

**ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS**

# Acceleration in Digitalisation: Social Networks, Civic Involvement and Electoral Processes in the United States and Latin America during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Los años del aceleramiento de la digitalización: redes sociales, implicación cívica y procesos electorales en Estados Unidos y Latinoamérica durante la coyuntura de la pandemia del COVID-19

**Daniel Javier de la Garza Montemayor**

University of Monterrey, Mexico  
[daniel.delagarza@udem.edu](mailto:daniel.delagarza@udem.edu)

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered an acceleration in digitisation in practically all aspects of social life. Most notably, during the early stages of the health crisis, digital media became almost the only channel through which people could express themselves, in light of the social distancing measures that were decreed in most countries. In this article we analyse how this historical moment impacted civic participation among US and Latin American citizens, especially during the elections that were held in these countries. The article adopts a qualitative approach based on an analysis of information from the main academic studies and media coverage of the selected case studies. The experience of the 2020 US electoral process, the midterm elections in Mexico in 2021 and the presidential elections in Chile and Colombia are all considered. In all cases, the campaigns resorted to digital strategies in order to gain support. The study concludes that we find ourselves at an undeniable watershed moment, although its implications are not yet fully known, largely because it is not clear whether the use of new technologies really contributes to the strengthening of democratic values.

**KEYWORDS:** Social networks; digital media; Latin America; USA; COVID-19.

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## RESUMEN

La pandemia del COVID-19 implicó un aceleramiento en la digitalización en prácticamente todos los aspectos de la vida social. De forma muy notable, en la primera etapa de la crisis sanitaria, los medios digitales se convirtieron casi en el único canal mediante el cual las personas podían expresarse, tomando en cuenta las medidas de distanciamiento social que se decretaron en la mayoría de los países. En este artículo de revisión realizamos un análisis de cómo este momento histórico tuvo un impacto en la participación cívica de los ciudadanos en Estados Unidos y en Latinoamérica, en especial, durante los procesos electorales que se celebraron en estos países. El enfoque del artículo es de carácter cualitativo, a través de un análisis de información de los principales estudios académicos y cobertura periodística sobre los casos de estudio seleccionados. Se narra la experiencia del proceso electoral estadounidense del 2020, las elecciones intermedias en México en 2021, así como las elecciones presidenciales en Chile y Colombia. En todos los casos, las campañas tuvieron que recurrir a estrategias digitales con el fin de generar adhesiones. El estudio concluye que estamos en un innegable cambio de época, pero sus implicaciones son de pronóstico reservado, en buena medida porque no está claro si el uso de las nuevas tecnologías realmente contribuye a fortalecer valores democráticos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** redes sociales; medios digitales; Latinoamérica; Estados Unidos; COVID-19.

## 1. Introduction

It is no secret that the 2010s laid the foundations for a new form of civic involvement that was gradually adopted by public and private institutions as a way to connect with new markets and citizens, whether to keep them informed or to attempt to persuade them for a specific purpose (De Zúñiga and Shahin, 2015). Digital media emerged during the 2000s, but for the most part it played a secondary role (Vukanovic, 2009). However, this changed rapidly in the last two decades.

It is possible to argue that these technologies were embraced first by users for a range of purposes before being adopted by organisations (El Ouiridi *et al.*, 2016). This is worth mentioning since there was initially great reluctance in both the public and private sectors to take the arrival of digital platforms seriously, most of all social networks (Treem, 2015). Over time, it became clear that cyber interactions resulted in real-world effects that could no longer be ignored, and a number of organisations initiated efforts to use these tools to their advantage.

In any case, it is vital to note that the end of the last decade brought with it a paradigm shift in the way that we communicate and interact with one another. Nowadays, the myriad communication methods available—text messages, videos and voice messages—enable us to connect with others with an ease that would have been unimaginable a few years ago (Sharma and Shukla, 2016). However, it is also true that it has become easier to pinpoint which segments of the population are more likely to have a greater affinity with a particular message being transmitted (Vinerean *et al.*, 2013).

In ten years, we have experienced significant, irreversible changes in the way in which we consume entertainment, receive news and communicate with others.

During this time, the foundations were laid for an interconnected society in which digital tools play a vital role not only in how we maintain personal contact, but also how we participate in social life, carry out our daily activities and even operate professionally (Felmlee and Faris, 2013).

By the beginning of 2020, it had become evident that institutional communication, marketing strategies and the method of receiving information would have to be viewed through another lens. A new landscape had been created where technologies converged, presenting enormous challenges and opportunities, as well as obvious risks (Venegas-Vera *et al.*, 2020).

The risk factor is of utmost relevance, since at the end of the decade the reality was far different from the optimistic predictions of many academics and opinion leaders regarding the fervour surrounding digital platforms. At some point, digital platforms, especially social networks, were viewed as a tool to strengthen our capacity for democratic expression (Loader and Mercea, 2011; Castells, 2012).

The legitimacy of online media sources was initially established through the discrediting of certain mass media outlets, which tend to pander to a variety of outside interests rather than pursue basic journalistic rigour. In the eyes of many, these new platforms were considered democratising and even libertarian spaces. Cyberspace was viewed as an alternative that was capable of standing up to the status quo and even changing the power distribution in various contexts (Herman and Chomsky, 2010; Castells, 2011; Tarman and Yigit, 2013).

But this only became reality on very few occasions during the first part of the last decade. Far from resulting in a better-informed society, in many cases the evidence seems to suggest that in fact the opposite occurred. The accumulation of perceptions, especially those that were not based on verifiable facts, gave rise to a phenomenon known as *post-truth*, in which empirical and verifiable information is simply ignored. Speculation and conspiracy theories abound in cyberspace during the proliferation of this sensation (Suiter, 2016; Hannan, 2018).

Over time, it has become evident that the virtual public sphere was subject to manipulations and distortions that rivalled or even surpassed what had taken place with the traditional media. This went beyond *fake news*. A fierce dispute over narrative began in polarised contexts that only heightened the differences in profoundly unequal societies (She *et al.*, 2017; Kubin and Von Sikorski, 2021).

Social networks are more adept at strengthening preconceived beliefs than provoking discussions on public matters. Users tend to follow the accounts of those with whom they essentially agree (Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018). This has caused heightened tension at a time of deeply rooted differences in terms of beliefs and convictions, where citizens are strongly divided in terms of religion, politics and other social issues.

For this and other reasons, doubts began to arise about the role these new types of media played in supporting democratic coexistence. The ethics of various

organisations that use algorithms to influence user consumption were also called into question. And of course, suspicions lingered about social networks that use their users' personal information for purposes other than those initially stated (Beaufort, 2018; Petrescu and Krishen, 2020).

The former became evident in the case of companies that employ technology to suggest and offer products and/or services based on users' search preferences. The practice of personalised advertising was long associated with the non-consensual exploiting of user browsing data. On the other hand, we have the case of Facebook and the enormous controversy that arose in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Heawood, 2018; Hinds *et al.*, 2020).

These issues found themselves in the public debate before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; the health crisis sparked greater dependence on technology, which in turn resulted in a marked acceleration in digital interaction (Kaur *et al.*, 2020).

In this article we will reflect on some of the implications and trends observed regarding civic participation in the 2020s, a decade so inextricably linked to and impacted by this historic event, in addition to the influence of these digital tools in the elections that unfolded during this juncture. The overall aim of this investigation is to examine the contextual similarities and differences of digital civic engagement in the United States and key Latin American countries. This research uses a qualitative methodology before employing a documentary technique, selecting academic studies and relevant media articles to then perform an in-depth analysis of recent events (Díaz *et al.*, 2003; Vargas *et al.*, 2015).

## 2. Social media and civic engagement

It is important to understand that the advent of new information and communication technologies brought with it fresh power dynamics. At first, some even argued that digital social networks would be able to stand up to the established powers (Kreiss *et al.*, 2011). However, others expressed scepticism, warning of the risks that these tools pose. Interest in this nascent issue began as exploratory research at the end of the 2000s, but in the following years empirical data would become available (Chadwick and Howard, 2009), eventually generating information on various case studies from key moments in history.

The democratising potential of social networks, which during the last decade had been used as a space to unite and take collective action, gradually gave way to the discouragement of broad social groups frustrated that these platforms were failing to meet their potential (De la Garza, 2020). On the other hand, it can also be argued that it was not society that was capitalising on these technologies, but those in power, although this was not so obvious at first.

The 2010s began with the WikiLeaks releases and the Arab Spring revolutions, while notable Ibero-American movements such as 15-M in Spain, Chilean Winter and #YoSoy132 in Mexico also emerged (De la Garza *et al.*, 2019). All of them constituted acts of protest that were organised via social media, bringing about transcendental changes in governments, political systems and the prevailing legal framework regarding a number of issues.

However, mobilisation ceased and eventually became institutionalised. In a broad sense, these social movements could be viewed as catalysts propelling the careers of new actors and political parties in these countries. Yet the first digitally organised movements were not successful in bringing about far-reaching systemic change, as we have pointed out. This is particularly the case in Mexico, Chile and Spain (De la Garza and Yllán, 2020).

The fact that further protests broke out in Latin America in 2019 only underscores the argument that these social mobilisations failed to fulfil their purpose. Especially dramatic was the case of Chile, a country that was considered a model of development in the region for many years. Unlike in 2011, the protests at the end of the decade saw people of different ages and social strata take to the streets (Jiménez-Yañez, 2020; Rivera-Aguilera *et al.*, 2021). As in the Chilean Winter, however, technology played an important role. The same can be said of the cases of Ecuador and Colombia, which were also the scene of important mobilisations in 2019 (De la Garza and Robles, 2020; González and García, 2022).

The protests held throughout these Latin American countries were further proof of the articulating power of social media. But above all, they bore witness to deep social unrest that transcended the generation of so-called digital natives. Social inequality, lack of access to basic services, violence and anti-democracy were some of the triggers of the mobilisations that shook the entire region to its core (Valenzuela and Sáez, 2020).

In the end, they served to confirm certain observations that were made during the first demonstrations promoted online. Social networks are merely digital tools for connecting with others, but in times of social upheaval they have the capacity to fan the flames of collective unrest (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012).

They can be used for sharing messages, videos calling for protests, or for transmitting content that raises awareness or distorts reality, as the case may be. Various studies have shown that social networks have contributed to citizen empowerment at different points in time (Vlachokyriakos *et al.*, 2016; Lin and Kant, 2021). But it is also true that citizen unrest often remains in cyberspace.

The intensity and popularity of digital platforms have played a pivotal role in strengthening calls for protest on several occasions. It is also true that they have contributed little to generating in-depth public deliberation on matters of collective interest (De la Garza *et al.*, 2021).

While the power of social networks might have been underestimated (or not fully understood) during the early years, by the early 2020s it was clear that hardly any social movement could exist were it not for cyberspace, and any electoral hopefuls would be unable to gain traction without the use of these tools. It is important to consider that all of this occurred even before social distancing measures were enacted in much of the world, which eventually forced virtually all interactions to take place online.

### 3. COVID-19 and the acceleration of digital interaction

The political effervescence that was growing at the end of the decade was momentarily halted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For several weeks, even months, the discourse of social mobilisations occurring outside of cyberspace in most, if not all, countries revolved around the spreading of a virus of which very little was known (Heiss, 2020).

But even this historical juncture was not exempt from the disinformation that is able to proliferate through social networks. Conspiracy theories of all kinds spread, while all kinds of remedies and preventions that lacked scientific basis were also recommended. Unfounded news stories triggered shortages of some products and collective panic in broad sectors of the population (Rocha *et al.*, 2021).

There are also cases of the regrettably inevitable politicisation of tragedy (Dai *et al.*, 2020), although opposition parties in various modern democracies were guilty of the same (Altiparmakis *et al.*, 2021).

When selecting our case studies from four countries in the Americas, Internet access was taken into account. We begin with the case of the United States, which has fairly wide access, with at least 80% of the population having an Internet connection. Next is Mexico, which has the largest Spanish-speaking community in the world. Finally we study the cases of Colombia and Chile. In the former, more than half of the population has access to the Internet (60%), while the latter has the smallest digital divide in the region (Pew Research Center, 2021; Gavira González, 2022; González, 2022; Zamarrón, 2023).

### 4. Case studies: presidential elections in the United States and Latin America

An emblematic case that ushered in a shift in political communication was the United States presidential elections in 2020. It is important to remember that the vote swayed in favour of Donald Trump, who was acquitted during impeachment proceedings, marking only the third time in the history of the United States that a trial of this nature was held (Jacobson, 2020).

The Democratic Party, meanwhile, was far from choosing its candidate. A record number put their name forward for nomination, but history would repeat itself, as the final choice would come down to Vermont State Senator Bernie Sanders and whoever could successfully challenge him, as in 2016. Sanders, a political veteran, used social media with great skill, as he had done in his previous election campaign. The COVID-19 pandemic erupted just before the Democratic Party decided on its representative in the upcoming presidential election (Altamura and Oliver, 2022).

Despite Donald Trump's strong footing in the polls at the start of the year, his mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to the perception that he could be defeated. In this regard, it is important to remember that the last US president who failed to win re-election was George H. Bush in 1992, 28 years earlier. In the end, various sectors of the Democratic Party realigned their support and joined the candidacy of Joe Biden to the detriment of Bernie Sanders, and the former vice president won the party's nomination (Bisbee and Honig, 2020).

This marked the beginning of the electoral campaign in the most powerful country—and one of the largest—in the world, a fact that has historically contributed to candidates having to launch strategically planned campaigns. As such, they usually prioritise swing states, those that could be won by either party, over those that they believe they will win with relative ease (Duquette *et al.*, 2017).

Since traditional rallies were either banned or severely limited in terms of their capacity, the campaign was mainly fought through the mass media, and, most notably, digital media. In fact, the traditional conventions at which each party nominates their presidential candidate were held online for the first time in history (Landman and Splendore, 2020).

On the other hand, the voting method was also the subject of fierce public debate. Voters could choose between voting by mail and in person. Given the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, an unprecedented proportion of voters were expected to opt for postal voting (Persily and Stewart III, 2021).

However, an interesting trend emerged that would complicate the electoral process: according to polls, Republican Party voters were more likely to vote in person, while their Democratic counterparts favoured postal voting. Before the campaign, there was speculation that the vote count could be somewhat distorted on election day, given that the first votes to be counted would put Donald Trump in the front seat. As it transpired, this was indeed the case (Clarke *et al.*, 2021).

Emotionally charged messages between supporters on both sides of the party divide also grew in number and intensity in an increasingly polarised climate (Chaudhry *et al.*, 2021). Despite the fact that the opinion polls tipped in favour of Joe Biden for almost the entire course of the campaign, President Donald Trump never contemplated the possibility of losing the election (Bender, 2021).

On election night the forecast was still mixed, but as the mail-in votes arrived and were counted, Joe Biden's advantage widened until it became insurmountable. Donald Trump ignored the results and claimed that election fraud had been committed (Wolff, 2021).

The post-election process opened up a rift between those who upheld the democratic institutions and those who considered themselves aggrieved by the alleged irregularities. Even President Trump himself began an online campaign to raise funds for his legal defence and to collect evidence of the supposed irregularities (Tollefson, 2021).

As Donald Trump repeated his claims of electoral fraud, the mass media chose to cut away from the president's live speech on the grounds that they would not cover attacks on democracy. Tension continued to grow and, despite the ongoing pandemic, in-person protests condemning the alleged fraud even popped up in various parts of the United States (Justwan and Williamson, 2022).

The situation reached its boiling point after angry Trump supporters, attending a rally called by the president during which he used incendiary rhetoric, attacked Washington, D.C.'s Capitol Building. Scenes of the president's supporters violently storming the Capitol were broadcast around the world (Moats, 2021). These events, among other things, resulted in Donald Trump's social media accounts being suspended (Hennig, 2021).

There are many conclusions that can be drawn from the 2020 presidential elections in terms of political communication and active civic participation. The first is that, as has been seen in the last decade, the social movements that were launched in the virtual realm did not gain visibility until they left cyberspace (Red, 2013).

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, it was clear that the political dispute could be largely resolved through digital media, with little participation in the streets. A notable exception, of course, is the protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd, which spread through the country's largest cities (Reny and Newman, 2021).

Similarly, by this time it was inconceivable for a political communication strategy to not be centred around digital media. At this point, the mass media were being discredited by broad sectors of society (Hmielowski *et al.*, 2022).

It was also evident that the narrative on matters of public interest was being disputed over social media. Millions of Americans were convinced that the election had been stolen from Trump, even though there was overwhelming evidence to suggest otherwise (Woodward and Costa, 2021). But once again, the digital media were effective in reinforcing the beliefs of the millions of users who argued that there were alleged irregularities (Aguado, 2022).

Another important takeaway is that in this case, it was not just the large traditional media consortia that adopted a position on the matter during the aftermath of the



elections; two of the largest social networks, X/Twitter and Facebook, decided to cancel the accounts of President Donald Trump, as mentioned above (Hobbs, 2021). Although they did so under the auspices of preventing the spreading of baseless opinions, their actions indicated their stance regarding the issue.

The year 2020 served as proof that cyberspace would be one of the main battlefields not just for subsequent electoral contests, but also for any regional or national power disputes that may take place. The following electoral processes that played out in the region confirmed this.

## 5. Mexico, 2021

The legislative elections in Mexico in 2021 stood out from those previously held in the country for a number of reasons. It is important to remember that Mexico's presidential term is the longest in the continent, with the winner leading the government for six years without the possibility of re-election. Meanwhile, the country's Chamber of Deputies holds elections every three years (Cruz, 2021).

The elections in question differed from those held before in that they coincided with the elections for 15 governors, the leading authority in each of the country's states. The electoral calendars, and the terms of a number of state governors, had been modified to make this possible. Almost half of the governorships were at stake, since Mexico has 32 states, making this an unprecedented event (Ahuja, 2021).

It is also true that the make-up of the political spectrum had changed drastically in the wake of the 2018 election. The ruling party, MORENA (National Regeneration Movement), only formally registered as a political party in 2014. Just four years later, in the 2018 presidential elections, it won more than half of the seats in the presidential election and a majority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) achieved the worst results in its history, while the National Action Party also took a huge step backwards in terms of electoral support (Aragón Falomir *et al.*, 2019).

Although some contend that Mexico had already been highly polarised for a few years, political conflict increased significantly since Andrés Manuel López Obrador won the race for president. The president of Mexico holds a press conference every weekday morning in which he provides updates about his government; however, he often uses it as an opportunity to lash out at his critics and opponents (Andrade *et al.*, 2021).

Excerpts of the president's morning statements are shared by the public and private media, as well as via social media. Digital platforms in particular foster the intense exchange and spreading of information by both the president's supporters and detractors (Plascencia *et al.*, 2022).

The electoral process was complex not only because of the positions that were being disputed—as it would have ramifications on both the national and local level—but also because of the wide-ranging COVID-19 prevention measures that were in place at the time. Face-to-face events were restricted, with the use of digital means being favoured for that very reason (Bautista-San Juan, 2022).

An interesting aspect of the electoral contest was that the narrative established at the national level by the government and opposition parties was replicated somewhat on a regional level; however, in others, a regional logic prevailed, depending on the specific state. How exactly this played out was determined by the interaction between the political forces in each state. In other words, some gubernatorial elections replicated the same polarisation that was happening on a national scale, while a few states had a dynamic of their own (De la Garza, 2022).

Two historically antagonistic parties, the PRI and the PAN, unexpectedly decided to join forces, alongside the PRD, in an attempt to prevent MORENA from building on its majority. They also created coalitions in several (although not all) disputed states in order to prevent MORENA from triumphing all over the country (Yáñez, 2022).

If we look at the ruling party, the electoral strategy was implicitly defined by the president himself. At the morning conferences, he confronted the opposition, including the electoral authorities, and argued in favour of continuing the alleged transformation he was spearheading. In most cases, candidates of the MORENA-led coalition in both the deputies and municipal elections, including those for governor, sought to align their elections pledges with the discourse and platform of President López Obrador (Espino, 2021; Estrada, 2022).

The political communication employed by the opposition, on the other hand, was much more varied, in theory because the coalition was not all-encompassing. Although the coalition was strong in most of the disputed districts and states, part of the media time set aside for it was used to promote each of the parties that formed it. In addition, in other states in which they were not in coalition, they ended up competing with one other. The only message that they managed to transmit loud and clear was that they wanted to prevent a total victory for MORENA (Palma, 2021).

The participation of Movimiento Ciudadano, a party that hoped to finish third by taking advantage of the discord between the ruling party and the opposition coalition, is also noteworthy. Its main goal was (and is) to convey messages of a social-democratic tone, while establishing an identity that diverged from the populism of MORENA and that did not carry the burden of having already held office, as was the case with the other opposition parties (Noyola Rodríguez, 2022).

Both the incumbent party and the opposition leveraged social media to promote their candidates, comment on different aspects of the elections and share news with which they had some degree of affinity. Digital journalism also took on a prominent role (Falomir and Lucca, 2020).

Given the ongoing elections, it is clear that any new communicators who emerged on digital platforms would either support the government or oppose it. In fact, one

could say that few new voices appeared in these new media that were unaffected by the polarisation that had come to be a key feature of Mexican politics (Gómez and Ochoa, 2021).

Finally, the election results revealed that both the opposition and the government performed similarly. On the one hand, the ruling party lost several seats in the Chamber of Deputies, although it held onto a simple majority that would be enough for it to pass secondary laws but not to make changes to the Constitution without the support of other political forces. Despite this ambivalent outcome, its greatest success was winning 11 of the 15 disputed governor elections (Bravo Regidor, 2021).

The opposition coalition was a complete failure on the state level, as it lost practically all elections in which the PRI, PAN and PRD ran together. The National Action Party managed to win the states of Querétaro and Chihuahua alone, while Movimiento Ciudadano won in the pivotal state of Nuevo León. The Green Party successfully defeated MORENA in the state of San Luis Potosí, but at the national level the two parties continued to form a coalition, so even this was seen as a victory for the ruling party (Varela *et al.*, 2021).

However, the most unexpected defeat for the ruling party came in what they thought was a stronghold, Mexico City, where MORENA lost most of the boroughs it contested. It also lost several local and federal offices that it thought were safe (Cota, 2021).

It is hard to say whether the pandemic hindered voting in the 2021 legislative elections. On the one hand, voter turnout was higher than in previous midterm elections, although it was 10% lower than that recorded during the 2018 presidential elections (Vallejo, 2021).

However, the most dire predictions of those who suspected that the electoral process would not be able to go ahead never came to fruition. The National Electoral Institute (INE) ensured that the elections went smoothly, and reports of anomalies were lower than in past years.

## 6. Chile and Colombia

The elections in Chile in 2021 and in Colombia in 2022 were characterised by a deep desire for change that had manifested itself in the streets in previous years. In both cases the traditional parties had been replaced by new representatives from both the left and the right (Martínez and Olivares, 2022), and they both occurred during the pandemic years, even though preventive measures had relaxed somewhat with respect to 2020.

Chile witnessed insurrectionary protests that had the goal of calling for a constitutional convention. As such, the 2021 presidential election was significant, largely because the winner would have the opportunity to lead the administration that implemented the approved Constitution (Dulci and Sadivia, 2021).

The selection process within the different political forces was more complex than in previous elections. The traditional Concertación coalition and right-wing parties had seen their influence diminish over time (Titelman, 2021). Therefore, there was a distinct possibility from the outset that the future president would be chosen from among the ranks of a movement or political group different from those that had governed the country since its transition to democracy.

Seemingly as a sign that the Chilean election would be a fascinating one, the primaries held by coalitions on the left and the right produced unexpected results. Gabriel Boric, who rose to prominence following the 2011 social movement known as the Chilean Winter, prevailed over the favourite, Daniel Jadue, representing the Communist Party. Meanwhile, in the traditional right-wing coalition between National Renewal and the UDI (Independent Democratic Union), Sebastián Sichel Ramírez defeated Joaquín Lavín, who was considered to be the favourite (Montes, 2021).

In these primaries, an interesting fact was that at least five candidates earned over a 10% share of the vote. The candidate who won the first round, José Antonio Kast, did so with just over 27% of the votes, while Gabriel Boric, from the Apruebo Dignidad (Approve Dignity) coalition, also advanced to the second round (Paul, 2021).

The two candidates made extensive use of social media to help strengthen their messages. Gabriel Boric knew the importance of the medium; earlier in his life he had been a student leader, leveraging online platforms to promote his message and recruit followers to his cause. José Antonio Kast was no stranger to the potential that social media presented either, using it to unite a radical group of followers, which helped propel him from also-ran status in 2017 to having a serious chance of winning the presidency in the following elections (Adetunji, 2021).

Eventually it was the young Gabriel Boric who would win the second round by a wide margin. These pandemic-era elections ushered in the displacement of traditional political forces, the demonstration of greater political plurality in the country and new coalitions capable of catapulting a candidate into office (Honorato and Rubiños Cea, 2021).

Colombia's 2022 elections followed a similar pattern. Discontent at the polls spilt out into the streets. In this case, Gustavo Petro, who led a coalition called the Historical Pact (Riera Bosqued, 2021), ran for the third time. Politicians from traditional coalitions also stood as candidates:

Gustavo Petro and Rodolfo Hernández both made it to the second round. The latter ran as an independent and surprised many by beating the traditional right's candidate, Federico Gutiérrez. Both Petro and Hernández took advantage of the excellent possibilities offered by social media. Petro sought to put forward an image of moderation in a country that had traditionally feared the left. Hernández, on the other hand, hoped to connect with a younger electorate (Franco, 2021).

The second round was a lot closer than the first. Rodolfo Hernández's candidacy received support from members of the traditional political forces who were wary of the arrival of Gustavo Petro, while the latter boasted the ability to unite both the left and discontented citizens.

As in the Chilean elections, the traditional political class experienced a setback in the second round. The dissatisfaction that had been manifested on the Internet and in the real world ended up provoking a change of government. In the end, the results favoured Gustavo Petro, something that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

## 7. Conclusions

**Table 1**

*Particular context and shared features of the selected case studies*

Case study	Particular context	Common features
United States	Presidential elections in the first year of the pandemic	Strategic use of social media in electoral campaigns. Digital media acts as a channel of expression and activation for society. Political and social polarisation in cyberspace.
Mexico	Midterm elections (national) in the second year of the pandemic	
Chile	Presidential elections (internal, and first and second rounds) in the second year of the pandemic	
Colombia	Presidential elections in the third year of the pandemic	

Source: own research (2023).

The beginning of the new decade validated the trends that had emerged in previous years. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments from across the political spectrum enacted social distancing measures. But even at the peak of confinement, the wheels of politics continued to turn.

The struggle for power, especially in elections, called for the use of technology to unite citizens at times when physical contact was scarce. That being said, the pandemic, even with all the tragedy it entailed, did not bring about the chaos that some initially predicted. And even when there were strong social movements in the countries examined in this article, political power was achieved through institutional means.

However, it is also true that much of the discussion on public affairs became strident if not downright toxic. Social media gave shape to various movements and allowed people to rally around certain issues, but it also reinforced technopopulisms that revolved around a discourse that was equal parts exclusionary and anti-democratic.

It is also important to mention that the rise of social media coincided with a moment in history when broad segments of society began to question the *status quo* and the powers that be. It has been a stomping ground for organising dissent since the early 2010s, and this trend has only further consolidated itself over the years.

Although it initially impacted public life sporadically, as we mentioned, over time cyberspace became a key battleground given that most current disputes are resolved there. Whether this reality actually contributed to creating better governments or solutions for citizens is the subject of another debate, but the COVID-19 pandemic very possibly contributed to accelerating a trend that had been clearly demonstrated for some time.

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Daniel Javier de la Garza Montemayor

Daniel Javier de la Garza Montemayor holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the Universidad Pablo de Olavide (Spain) and in Philosophy, specialising in Political Science, from the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (Mexico). He also has a bachelor's degree in Law and a master's degree in Business and Technological Innovation from ITESM, as well as a master's degree in Science in Management from Babson College. He currently works as a full-time professor-researcher in the Administration Department at the University of Monterrey.

