Abstract: More and more, political life in Latin America is playing out on social media. What are the implications for democracy? Recent elections in Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, and Mexico show that social media can help elevate political outsiders and spread sophisticated misinformation. Survey data show that while social media users are more supportive of democratic principles, they have more negative views of their political system. Despite important innovations for combating misinformation, policymakers must also focus on the underlying conditions that foster the negative effects of social media: political polarization and deepening public distrust of democratic institutions.

As social media use expands around the world, so too does its political relevance. Political leaders use social media both to disseminate information and to motivate and mobilize their supporters. In turn, growing numbers of citizens use these platforms to access political news, share it within their networks, and engage with politics. More and more, political life is playing out on social media.¹
And yet, observers, scholars, and even ordinary citizens seem increasingly concerned about the implications for democracy. According to one 2019 study, 85 percent of Brazilians said they were worried about what is real and fake on the internet. Large majorities even in the UK (70 percent) and US (67 percent) expressed similar concerns. In another poll, large majorities in the US thought social media divides the country and spreads falsehoods. And a Pew study of eleven developing countries found that large majorities thought social media made people both more informed and more susceptible to manipulation.²

Are they right to be so concerned? The promise of social media was that expanding access to information would be a democratizing force around the world. With more and more citizens connected to social networks, it was thought, useful information could be shared quickly, and citizens would have the facts to hold their political leaders to account.³ It would also be easier to mobilize democrats against authoritarian regimes, as the Arab Spring suggested. Of course, experience has shown that this technology for quickly spreading information also provides a platform for viral misinformation, for circulating hate speech, and for stoking negative – even violent – emotions.

Most of what we know about the effects of social media on the public and democracy comes from studies of the advanced democracies of North America and Western Europe. But social media are also rapidly expanding across the developing world, where democracy may be more fragile. These are contexts in which larger portions of the population have limited access to political information, and where political competition itself is often less structured and institutionalized. As social media become a key source of political information in developing countries, are they fulfilling their democratizing promise or instead undermining democracy?
We focus here on Latin America and how social media – especially Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – are shaping contemporary democratic attitudes and politics. To provide a portrait of how social media are used in electoral politics, we focus on four recent national campaigns – Argentina (2019), Brazil (2018), El Salvador (2019), and Mexico (2018). We also look at new, region-wide survey data from the AmericasBarometer to examine the democratic attitudes of those Latin Americans who are the most frequent users of social media.

The Rise of Social Media in Latin America

Social media are now one of the primary channels through which politicians and the public engage in politics in Latin America. The rise of social media reflects in part the rapid spread of internet access, which nearly doubled in the region over the decade between 2008 and 2017, according to AmericasBarometer data. Today, many Latin American politicians use social media as an integral part of their campaigns and, once elected, to communicate with constituents.

To see this rapid growth, consider Argentina and Brazil. In Argentina, social media gained particular relevance in the electoral campaigns of 2011 and 2015, especially among politicians on the right, like former president Mauricio Macri and former Buenos Aires governor Maria Eugenia Vidal. Figure 1 shows the sharp increase in the number of national politicians in Argentina with a Twitter account. During the 2019 general elections, nearly every politician running for president or holding a seat in Congress used Twitter.
Brazil tells a similar story, which we show using data from Facebook. During the 2010 elections, when Google’s Orkut network was still popular in Brazil, only a small proportion of politicians used Facebook. But by the 2018 election, nearly all presidential candidates and congressional incumbents were using the social networking site. Of course, these figures only focus on Twitter and Facebook, which are publicly accessible. Recent election cycles in the region suggest that WhatsApp has become an even more prominent platform for politics in Latin America.

Although WhatsApp is primarily a messaging platform, it is commonly used in Latin America and other developing contexts as a social media platform. People join WhatsApp groups to share news and information, coordinate activities, or discuss issues. These groups are often quite large – extended families, neighborhoods, classroom parents – and individuals are regularly added to groups without their knowledge and interact on group messages with individuals they
do not personally know. In Latin America, WhatsApp groups are regularly used by political candidates to disseminate campaign messages.

WhatsApp’s appeal for politicians is that usage in the region has skyrocketed rapidly. The platform first appeared in 2009 and took off after it was acquired by Facebook in 2014. According to AmericasBarometer data from 2018/19, nearly two in three Latin American adults reports using WhatsApp, making it the most popular of the social media platforms. At a close second, 56 percent of adults report that they use Facebook. Twitter is far less popular in the region, with only one in ten adults reporting using it. There is also a great deal of overlap between users across the platforms. Indeed, 51 percent of Latin American adults use both Facebook and WhatsApp. Still, only 30 percent of Latin American adults report either not having or never using social media accounts.

Mean rates for the region mask a great deal of variation across individual countries. Table 1 reports the proportion of adults in each country who report using Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Unsurprisingly, social media usage is substantially above-average in the wealthier Southern Cone countries and significantly below-average in less affluent Central America. These differences make sense when we also look at rates of access to a cellphone and home internet, data that also come from the AmericasBarometer. Although the data are more sparse, we also report statistics on smartphone penetration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>WhatsApp users (%)</th>
<th>Facebook users (%)</th>
<th>Twitter users (%)</th>
<th>Cellphone in home (%)</th>
<th>Home internet (%)</th>
<th>Smartphone ownership (%)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>67</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>76</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56</td>
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### Table of Social Media Usage Across Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>WhatsApp</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>WhatsApp Daily</th>
<th>Facebook Daily</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dom. Rep.</td>
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<td>89</td>
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<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Sal.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Honduras</td>
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<td>67</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>96</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: Americas Barometer 2018/19 and Pew Research Center.*

Social media usage is higher in countries with higher rates of internet access in the home: the correlation between the proportion of adults in a country who use WhatsApp and the proportion with internet access at home is a strong 0.93. WhatsApp usage is also higher where more people have cellphones (a correlation of 0.86) and where smartphones are more widespread (a correlation of 0.83).

Of course, not everyone uses social media at the same level of frequency. While one person might have a Facebook account that she uses to connect with friends occasionally, another might open Facebook multiple times a day. The Americas Barometer also asked respondents how frequently they see content on each social media platform and, more specifically, how frequently they see political content on them. WhatsApp users are the most frequent users, with 82 percent reporting they use it daily and most of the rest (another 15 percent) reporting using it a few times a week. Facebook users are somewhat less frequent, with 57 percent saying they see content daily and another 33 percent a few times a week. In contrast, among Twitter users, 37 percent say they view it daily and another 34 percent say they do so a few times a week.
All of this engagement with social media does not necessarily mean that people are engaging with political information. Indeed, social media are considered by communication scholars to be “soft news” sources, where political content is an ancillary interest. Most social media users, “are not necessarily seeking information about public affairs” when they make use of these platforms. Still, in Latin America, majorities of social media users report seeing political content very often. Among Facebook users, 61 percent report seeing political information a few times a week or more. For Twitter, that figure is 57 percent. WhatsApp users are less likely to report seeing political content, but even among them, 32 percent report doing so a few times a week or more. This platform is used not only for connecting friends and family on apolitical matters, but also for disseminating political opinions and content.

All of this represents dramatic growth in the political relevance of social media in the region. When the 2012 round of the AmericasBarometer asked Latin Americans if they had received or shared political information on social media, only 11 percent said they had. By 2018/19, the rates of political engagement on social media are clearly far higher.

Who are these social media users in Latin America? Our analyses of the AmericasBarometer data reveal that the average social media user is younger, urban, more affluent, and more educated than the average citizen in the region. There does not seem to be a substantial gender divide in WhatsApp and Facebook usage, although Twitter users are more likely to be men. Among social media users, the most frequent users and those who most frequently view political content are again younger, urban, more educated, and more affluent. Women and rural users are marginally less likely to report frequently seeing political information on social media. While there is predictable variation in social media usage across and within Latin America countries, the upward trend is abundantly clear: social media are here to stay.
Lessons from Recent Elections

If social media are now part of the political communication landscape, how are they shaping Latin American politics? On the one hand, social media promote horizontal discussion among peers, creating an information environment that facilitates users creating their own content and sharing information and opinions.12 This is the democratizing promise of social media. On the other hand, social media foster easy access and rapid dissemination of content. In the absence of content control, this can facilitate spread of misleading news, fake news, and disinformation.13 Deliberate attempts to inject disinformation into politics have been observed in many recent elections, including in Latin America. Consider these dynamics in four recent presidential elections in the region: Mexico (2018), Brazil (2018), El Salvador (2019), and Argentina (2019).

Mexico’s 2018 general election centered around the presidential race in which Andrés Manuel López Obrador was the consistent frontrunner and favorite, and the eventual winner. The election cycle witnessed extensive efforts to use social media to disseminate misinformation and disinformation.14 These efforts included a combination of contracted human accounts, automated accounts or bots, and cyborg accounts. Various actors disseminated all kinds of specious claims: that López Obrador’s campaign was being financed by Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro or supported by Russian president Vladimir Putin, that Pope Francis had spoken out against López Obrador, or that Ricardo Anaya, another presidential candidate, backed Donald Trump’s border wall. Automated bots saturating social media with support for a particular candidate had appeared in prior Mexico elections too,15 but 2018 was unique for the intensity and spread of the misinformation campaigns, which now appeared not only on Twitter, but also on Facebook and
WhatsApp. On Facebook, commercial groups coordinated large-scale responses to posts about a candidate in return for payment.

Brazil’s general election later that year cemented WhatsApp as the dominant platform for misinformation campaigns. Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right, largely unknown congressional deputy who came from behind to win the presidency, made extensive use of social media to post provocative statements that would then get discussed and reproduced by traditional media outlets – the strategy Trump used in the 2016 Republican primary. But reports also surfaced after the election that Bolsonaro’s financial backers contracted outfits that used illegal phone lists to create WhatsApp groups and distribute inflammatory misinformation about his chief rival, Fernando Hadad of the Workers’ Party (PT). These messages included claims that Brazil’s electronic voting system had been hacked by Venezuela and rigged to favor Hadad, and that he had handed out baby bottles with penis-shaped tops in an effort to combat homophobia. Another displayed the name of popular former PT president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva next to the number 17. Brazilians have to punch in the number of their party or candidate when they vote, but 17 was Bolsonaro’s number. Some observers suggest that roughly one million WhatsApp groups were created during the election campaign to promote particular candidates. As in Mexico, other social media platforms played a reinforcing role, with some misinformation disseminated further after being shared by influencers on Twitter and Facebook, but WhatsApp was the predominant vehicle for misinformation.

Social media also upended El Salvador’s 2019 general election, but in a different way. In a country where two parties had controlled the presidency for three decades, Nayib Bukele, the independent right-wing mayor of San Salvador, was an instant frontrunner. A younger candidate who railed against the corruption of the traditional parties, Bukele was known for
communicating directly with constituents on social media. As mayor, he used Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to announce policies and inform citizens about events in the capital. And as a presidential candidate, he used social media to amplify his provocative campaign messages to his 1.3 million followers (in a country of 6.4 million). Lacking a party or campaign organization, it was through social media that Bukele achieved enormous popularity and won in a landslide. The final months of the election cycle saw substantial misinformation being spread on social media: doctored images of other presidential candidates on the campaign trail, unsubstantiated claims that German airline Lufthansa would build a new state-of-the-art international airport if Bukele won, a misleading photo collage of a speech Bukele gave in Guatemala City that used photos from a different rally to suggest there were large crowds.

Though lower in volume and salience as compared to Mexico and Brazil, El Salvador’s Bukele showed how an adept social media personality could generate significant political engagement at the same time that misinformation spread during the election cycle. Even in a country with relatively lower levels of usage, social media can have an enormous political impact.

By the end of 2019, when Argentines went to the polls, WhatsApp had become a major platform for campaigns and misinformation. Already in 2015, social media was a prominent resource for the national presidential campaigns. But by 2019, the campaigns were utilizing it on a massive scale. The incumbent Mauricio Macro’s team managed a reported network of 300,000 activists via WhatsApp groups. It explicitly stated that it would focus on the messaging platform and target groups of parents. Supporters developed texts and memes, audio clips and recorded videos and used social media to spread these materials. More so than in 2015, these strategies were informed by greater micro-targeting to precisely the types of users who were most likely to be influenced or persuaded by each message.
Along with these campaign tactics, though, also came massive amounts of misinformation spread on social media against both sides of the political spectrum. These ranged from false claims about huge numbers of immigrants receiving social welfare benefits to doctored videos of major candidates making embarrassing statements or slurring their speech and appearing drunk. The fact-checking website, Chequeado, lists hundreds of false claims that spread across social networks and sometimes made their way into traditional media outlets during the campaign.

As these four elections illustrate, social media have become integral technologies of electoral campaigning. But they have also become platforms for those who seek to undermine the legitimacy of elections. According to one report, social media have exacerbated “the spread of disinformation and misinformation in ways that can impact political decision-making and electoral outcomes” across the region. These misinformation campaigns are becoming more and more sophisticated over time, and their center of gravity has clearly moved away from the more public platforms to WhatsApp, where encryption makes them harder to detect and obstruct.

Still, these elections also highlight increasing efforts by governments and civil society to combat misinformation. In Mexico, a group of over 80 media outlets created a joint initiative called Verificado 2018 with financial support from civil society, foundations, universities, and the social media platforms themselves. Over the course of the election campaign, Verificado fact-checked and debunked hundreds of false stories and memes being spread on social and traditional media. This initiative is still the most extensive effort to counter misinformation Latin America has seen, although similar efforts emerged also in Brazil (Projeto Comprova) and Argentina (Chequeado and Reverso). In 2019, the Argentine government went a step further and set up a fact-checking body within the agency that manages elections. Government and civil
society actors are innovating and learning from past experience how best to combat misinformation.

In poorer parts of the region, like El Salvador, civil society and election agencies are weaker and so poorly funded that they have not attempted similar initiatives. The platforms themselves have made efforts to contract out fact-checking and inform users if shared content is deemed to be false. In these contexts, governments are relying much more heavily on the social media companies to regulate their content themselves.

Still, fact-checking cannot be the last word in fighting misinformation. In fact, there is mixed evidence that fact-checking actually debunks false content. And repeating false claims in order to debunk them can also help to spread them. Fact-checking can help platforms like Facebook and Twitter “demote” false items, reducing their prominence in users’ feeds. But fact-checking takes time and misinformation can sometimes spread more quickly than fact-checkers can respond. Moreover, efforts to reduce the spread of misinformation through the more public social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have pushed those trying to spread falsehoods to use WhatsApp instead, as Argentina and Brazil demonstrate.

**Social Media Use and Political Attitudes**

Even if the veracity of every claim spread on social media could be communicated quickly and convincingly to users, being barraged with false information, incivility, and provocative messages affects people’s political attitudes, “reinforcing and radicalizing existing and more generalized partisan beliefs and values.” Social media messages, whether true or false, often try to evoke negative emotions, like anger and fear. Even if users know that certain claims are false, recurring negative feelings may breed doubt and distrust. As a result, even a
careful social media user may become more cynical or more apathetic, with clear implications for democracy.²⁹

To assess how much of this dynamic has taken root in Latin America, we can again turn to survey data from the 2018/19 round of the AmericasBarometer. We classify the survey respondents into three different groups by the frequency with which they view content on social media – those who do not use social media, those who use them relatively infrequently (either a few times a month or a few times a year), and those who use them frequently (either a few times a week or daily) – and then compare the political attitudes of these groups across the region.

Figure 2 compares these groups along three dimensions: level of political tolerance, support for democracy in the abstract, and satisfaction with democracy in their country. ³⁰ In each case, we look at the proportion of individuals with high levels on each of these democratic attitudes. Across the region, people who use social media more frequently appear on average to be more politically tolerant and more supportive of democracy in the abstract. But they also tend to be less satisfied with how democracy works in their own country. These results hold even when we account for the fact that people who use social media frequently are younger, urban, more affluent, and more educated.³¹
Even more starkly, the evidence suggests that social media use breeds distrust. Figure 3 shows the same comparisons among groups of social media users, but this time looking at the proportion of survey respondents who reported high levels of trust in democratic institutions: the president, Congress, the Supreme Court, local governments, elections, and the media. Trust in democratic institutions is overall quite low in the region after years of inefficient service provision and high-profile corruption scandals. But for each institution, people who use social media more frequently are less likely to report high degrees of trust in these institutions; that is, they are more distrustful. The largest differences have to do with trust in the executive and in traditional media. Other studies has also found that social media users are less trusting of traditional media. Other studies has also found that social media users are less trusting of traditional media. But the differences between non-users and high-frequency users are notable even for trust in elections, and all these findings hold even when we account for demographic characteristics.

*Source: AmericasBarometer 2018/19*
These results are consistent with the two sides of the social media coin. On the one hand, frequent social media users are more committed to political diversity and to the concept of democratic representation, at least as abstract principles. On the other hand, the evidence is consistent with the notion that their frequent exposure to false claims and to emotive, often hateful, messages breeds dissatisfaction with the political system and distrust of democratic institutions. In other words, even if we could inform and persuade each citizen about the veracity of the content they see on social media – that is, if fact-checking were instantaneous, comprehensive, and believed – it could still be the case that the medium itself breeds cynicism and distrust. And these attitudes are detrimental to well-functioning democracies, which rely on
citizens being invested in the political process and confident in the legitimacy of their institutions, regardless of the political outcome.

**Which Way Forward?**

Social media are a mixed bag for Latin American democracies. But the bad seems to be outweighing the good. As more and more people in the region continue to join the ranks of social media users – and especially as it spreads to those who are less digitally savvy – the pernicious effects of social media may increase more quickly than the beneficial ones. Already, each new election in the region seems to bring more sophisticated, more sustained, and less detectable campaigns to misinform and manipulate the public.

Fact-checking is an important tool in the fight against misinformation, especially during election campaigns. Efforts in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico demonstrate one way forward, by building robust consortia of news outlets with the capacity to review and debunk stories, images, and videos that circulate on social media. But to be effective, these initiatives need to be well-staffed and well-funded, and they need the support of government election agencies. The more robust these initiatives are, the more content they can fact-check. Although these initiatives in the region reviewed many false claims made at the national level, stories about local candidates and politics get almost no attention. Being able to review content at the local level requires a substantial investment in resources.

At the same time, fact-checking initiatives only work if the public trusts their assessments of what is fact and what is fiction. Argentina’s fact-checker Chequeado was headed by the spouse of a mayor with political ties to the incumbent president, raising doubts about its objectivity.
Even so, fact checking is no panacea. In the best circumstances, fact-checkers are contracted by social media companies themselves, and their assessments not only accompany a post but also affect how likely users are to see it. More often, fact-checking organizations simply post their assessment online or disseminate it via traditional media outlets. Even a well-resourced fact-checking operation cannot review every story and claim shared on social media. It also takes time to assess a post, and by the time the evaluation is completed, tens of thousands of users might have viewed it. Finally, this kind of fact-checking only works for social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, where posts are either public or viewable by the company itself. Since WhatsApp messages are only viewable to the users, there is no way to provide a fact-checking assessment on the platform itself. In order to find out whether a WhatsApp post is false, users need to look elsewhere for that assessment. The problem there is that more and more WhatsApp users, particularly poorer ones, use it with cellphone plans that provide WhatsApp for free but charge for other internet data.

There is more the social media companies themselves can do. They could invest more in reliable fact-checking initiatives in every country, especially those like El Salvador with little local infrastructure. They are already doing this, but the capacity of these fact-checkers has been limited. Since fact-checkers have a hard time keeping up with misinformation, social media companies could also limit its virality, the speed with which it spreads. WhatsApp has already done this in some countries, allowing users to restrict who can add them to groups, reducing the maximum number of users in a group, and limiting the number of times a post can be forwarded. More of these kinds of limits could be implemented, especially during election periods. The platforms themselves might also remind users regularly to report content they believe to be false.
It is also well past time for government agencies to step into the fray. Although many governments enforce rules about campaign advertising and regulate traditional media, they have been slow and under-resourced in regulating and investigating campaign messaging on social media platforms. Relying on social media companies alone to do this seems suboptimal; political leaders should be the ones charged with protecting the public interest. They ought to be working more closely with social media companies to identify misinformation campaigns and the actors behind them. They should also invest resources into inoculating the public against misinformation, through widely-distributed warnings and through campaigns to teach digital literacy.

Perhaps most important, though, is that the spread of misinformation and the ill effects of social media on political attitudes are not happening in a political vacuum. Research shows that people are more likely to believe misinformation when they have less trust in their political system and when political polarization is high.33 This may be one reason we saw so much more misinformation in the more polarized contexts of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico than in El Salvador.

These are underlying conditions that policymakers must also address. The task is not easy, but also not impossible. Political leaders need to emphasize building coalitions, and governments ought to incentivize and spotlight examples of compromise rather than confrontation. Government agencies, with the help of international actors, should put resources toward winning back the trust of the public by rooting out corruption and by more efficiently providing services to the public. And then they should highlight these successes to the public as widely as possible – perhaps via social media.
Notes


6 For each platform, we identify users with a combination of two survey questions. The survey first asked, “Do you have a Facebook/Twitter/WhatsApp account?” Those who answered yes were then asked, “How often do you see content on Facebook/Twitter/WhatsApp?” One response option for the follow-up question was “never.” We identify users as those who both said that they have an account and reported seeing content more frequently than never.
7 Our regional analyses weight each country equally, regardless of sample size. Our averages for the region, then, can be interpreted as values that one would expect to find in the average country in the region.

8 Pew Research Center, “Social Media Use Continues To Rise in Developing Countries, but Plateaus Across Developed Ones” (2018).

9 Since 2016, WhatsApp can be used on either via the smartphone app or on a computer via a web interface.


11 The 2012 AmericasBarometer asked, “In the last twelve months, have you read or shared political information through any social network website such as Twitter or Facebook or Orkut?”


25 Bandeira et al. Disinformation in Democracies.

26 Daniel Funke, “Facebook announces sweeping changes to its anti-misinformation policies,” Poynter, 10 April 2019.


Political tolerance is an index based on the degree to which respondents approve or disapprove of the right of regime critics to exercise the right to vote, the right to participate in peaceful demonstrations, the right to run for office, and the right to make speeches. Support for democracy relies on the question, “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?” Satisfaction with democracy is measured by asking, “In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in (country)?”

The differences between non-users and high-frequency users are all statistically significant and robust to regression analysis with demographic controls.
