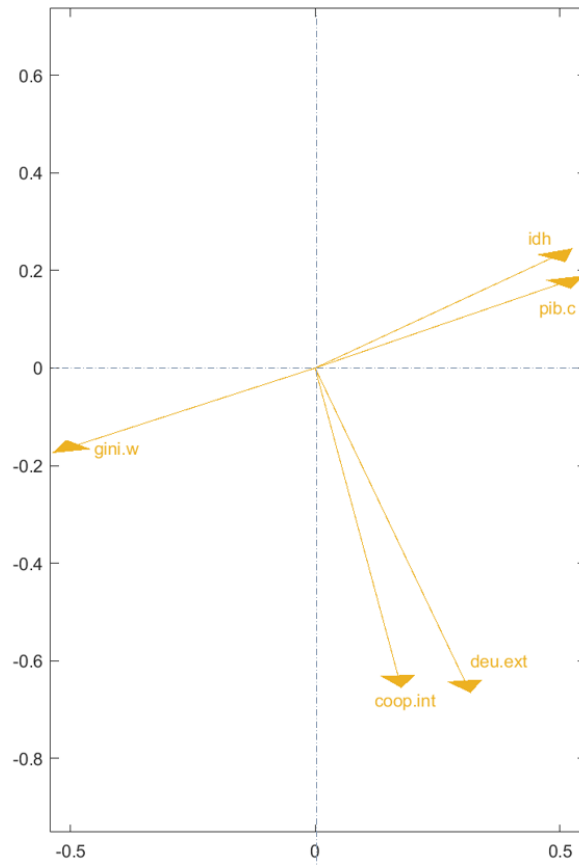
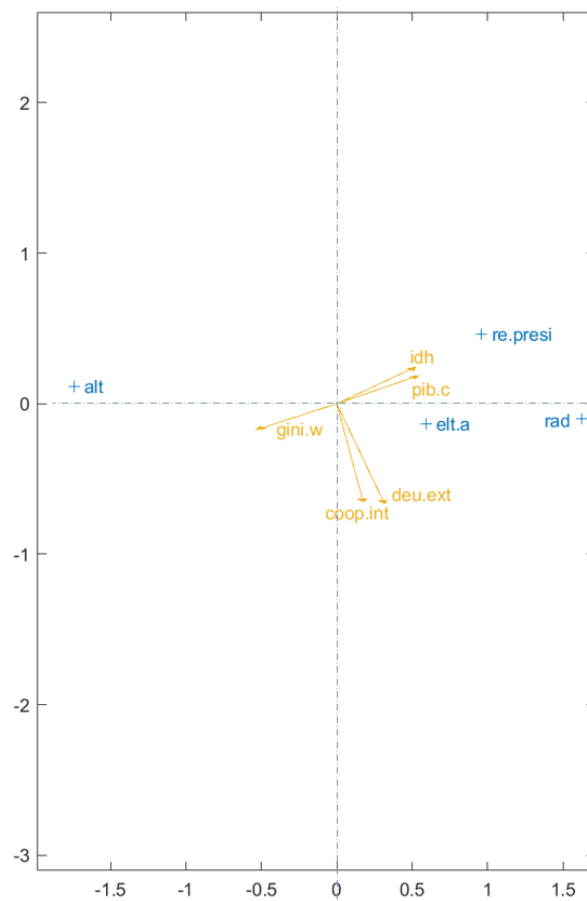Figure 5. Biplot of actors and structures, emphasis on structures.

Figure 6. Biplot of actors and structures, total vision.

Co-inertia: Actors and Structures

Escoufier's Rv coefficient of vector correlation between X and Y is greater than 0.7 (0.75), indicating high shared covariance. The p-value of the Monte-Carlo test is <0.05 (0.001), i.e. there is sufficient statistical evidence to reject "H0" of non-co-structure between X and Y, "H1" of self-co-structure is accepted. Based on the first two eigenvectors, 99.8% of the shared variance can be explained, which guarantees a good representation (Figure 5 &6).

There is a direct positive correlation between the HDI and GDP, which is associated with high values of re.pres and rad, while the a.g.s has values that are low than the average to establish a strong relationship with HDI and GDP. That combination is contrary to gini.w which is associated with high alt values. Thus, the radicalism of parliamentary elites and presidential re-election are associated with the Human Development Index and the increase in GDP per capita. On the other hand, inequality increases when political alternation also increases. The variables coop.int and deu.ext are strongly correlated, but they are unrelated to either of the other two groupings of variables. This would indicate that the variables linked to international relations are not affected by local actors, nor are they directly related to the variables of the national economy in the period analyzed.

Statis

According to the analysis of the 3 joint tables with the Statis technique, Escoufier's Rv coefficient for crossovers between actors and structures is 0.92, between actors and institutions is 0.93 and between institutions and structures is 0.89. All cases show high values that indicate similar structure between the levels of social reality. The values of cosine2 (>.90) and the weights of each k-table (>0.50) are also high, which guarantees a good representation to construct the commitment figure. Regarding the interstructure, the first 2 components explain 98.12% of the variance of the k-tables. In the commitment, the first 2 components explain 88.32% of the variance. In all cases, the variance explained is high.

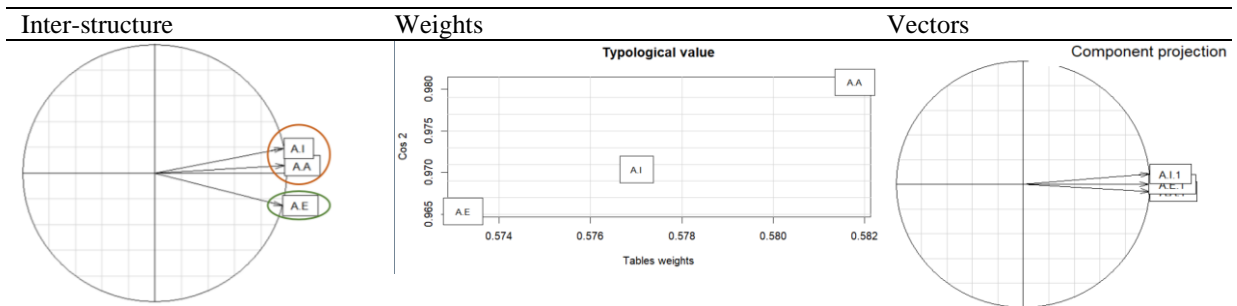Figure 7. Statis: interstructure, weights and vectors

Figure 7 shows a higher correlation between agent and institution k-tables. The weights that contribute the most to the commitment are the variables of the actors. And the extension of the eigenvectors shows that the three k-tables are well represented because they go all the way to the edge of the projection in the vector graph.
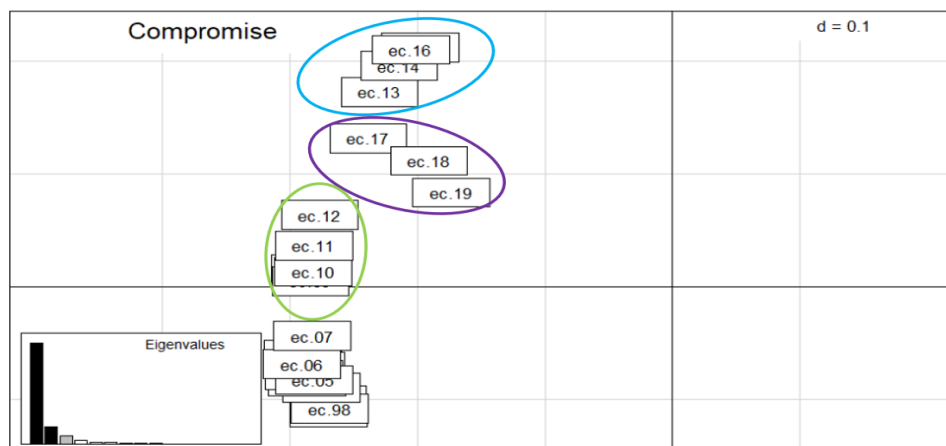

Figure 8. Statis: Compromise

The representation of commitment distinguishes the cases of Ecuador's democratic decline on the axis of the X's, period 2009-2019, while distinguishing them by their typology in three sub-periods of each government: 2009-2012, 2013-2016 and 2017-2019. The time period 1996-2008 appears indistinguishable in the commitment, this period would be the democratic one, while the 2009-2019 period would be the one of decline, with its sub-processes.
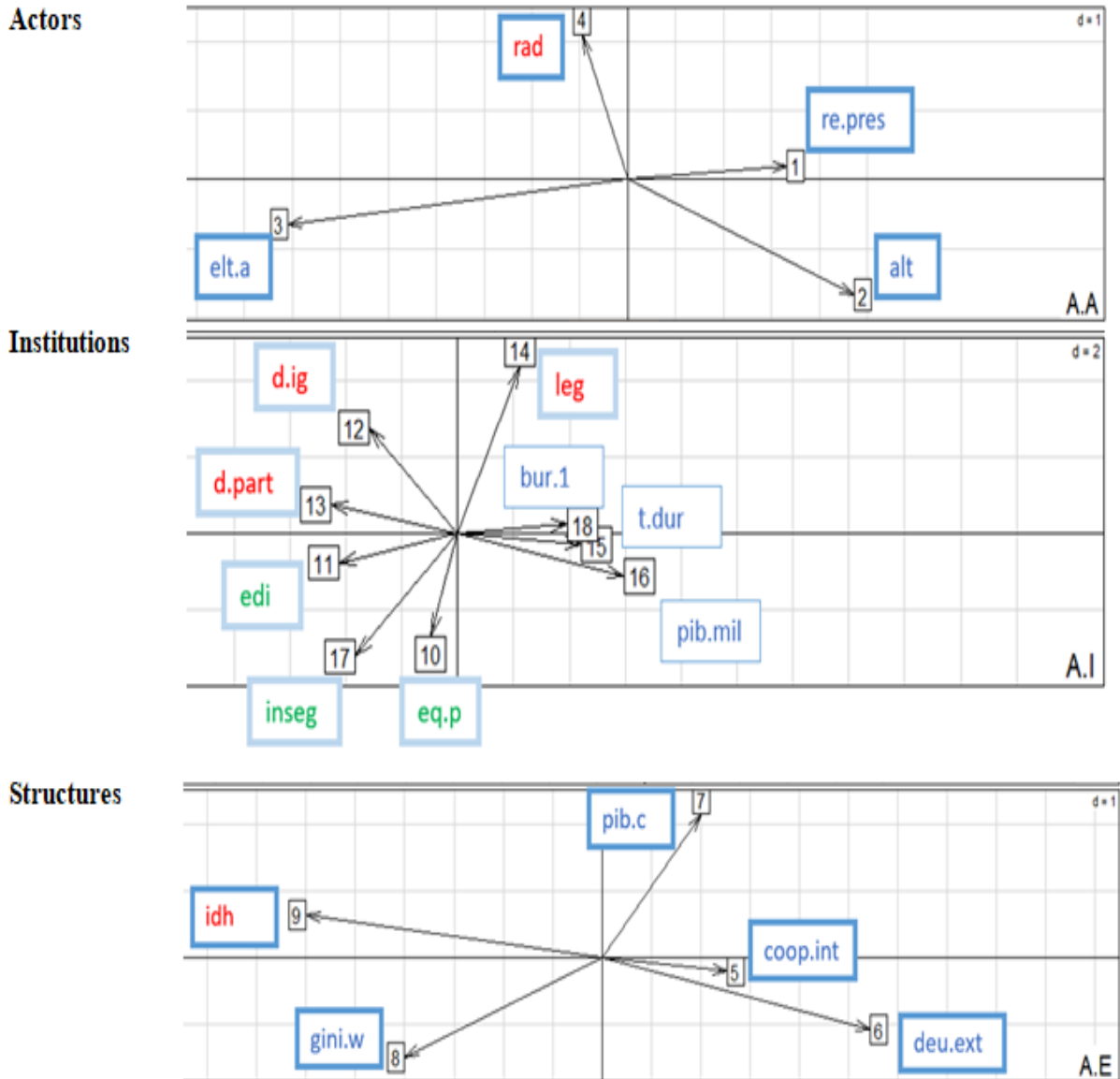

Figure 9. Statis: intra-structure of each k-table

For the interpretation of each intra-structure of each k-table, which here represents each level of social reality, attention must be paid to the position of the individuals (country-year). Based on these joint positions, the relationship between the levels and the country-year observations is established. Episodes of democratic decline present above-average values in the radicalism of parliamentary elites (rad), in the Human Development Index (HDI) and in the varieties of egalitarian democracy (d.gi) and participatory democracy (d.part).

The years with the highest quality of the electoral democracy variety present higher values in their average in the support of parliamentary elites for democracy (elt.a), balance of state powers (eq.p), as well as high values in insecurity (in.seg) and high inequality (gini.w). Regarding the period, 2009-2012 presents high values in hdi, and partially high in d.part and d.ig, although the latter would not be above average. The period 2013-2016 presents high values in rad and d.ig, as well as leg. In the 2017-2019 period, there is no direct correspondence to a particular variable, but it would belong globally to all those described in the two previous periods.

Specific Discussion

Review and Comparison of Statistical Techniques

Regarding the contribution of statistical processes, the Statis technique better represents the variables of the actors in the interaction of the levels of social reality and the country-year observation units, this may be associated with the partial scaling of the data in R that take the values of each level and not the data of all the joint tables. This methodological decision was made because the quality of the representation in the explained variance is higher with this scaling, especially in Escoufier's Rv coefficients, although the percentage of the explained variance in the components of the interstructure did not increase significantly. By placing each level of variables at the center in all the years of observation, the technique puts the actors at the center of the explanation of reality, with higher values in the weights for the commitment, which in turn distinguishes very well the periods of Ecuadorian decline.

When the scaling was total, the variables that best represent the model were the structural ones. This may indicate that when all the values of the k-tables are taken, the structural variables better model the variations of the institutions and actors in the political processes, even if the quality of representation of the country-year observations is lost. However, since all the values in the model are better represented by partial scaling, the decision was made to use it for analysis. Thus, in the interaction between the levels of reality, these calculations reinforce the argument that actors are the ones who guide changes in political processes (Gerschewski, 2023; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2023, 2013; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016), as well as the relevance of parliamentary elites (Alcántara, 2021; Bohigues, 2021b, 2021a) to explain the decline, which also better describe the changes in each country-year unit, as well as in the ideal analytical unit of government periods.

On the other hand, co-inertia only expresses a moderately high Rv coefficient at the crossover between institutions and actors, a little lower between actors and structure, and much lower than the theoretical value even between institutions and structure. Unlike Statis, here it is not possible to compare with the types of scaling of the data, but in any case, the crosses of the k-tables with the structural variables are the ones with the lowest values in the Rv coefficient, which leaves the variables of the actors at the center of the explanation with the highest values in global terms. Again, this reinforces theoretical arguments about the relevant role of actors in explaining changes in political processes (Gerschewski, 2023; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2023, 2013; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016), as well as the relevance of parliamentary elites (Alcántara, 2021; Bohigues, 2021b, 2021a) to partially explain the decline. However, co-inertia only represents well the period of Ecuadorian decline from 2013 onwards, leaving 2009 to 2012 unrepresented.

Discussion on the Levels of Social Reality

Both Statis and Co-inertia show that the values in the k-table with the variables of the actors best express the explained variance of the changes in the social process of democratic decline. In both techniques, the country-year observation units are distributed in such a way that the units with high values in electoral democracy are located on one side of the axis and the low values on the other. However, when it is controlled for the varieties of egalitarian and participatory democracy, a debate opens about the distribution of observation units.

Electoral democracy is inversely correlated with egalitarian democracy, and neither is related to participatory democracy, according to the representation of co-inertia. On the other hand, with Statis only electoral and participatory democracy are slightly correlated, while egalitarian democracy is related, but to a much lesser extent, to varieties of democracy. It is only when interpreted with country-year units that these relationships can be better analyzed.

The period 2009-2012 is the expression of the decline in the quality of the democratic regime, but at the same time it is close to the participatory variety, which includes the year 2008 that coincides with the process of the Constituent Assembly and an applied participation of civil society in Ecuadorian politics; at the same time, the Human Development Index rises markedly. The period 2013-2016 expresses the decline of electoral democracy deeper, but at the same time greater egalitarian democracy; At the same time, the parliamentary elites were radicalized in parliament and the ruling party had an absolute majority. Finally, the 2017-2019 period of decline is in an intermediate position because, although according to the descriptive data it has a recovery in the electoral variety of democracy, it does not recover the values prior to 2009, but neither does it increase the values in the egalitarian or participatory democratic varieties. This temporal description is valid in both the representation of Statis and Co-inertia.

The period of decline that is least easy to characterize is 2017-2019, this is because there is no evidence of a radical change in the average values of the three varieties of democracy. It is likely that there is a "path dependency" at the critical juncture of the years 2007-2008 that marks a trajectory of democratic decline in its electoral aspect that, although the Ecuadorian institutional variables show resilience in 2017, they do not manage to recover but decline again until 2019. And one element to be widely debated is how that same critical juncture correlates negatively with the egalitarian variety, because this contradicts one of the democratic principles that indicates that for there to be full democracy all citizens must be equal. In any case, Ecuadorian electoral democracy shows a positive correlation with high levels of inequality, and although the same critical juncture managed to reduce this structural variable until 2016, there seems to be another "path dependency" that drags high levels of inequality among Ecuadorian citizens, and in the face of this reality it seems that the resilience to generate equality is not good in the case of Ecuador since 2017.

Finally, it only remains to reiterate the relationships previously established in the literature of sociology and political science with respect to institutional variables. Electoral democracy correlates very well with the balance of state powers, as well as with political alternation, which are the foundations of democracy institutionally understood. While radical elites (both on the right and on the left) along with the ruling party's control of parliament (an indicator against the balance of powers) correlate positively with the egalitarian variety of democracy. These observations are valid for the global period of decline from 2009 to 2019, and the interaction with the variables of social reality was previously described period by period of government. In this exploratory research, the values of the years after 2019 were not taken because the Covid_19 generate values that are too extreme, however, an exploration of other multivariate techniques to solve this dilemma is still pending.

Conclusion

The actors show a high explanatory power of the changes in social processes linked to the democratic decline of the Ecuadorian case, in the period 2009-2019, this statement is valid with the results obtained with the multivariate techniques Statis and Co-inertia, although the first shows better quality of shared variance explained expressed by Escoufier's Rv coefficient. Likewise, both techniques characterize very well the electoral democratic variety of the period prior to the democratic decline: 1996-2006. The years 2007 and 2008 represent a critical juncture that would have formed a "path dependency" that motivated the decline of electoral democracy, but at the same time the increase of values in the egalitarian democratic variety, which shows that these two varieties are inversely correlated in the Ecuadorian case, while there is no statistically significant information to establish a relationship with the participatory democratic variety. Regarding the latter, it is necessary to check whether it is directly related to the critical juncture of 2007 and 2008, although it could be related to variables not considered in this exploratory work.

The variable of the actors directly related to the democratic decline is the radicalism of the parliamentary elites, while the institutional variable related to this process is most of the legislators of the president's party in parliament; This set of variables is contrary to the institutional variable of the balance of powers and to the variable of the actors of political alternation.
On the other hand, the variable of the actors that is related to the increase of egalitarian democracy is the radicalism of the parliamentary elites, and it is also related to the increase in the Human Development Index, which coincides with the theoretical notion of equality, although this last statement is more valid for the period 2009-2012 than for 2003-2016. In the latter, data on external debt and international cooperation begin to take on more importance, and these last two structural variables are highly explanatory in the 2017-2019 period.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The author declares that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the author.

Acknowledgements or Notes

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