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## **The Subnational Politics Project: Addressing Subnational Data Challenges in Comparative Politics**

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# The Subnational Politics Project: Addressing Subnational Data Challenges in Comparative Politics

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## Abstract

Subnational research has become central to comparative politics, yet its cumulative development has long been constrained by the scarcity, fragmentation, and limited temporal coverage of systematic subnational data, particularly in the Global South. This article introduces the *Subnational Politics Project (SPP)*, a new data infrastructure designed to address these challenges by providing harmonized, longitudinal, and cross-national subnational political data for Latin America’s federal systems—Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico—from 1983 to 2024. The SPP integrates multiple datasets covering executive politics, legislative composition, electoral dynamics, and subnational democracy. The article describes the project’s structure, details the procedures used to collect and standardize the data, and reports a series of internal and external validity checks. It also illustrates how the SPP can be used to analyze variation in subnational democracy, legislative dynamics, and territorial inequality in federal countries.

**Keywords:** subnational research, subnational democracy, Latin America, subnational electoral data, federalism

## 1 Introduction

Over the past decades, subnational research (SNR), i.e., *a strategy of social science inquiry that focuses on actors, organizations, institutions, structures and processes located in territorial units inside countries, that is, below the national and international levels*, has become a central and increasingly influential approach in comparative politics (Giraudy, Moncada and Snyder, 2019). SNR has transformed political science by advancing substantive, theoretical, and methodological knowledge. As documented extensively in “Inside Countries” (Giraudy, Moncada and Snyder, 2019), by moving beyond national averages, SNR revealed

critical phenomena that remain obscured in country-level analyses, including territorially uneven state presence, subnational authoritarian regimes within national democracies, localized economic clusters, and sharp inequalities in political rights, welfare provision, security, and well-being. SNR also redirected analytical attention toward actors and institutions—such as governors, mayors, provincial legislatures, local courts, and civic organizations—that were often overlooked in national-level research. In doing so, SNR not only uncovered patterns of territorial inequality but also prompted new research questions about why political outcomes have been and are distributed unevenly within countries. At the same time, as noted in "Inside Countries," SNR has spurred theoretical innovation by exposing the limits of national-level theories when applied to subnational contexts, encouraging the refinement of scope conditions and the development of new theories tailored to within-country variation.

Despite these advances, the cumulative development of SNR has long been constrained by data limitations. In earlier work, Giraudy, Moncada and Snyder (2019) identified a set of interrelated empirical challenges facing SNR, particularly in Latin America and the Global South (see also Auerbach et al. (2018); Sellers (2019)). These challenges were rooted in the scarcity, fragmentation, and temporal thinness of subnational data. This article introduces the Subnational Politics Project (SPP), a new data collection initiative developed explicitly to respond to these constraints.

The article proceeds in six sections. Section two discusses the main data challenges facing subnational research, particularly the uneven availability of subnational information. Section three introduces the Subnational Politics Project (SPP) as a response to these challenges, and outlines the project's structure. Section four reports validity checks assessing the rigor of both the data collection process and data construction. Section five illustrates three applications of the SPP to the study of subnational democracy. Section six concludes.

## 2 Data Challenges in Subnational Research

One of the main empirical obstacles facing SNR is the persistent scarcity of systematic subnational data (Giraudy, Moncada and Snyder, 2019). A longstanding “whole-nation bias” in comparative politics (Rokkan, 1970) has historically privileged country-level analysis, leaving researchers with relatively few comprehensive, systematic and readily accessible subnational datasets. This problem is especially acute in the Global South, where limited state capacity, informality, and uneven bureaucratic development hinder the consistent production of subnational statistics. These constraints are particularly pronounced in policy areas that were decentralized during the late twentieth century without parallel investments in local administrative and data collection infrastructure.

As a result, much of the empirical foundation of SNR has been built through decentralized, researcher driven data collection efforts rather than through standardized state or academically produced sources. SNR scholars have typically proceeded to assemble their own datasets from scratch, tailoring data collection narrowly to the needs of specific research questions, time periods, countries, and sometimes even to a small subset of subnational units within a single country (see Giraudy, Moncada and Snyder (2019)). These datasets are often bounded by the practical constraints of time, funding, and access, and they are rarely designed with reuse or extension in mind. Moreover, there are few centralized or “off-the-shelf” repositories for subnational political data, meaning that researchers frequently must rely on personal networks or direct contact with individual scholars to locate existing data.

A second major challenge concerns temporal coverage. Because compiling subnational data is labor intensive and costly, most existing datasets cover relatively short and selective periods of time. Subnational political data are most readily available for recent decades, when transparency, digitization, and administrative capacity have improved, but systematic longitudinal datasets remain rare. Even when time series exist, they often contain significant temporal gaps, limiting their usefulness for analyzing trends, institutional change, or causal dynamics over time. This temporal thinness has biased much of the literature toward short

term analyses.

A third challenge relates to data standardization. With exceptions, existing subnational datasets frequently rely on measures that are defined or operationalized differently across subnational units, undermining comparability. Heterogeneous indicators across spatial units complicate comparisons within countries and make aggregation difficult. While some SNR scholars have made impressive efforts to harmonize data across subnational units within individual countries (i.e. Giraudy (2015); Ingram (2016); Niedzwiecki (2018)), there have been far fewer attempts to construct datasets that apply identical indicators, coding rules, and variable definitions to subnational units across multiple countries. This limits the potential for cross-national-subnational comparison.

Together, these data challenges have imposed constraints on SNR. Scarcity and fragmentation of data have narrowed case selection, limited descriptive analyses, and hindered systematic hypothesis testing. Gaps in temporal coverage have restricted scholars' ability to study path-dependent processes and long-term institutional change, despite the fact that many subnational political outcomes, such as subnational political regime origins, persistence, and erosion unfold gradually over extended periods. The SPP seeks to mitigate these obstacles by providing systematic, standardized, longitudinal, and cross-national subnational data to support research on various topics, such as subnational political regimes, elections, federalism, legislative politics, among others.

## **3 The Subnational Politics Project (SPP)**

### **3.1 Data Description**

The SPP contains subnational political data for all Latin American federal countries—Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico<sup>1</sup>—spanning the 1983–2024 time period. The project contains 9,623 ob-

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<sup>1</sup>Per its constitution, Venezuela is the fourth presidential federal country in the Americas. We have excluded it from the SPP because the governments of Hugo Chávez (1998-2013) and Nicolás Maduro (2013-2026) have turned the country into a de facto hyper-centralized territorial regime.

servations across 94 variables. Each observation represents either an election or an executive term for a specific state per year (see Table 1 for country-specific breakdowns, and Table A1 for states-specific breakdowns).<sup>2</sup>

Table 1: Dataset Coverage and Key Statistics by Country

Country	Coverage			Elections		Executive
	Units	Period	Years	Executive	Legislative	Terms
Argentina	24	1983–2024	41	252	532	303
Brazil	27	1998–2024	26	189	182	247
Mexico	32	1985–2024	39	220	443 <sup>3</sup>	281
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>1983–2024</b>	—	<b>661</b>	<b>1157</b>	<b>831</b>

The SPP is made up of different datasets, which are classified into three categories based on their substantive focus: Executive Datasets, Legislative Datasets, and Democracy Datasets (Figure 1). These are organized as a series of interconnected datasets that together provide comprehensive geographic and temporal coverage. All datasets can be merged using a consistent country-state-year structure, with observations at the subnational level for each electoral year.

Executive databases follow a country-state-year structure for the president or governor in office.<sup>4</sup> Electoral databases, by contrast, employ a country-state-year structure for executive elections and a country-state-year-chamber structure for legislative elections.<sup>5</sup> Additionally,

<sup>2</sup>A small number of election-years for selected provinces/states in Argentina and Mexico could not be fully validated due to archival limitations. These include: *Argentina*: La Rioja (2015); Salta (1993); San Luis (2019). *Mexico*: Campeche, Colima, Guanajuato, Nuevo León, Querétaro, Sonora (1985); Aguascalientes, Chihuahua, Durango, Guerrero, Michoacán, Puebla, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala, Veracruz (1986); Baja California Sur, Coahuila, Quintana Roo (1987); Chiapas, Jalisco, Morelos, Tabasco (1988); Baja California (1989).

<sup>4</sup>See *National Executive Database (NED)* (Giraudy et al., 2025a), *Subnational Executive Database (SED)* (Giraudy et al., 2025b).

<sup>5</sup>See *Subnational Executive Elections Database (SEED)* (Giraudy et al., 2025c), *Subnational Legislative Elections Database (SLED)* (Giraudy and Gonzalez, 2025b), *Capital Federal Tierra del Fuego Legislatures Database (CFTDFLD)*(Giraudy and Gonzalez, 2025a).

a Subnational Democracy Index provides information on variation in democracy levels at the state level, organized at the country-state-year level.<sup>6 7</sup>

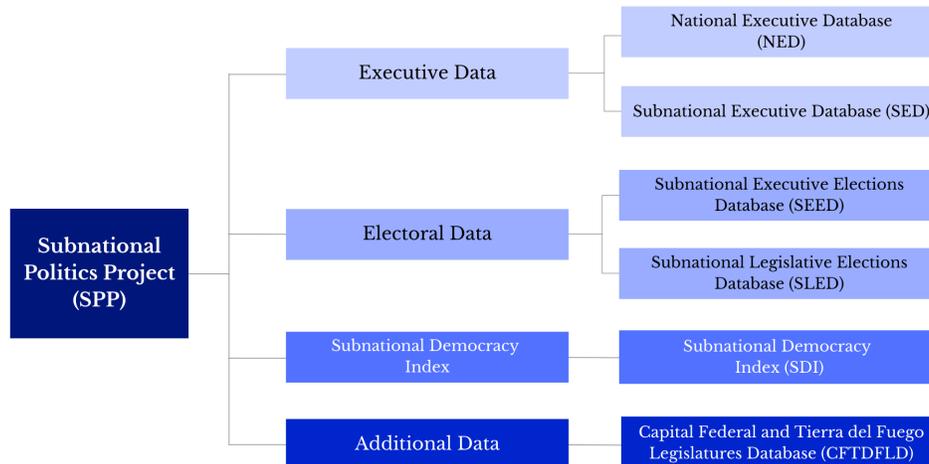


Figure 1: Outline of the SPP Databases

### 3.2 Data Collection

The data were collected using a combination of automated web scraping techniques and manual retrieval from official electoral institutions and open-access repositories, depending on data availability in each subnational unit<sup>8</sup> All raw data were later harmonized to a common subnational structure, standardizing territorial units, election types, party identifiers, and temporal coverage across countries.

<sup>6</sup>See *Subnational Democracy Index (SDI)* (Giraudy, 2025).

<sup>7</sup>Some information collected during the project did not fit within the scope of the core databases but may nevertheless prove valuable to other researchers. For example, the *CFTDFLD* database includes legislative electoral information for the Argentine jurisdictions of Tierra del Fuego and the Federal Capital during periods when they lacked provincial status in the constitution (prior to 1991 and 1994, respectively). The dataset retains the same structure as the main legislative database (*SLED*), thereby facilitating integration with the broader project’s data.

<sup>8</sup>Sources for Argentina: National Electoral Directorate (*Dirección Nacional Electoral*, argentina.gob.ar/dine); National Electoral Chamber (*Cámara Nacional Electoral*); selected Provincial Electoral Tribunals (*Tribunales Electorales Provinciales*); Andy Tow Electoral Repository (*Repositorio Electoral de Andy Tow*, andy-tow.com). Sources for Brazil: Superior Electoral Court (*Tribunal Superior Eleitoral*, tse.jus.br); ElectionsBR Database (*Base de dados ElectionsBR*; Meireles, Silva and Costa (2016)); State Electoral Tribunals (*Tribunais Eleitorais Estaduais*). Sources for Mexico: National Electoral Institute (*Instituto Nacional Electoral*, ine.mx); State Electoral Institutes (*Institutos Electorales Estatales*).

To mitigate fragmentation and comparability problems, the SPP employs three key strategies: (1) standardized subnational units (second-tier government levels)<sup>9</sup>, (2) harmonized coding rules across subnational and national units, and (3) transparent documentation of sources and methodological decisions.<sup>10</sup>

Several tests were conducted to ensure data collection reliability. For instance, for each election-year observation, we verify that (1) candidate vote totals equal valid votes; (2) valid, null, and blank votes sum to total ballots cast; and (3) turnout ratios are consistent with registered voter totals. Executive tenure lengths and legislative seat allocations are cross-checked against statutory rules, including staggered renewal systems in the Argentine provinces. Scraped data are systematically verified against primary electoral authority publications. These procedures ensure arithmetic and structural consistency.

### 3.3 Data Visualization

A central contribution of the SPP is its interactive dashboard,<sup>11</sup> which makes territorial variation visible and accessible. The dashboard enhances both teaching and research by providing intuitive visualizations that allow users to grasp broad patterns quickly while facilitating deeper exploration of subnational political dynamics.

The dashboard offers three main analytical tools. First, interactive maps visualize key variables over time, enabling researchers to observe and compare subnational patterns across countries. Users can download these visualizations for presentations or publications, making temporal and geographic variation immediately apparent. Second, line trend graphs allow users to track continuous variables over time for specific subnational units and to compare trends across subnational units within and across countries. This feature is particularly valuable for making subnational comparisons across countries to examine long-term

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<sup>9</sup>This was particularly important in Mexico for the SLED module, where alliances and parties can differ across electoral districts; we therefore aggregated all observations at the subnational level.

<sup>10</sup>SPP Codebook can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/H96FD> (Giraudy, Gonzalez and Urdinez, 2025)

<sup>11</sup>SPP Dashboard can be found here: <https://subnationalpolitics.com/>

processes, such as democratic erosion, party system change, or shifts in electoral competitiveness. Third, the Chamber Visualization Tool displays the composition of legislative chambers for subnational units in a given year. This tool addresses a particularly challenging data issue in Argentina, where some provinces—such as Buenos Aires, Capital Federal, Catamarca, Corrientes, Formosa, Jujuy, La Rioja, Mendoza, Misiones, Salta and San Luis—renew their chambers every two years using staggered methods. Previously, systematically determining chamber composition for all Argentine provinces in a specific year was extremely difficult. For the first time ever, the SPP’s Chamber Visualization Tool makes this information readily accessible for researchers and scholars.

## 4 Validity Checks and Comparisons to Other Datasets

The SPP provides longitudinal, harmonized subnational political data for Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico spanning the 1983–2024 period. To our knowledge, no other existing dataset combines comparable temporal depth, institutional and electoral granularity, and cross-national subnational coverage. Given the SPP datasets’ time and space coverage breadth, there are few datasets with which to directly validate the SPP data. As is common in large-scale original data collection efforts, the absence of equivalent benchmarks is a consequence of the dataset’s contribution rather than a limitation per se. Accordingly, we adopt a layered validation strategy combining internal validity checks, external validity tests – where partial comparative variables exist–. For validity (internal and external) tests, we focus on the SPP’s Subnational Democracy Indices (SDI), including the SUR Index, the Turnover Index, and the Contestation Index.

### 4.1 Internal Validity

The SPP’s SUR Index is a composite measure of subnational democracy that incorporates executive turnover, party alternation, the effective number of parties (ENP), and margin of

victory (see Giraudy (2015) for a description of this index). Internal validity requires that the overall index (scores) behave consistently with its constitutive conceptual components (scores). To do so we examine (1) pairwise correlations between each component and the composite index (Figure 2, Table 2) and (2) variance contributions of each dimension (Table 3).

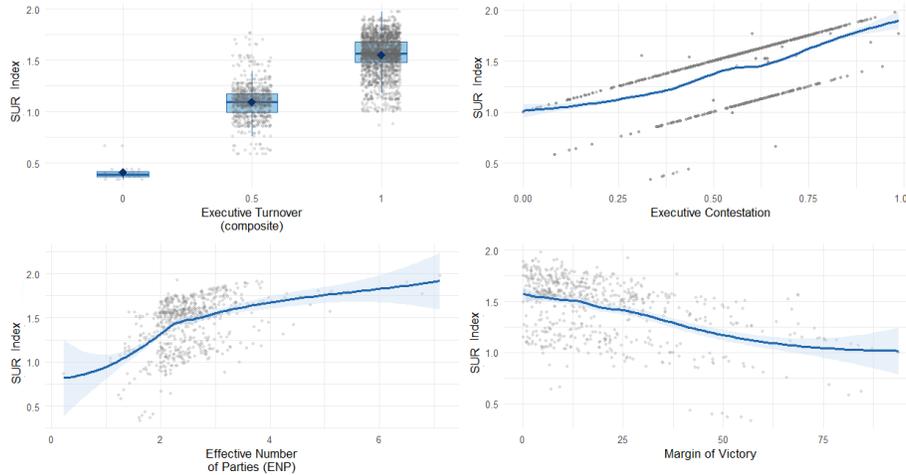


Figure 2: Component-Index Relationship for SUR Index

Figure 2 indicates that, as expected, turnover and alternation are positively associated with the SUR Index scores, while larger victory margins are negatively associated with the index. ENP contributes positively within theoretically plausible ranges. These relationships confirm internal conceptual and empirical coherence of the SUR index.

Table 2: Pairwise Correlation with SUR Index

Variable	r	p-value
Executive Turnover (composite)	0.77	<0.001
Executive Contestation	0.59	<0.001
Effective Number of Parties (ENP)	0.44	<0.001
Margin of Victory	-0.45	<0.001

*Note:* Pearson r; listwise deletion. p-values from two-tailed test.

A closer inspection of the individual components provides stronger evidence of construct validity. SUR Index's Executive Turnover exhibits the highest correlation with the index ( $r = 0.77$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and explains the largest share of its variance ( $R^2 = 0.597$ ), followed by Executive Contestation ( $r = 0.59$ ;  $R^2 = 0.351$ ), while Margin of Victory shows the expected negative relationship ( $r = -0.45$ ) and, alongside ENP, accounts for a smaller but statistically significant portion of variance.

Where temporal overlap permits, we compare the SUR Index to prior subnational democracy measures, including Giraudy (2015), Fidalgo (2021), Pérez Sandoval (2022), V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2025). For overlapping country-years, we assess both Pearson and rank-order correlations. Across all three countries, the SUR Index displays consistent and statistically significant correlations with the three external validation measures (Figure 3a, 3b and 3c). Regarding consistency with existing measures, correlations with Giraudy (2015) original index are strong in Argentina ( $r = 0.83$ ) and Mexico ( $r = 0.75$ ). Correlations with Fidalgo's Subnational Democracy Index (2021) are similarly strong and consistent across Argentina ( $r = 0.76$ ), Brazil ( $r = 0.75$ ), and Mexico ( $r = 0.65$ ), all significant at  $p < 0.001$ . The relationship with Pérez Sandoval's index (2022) is moderate but statistically significant in all three cases (Argentina:  $r = 0.58$ ; Brazil:  $r = 0.55$ ; Mexico:  $r = 0.46$ ). Taken together, these results provide strong cross-national evidence of the SUR Index's external validity. Differences in scale reflect alternative operationalizations rather than directional disagreement, supporting external validation.

Table 3: Variance Explained ( $R^2$ ) – Bivariate OLS

<b>Variable</b>	$R^2$
Executive Turnover (composite)	0.597
Executive Contestation	0.351
Margin of Victory	0.203
Effective Number of Parties (ENP)	0.197

*Note:* Each component regressed separately on SUR Executive Index.

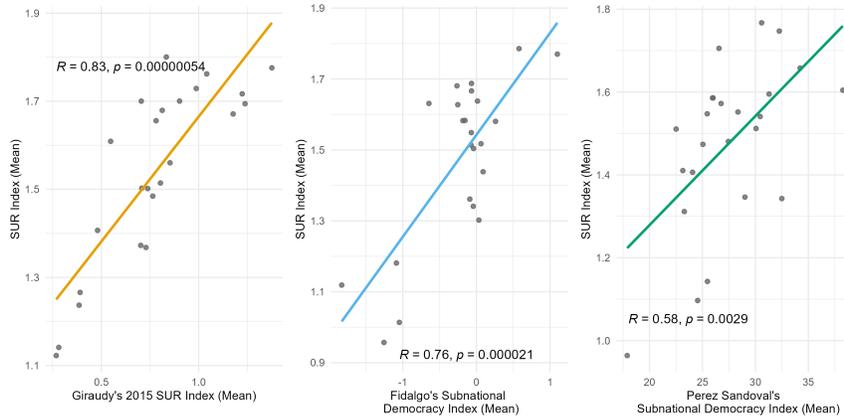
Bivariate OLS regressions.

## 4.2 External Validity

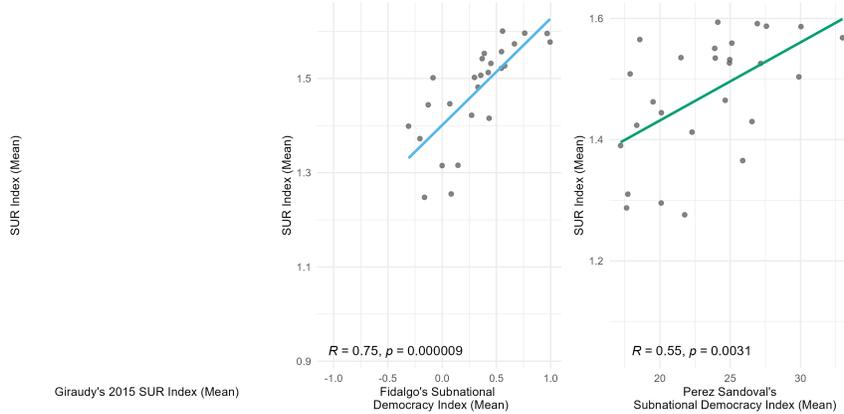
Single-country studies of Latin American countries have produced detailed measures on subnational democracy in Brazil (Borges, 2007; Fidalgo, 2021), and Argentina (Gervasoni, 2018), offering valuable insights into within-country variation. A smaller set of comparative datasets extends analysis across multiple countries (Giraudy, 2015; Fidalgo, 2021; Pérez Sandoval, 2022), enabling cross-national comparisons (see Table 4 for data-specific breakdowns).

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of Subnational Democracy Datasets in Latin America

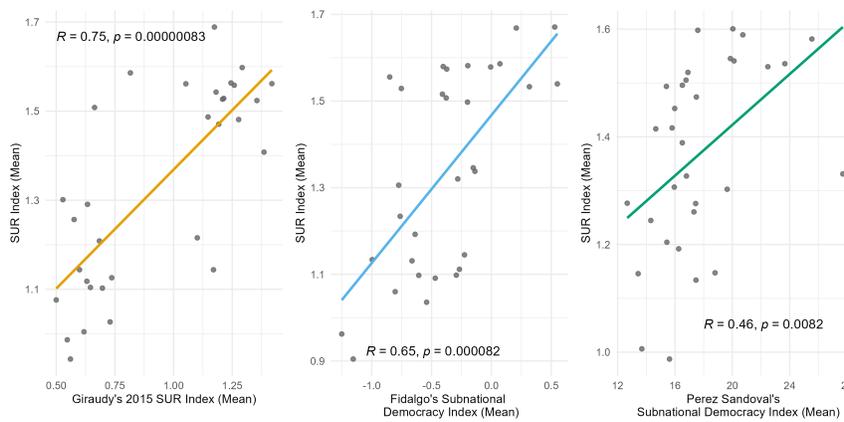
Dataset	Countries	Period	Units	Key Dimensions & Variables	Accessibility
Borges (2007)	Brazil	1982–1998	27	<b>Participation, Contestation:</b> Effective number of votes/total population, gubernatorial reelection/co-partisan succession, governor’s party vote-share, legislative seats controlled	Article
Giraudy (2015)	Argentina, Mexico	1983–2009	56	<b>Contestation:</b> Number of executive/legislative alternations, ENP in subnational legislature	Book appendix
Gervasoni (2018)	Argentina	1983–2015	24	<b>Contestation, Effective Suffrage, Institutional Constraints, Liberal Rights:</b> Battery of items in expert survey	Book appendix
Fidalgo (2021)	Argentina	1980–2016	—	<b>Executive contestation, Turnover, Legislative Control</b>	Book appendix
Pérez Sandoval (2022)	USA, Canada, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, India	1980–2021	308	<b>Contestation, Effective Suffrage, Institutional Constraints, Liberal Rights:</b> Battery of items in expert survey	Book appendix
V-Dem (2025)	202	1900–2024	—	Democracy indices, participation, deliberation	<b>Public (open) / Public Dashboard</b>
<b>SPP (2025)</b>	<b>Argentina, Brazil, Mexico</b>	<b>1983–2024</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>Contestation, Participation, Representation:</b> SUR indices, complete electoral results (executive/legislative), competitiveness, turnout, party system data	<b>Public (open) / Public Dashboard</b>



(a) Argentina



(b) Brazil



(c) Mexico

Figure 3: Comparison between SUR Index, SUR Giraudy (2015), Fidalgo (2021) and Pérez Sandoval (2022) by Country

## 5 Applications: Subnational Democracy

The SPP provides high-quality, systematically collected data that enables researchers to address a wide range of questions in comparative politics. The dataset can be used for analyses of the origins and consequences of subnational undemocratic regimes, multilevel party systems, legislative dominance, gendered political dynamics, and electoral competition, among other topics. In addition, SPP variables can be incorporated as controls in studies of public goods provision, fiscal institutions, civil violence, social movements and uprisings, intergovernmental transfers, and welfare states. Finally, the SPP allows scholars to address foundational descriptive questions that previously lacked empirical grounding. We rely on the research program on subnational democracy to demonstrate the SPP’s utility across three different areas of research within this program.

### 5.1 Subnational Democracy Variation and Continuity Within and Across Countries

A research program initiated by O’Donnell (1993) in the 1990s, advanced by Gibson (2005) seminal work on subnational authoritarianism, and further developed by other Latin Americanists (Benton, 2012; Behrend, 2011; Gervasoni, 2010; Giraudy, 2010) in the 2010s has fundamentally reshaped our understanding of territorial variation in democratic regimes. Despite these advances, empirical evidence documenting the evolution of subnational democracy within countries, across countries, and over time has remained scarce and only limited to the 1990s and early 2000s<sup>12</sup>. As a result, scholars have had limited capacity to systematically describe trends in subnational democratic performance in the 2020s, let alone identify the causes of subnational democratic erosion or deepening in Latin American countries. Most of the existing knowledge about subnational undemocratic regimes (SURs) was produced in the mid-2010s. After 2015, however, scholarly attention to subnational democracy declined

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<sup>12</sup>Exceptions include Gervasoni (2010, 2018), Giraudy (2010, 2015), Fidalgo (2021), Pérez Sandoval (2022).

markedly, driven in large part by the absence of systematic data for the post-2015 period. As a result, the trajectory of subnational regimes over the last decade has remained largely understudied, leaving important gaps in our understanding of whether and how SURs have persisted or changed in recent years. Evidence from the SPP shows that SURs have not disappeared altogether.

Density plots of the SUR Index across all years reveal the persistence—or “stickiness”—of these regimes (see Figures 4a, 4b., 4c), showing that SURs continue to exist despite widespread expectations of their disappearance. The SUR Index incorporates gubernatorial and party turnover alongside the effective number of parties (ENP) and margin of victory to establish levels of subnational democracy within countries. Higher (lower) values of the SUR Index indicate higher (lower) levels of subnational democracy.

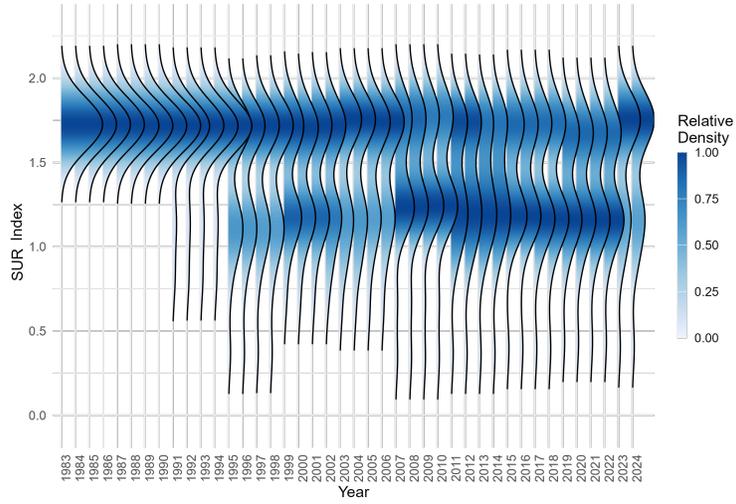
Figure 4a presents the temporal evolution of subnational democracy in Argentina from 1983 to 2024. The density ridgeline plot reveals that the immediate post-transition period (1983-1989) exhibits higher average levels of democratic quality across Argentine provinces. This pattern is attributable to the novelty of democratic competition following the military dictatorship (1976-1983): new governors and parties occupied executive positions (generating high turnover values), and electoral competition was primarily structured around two major parties, resulting in more balanced contestation. However, beginning in the 1990s, the distribution shows increased variation as gubernatorial reelection became more common and incumbent advantages consolidated. This trend intensified throughout the 2000s and particularly during the 2010s, persisting through 2024.

Figure 4b illustrates this process for Brazil from 1998 to 2024. The Brazilian case presents systematically lower average SUR Index values compared to Argentina, though the temporal trend remains relatively stable through the 2000s. Beginning in 2011, however, subnational variation increases markedly, with the distribution widening considerably through 2024. Notably, the Ridgeline plot reveals the emergence of outlier states: some Brazilian states exhibit exceptionally high democratic quality from 2014 to 2018, while others display concerning au-

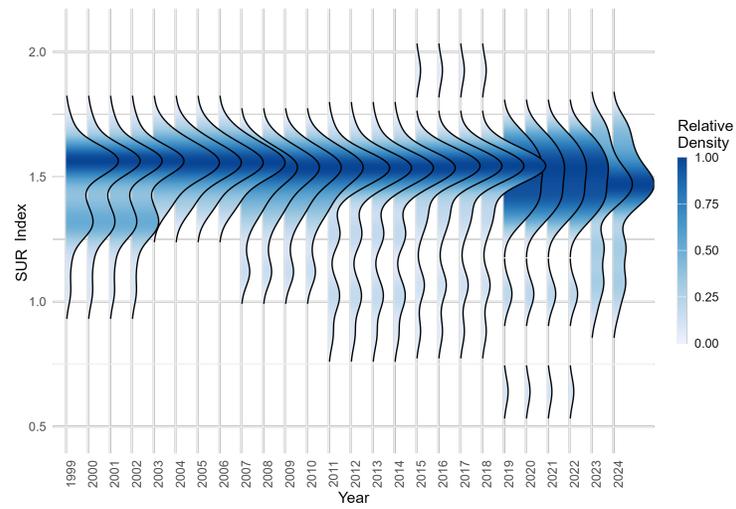
thoritarian tendencies from 2019 to 2022.

Figure 4c presents the Mexican case, which offers a particularly interesting contrast. Mexico begins the period (1985-1989) with substantially lower average levels of subnational democracy compared to both Argentina and Brazil, reflecting the country's single-party dominance under the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Throughout the 1990s, variation increases as the process of democratic opening advances unevenly across states. A striking pattern emerges from 1998 onward: states begin clustering into distinct groups—more democratic and less democratic—creating a clear bimodal distribution. This bimodality persists through the 2000s, visualized in the Ridgeline plot as two distinct peaks within the yearly distributions, reflecting Mexico's "two-speed democratization" where some states (particularly in the north and center) transitioned more rapidly while others (particularly in the south) remained under PRI hegemony. This bifurcation continued until 2014, when Mexico's political-electoral reform, the so-called Pacto por México, contributed to a notable shift: the distribution becomes more compressed and shifts rightward, indicating that Mexican states became, on average, significantly more democratic. The post-2014 period shows reduced bimodality and higher average democratic quality (Eaton and Giraudy, 2026), though some heterogeneity persists through 2024.

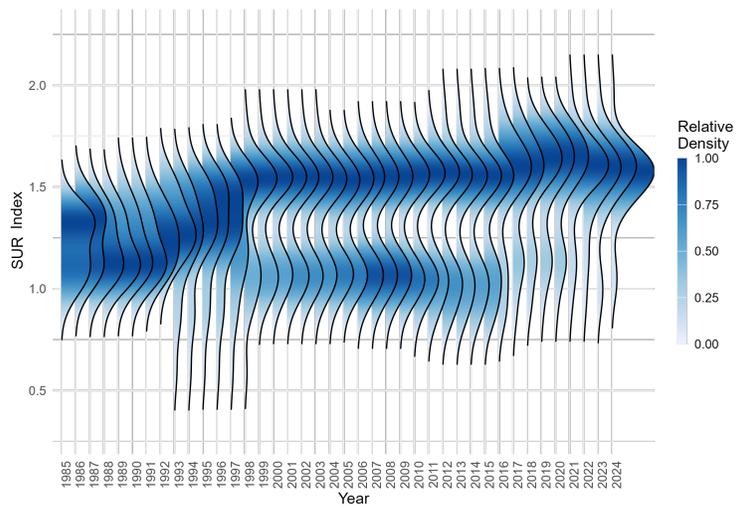
Another striking finding of the SPP data is that the trajectories of SURs differ markedly across countries. While SURs persist in Argentina and Brazil through present day, they appear to have subsided in Mexico. With this new descriptive data, the SPP prompts researchers to ask an important research question: what country-level dynamics account for these divergent patterns? Recent work by Eaton and Giraudy (2026) points to the importance of varieties of federalism in shaping the persistence and erosion of subnational undemocratic regimes, but more research needs to be done to elucidate these country differences.



(a) Argentina (1983-2024)



(b) Brazil (1999-2024)



(c) Mexico (1985-2024)

Figure 4: Ridgeline Plot SUR Index

## 5.2 Legislatures and Subnational Democratic Erosion

Recent research in American politics identifies state legislatures, rather than governors, as the primary drivers of democratic backsliding in the United States. Specifically, Campbell and Karch (2026) argue that most strategies of democratic backsliding in U.S. states are enacted by state legislatures, which do not always operate independently. Unified partisan control of the legislature and the executive branch, they note, facilitates gubernatorial involvement. These strategies are sometimes reinforced by state supreme courts, which declare them constitutionally permissible. At the same time, such practices can generate conflicts over separation of powers, as partisan legislative majorities deploy them to consolidate authority and expand their policymaking power at the expense of other branches of government.

One of the central contributions of the SPP is to provide systematic data on the composition of subnational legislatures, alongside data on executive branch composition. These data allow scholars of Latin America to engage more directly with debates on subnational democratic backsliding that have been far more empirically tractable in the United States, where detailed legislative data have long been readily available. By assembling comparable cross-national information on subnational legislative configurations, the SPP enables scholars to investigate whether patterns observed in the U.S. context travel to other federal systems.

Preliminary evidence suggests that similar dynamics may be at work in parts of Latin America. Figure 5 plots the relationship between levels of subnational democracy and the partisan composition of subnational legislatures, measured as the effective number of parties in the legislature (ENPL). The results indicate that in Argentina and Mexico, lower levels of legislative fragmentation—reflecting greater unified partisan control—are associated with lower levels of subnational democracy, as captured by the SUR index. In other words, where a single party or coalition dominates the legislature, subnational democratic performance tends to be weaker, following a similar pattern than the one observed in the United States by Campbell and Karch (2026). Brazil, by contrast, appears as an outlier: the relationship

between legislative composition and levels of subnational democracy is weak or nonexistent. These similarities and differences open up new avenues for comparative research on the legislative drivers of subnational democratic erosion across federal systems in the Americas, a research agenda that would have not been possible without the SPP data.

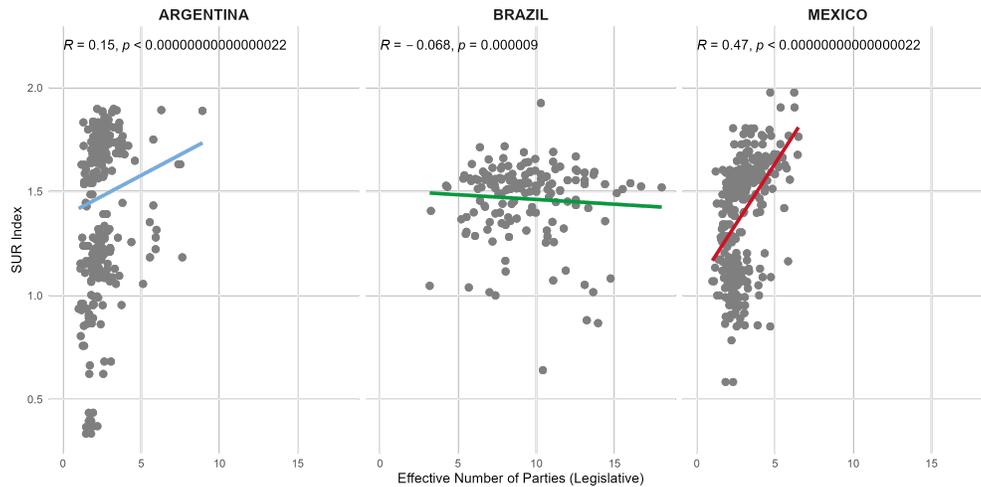


Figure 5: Correlation between ENPL and SUR Index

### 5.3 Reconceptualizing National-Level Measures of Democracy

A promising line of research initiated by Giraudy and Pribble (2018) argues that existing concepts and measures of national democracy are incomplete because they lack a territorial dimension. The authors argued that conceptually, full democracy presumes that all citizens—regardless of where they reside within a country—can equally exercise their political rights, including voting, civic participation, and free expression. Yet national-level democracy measures implicitly assume, rather than explicitly assess, the territorial distribution of these rights. Empirically, this omission can be misleading, as aggregate measures may obscure substantial subnational variation and lead scholars to overestimate the extent of national democratic consolidation. Giraudy and Pribble (2018) argue that theoretically, ignoring territorial inequality in political rights limits our ability to identify how multi-level political interactions shape national democratic outcomes. Incorporating a territorial

perspective reveals how subnational institutions, actors, and conflicts can either sustain or undermine democracy, even in countries that appear democratic at the national level. The authors propose a new national-level measure of democracy, the so-called *Adjusted Measure of Democracy*, which integrates territorial inequality into existing national-level measures of democracy.

Until recently, the absence of systematic subnational data prevented the calculation of such adjusted measures across countries. The new data compiled by the SPP make it possible to address this limitation by systematically incorporating subnational democratic inequalities into national-level measures. Figure 6 presents national electoral democracy scores for Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico using the V-Dem electoral democracy index. At first glance, the national indicator suggests relatively strong democratic performance across the three countries, with scores ranging in the 0.8s for Argentina and Brazil, and in the 0.6s for Mexico. Viewed exclusively through national indicators, these scores suggest that Argentina and Brazil achieved relatively high levels of electoral democracy following their democratic transitions in the early and mid-1980s, while Mexico experienced a slower but still meaningful increase in democratic levels, especially after the 2000 transition, with some notable decline towards the 2020s.

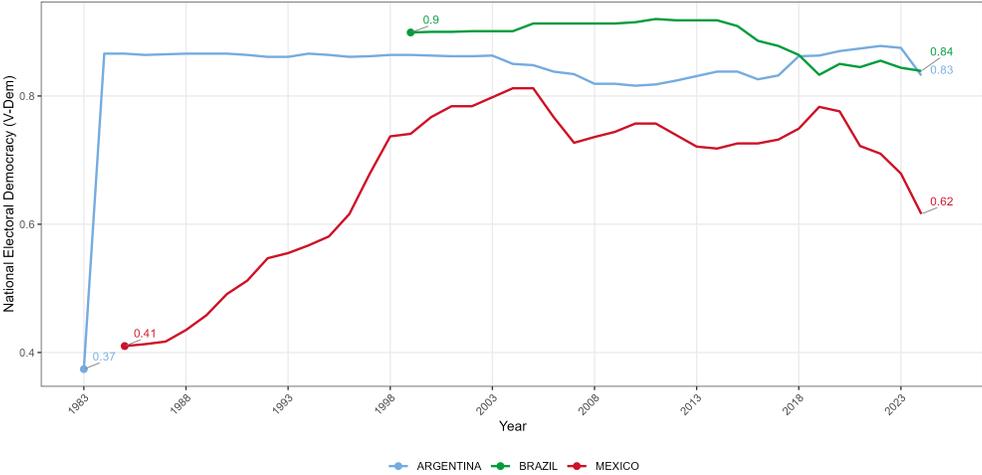


Figure 6: V-Dem Electoral Democracy

However, once territorial inequality is incorporated into the analysis through the adjusted measure of democracy, the interpretation of these trajectories changes. As shown in Figure 6, the national V-Dem scores suggest clear contrasts among the three countries, with Argentina and Brazil appearing to perform consistently better than Mexico throughout the period. However, once territorial inequality is incorporated into the measure, interesting differences appear. Figure 7 uses Giraudy and Pribble’s Adjusted Measure to weigh subnational democratic inequality within countries<sup>13</sup>. As reported in the figure, starting in 2018 Brazil’s scores surpass those of Argentina, suggesting that the wide and pronounced territorial inequalities of subnational democracy in Argentina penalize the country’s overall democratic score. Another interesting finding is that the gap between Argentina and Brazil vis-à-vis Mexico becomes smaller, indicating that the less pronounced subnational inequality in Mexico improves the country’s overall score.

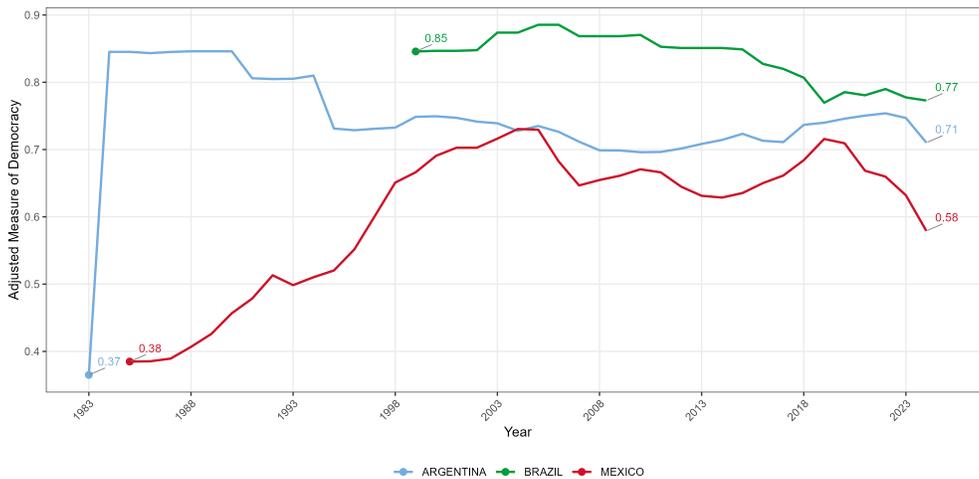


Figure 7: Giraudy and Pribble (2018) Adjusted Measure of Democracy

Perhaps the most significant finding of adjusting national measures by territorial inequality is that, as shown in Figure 8, all three scores of national democracy become lower in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, revealing that these countries should not be regarded as

<sup>13</sup>Giraudy and Pribble (2018) create a Territorial Inequality Gini Index, which is then used to calculate the Adjusted Measure of Democracy as follows:  $Adjusted\ Measure = (National\ Measure) \times (1 - Territorial\ Gini\ Index)$ .

democratic as they are typically considered to be.

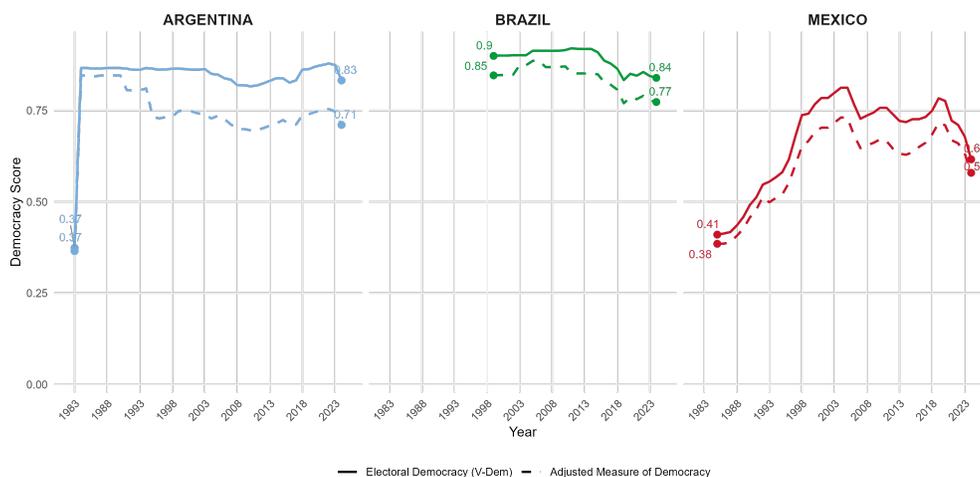


Figure 8: V-Dem Electoral Democracy vs. Giraudy & Pribble (2018) Adjusted Measure of Democracy

These findings carry important implications for how we assess democratic performance across countries. For instance, empirically, scholars may have overestimated the extent to which countries have achieved full democracy in the last 20 years. Theoretically, scholars may have underscored or omitted the role that multilevel political dynamics play in shaping national democratic outcomes. With the new SPP data, more empirical and theoretical rigor can sharpen our understanding of national level democracy in Latin America.

## 6 Conclusions

This article introduced the SPP, a new set of six interrelated datasets designed to address longstanding empirical challenges in the study of subnational politics in the Global South. Despite the increasing importance of subnational research in comparative politics, scholars have long faced constraints stemming from the scarcity, fragmentation, and uneven comparability of subnational data. The SPP seeks to mitigate these limitations by providing harmonized and longitudinal political data for the federal systems of Argentina, Brazil, and

Mexico from 1983 to 2024. The project integrates multiple datasets covering subnational executive branches and elections, legislative composition, electoral dynamics, and subnational democracy. The validation exercises reported in this article indicate that the data and indices behave consistently with theoretical expectations and show substantial convergence with existing measures where comparisons are possible. By making systematic subnational political data publicly available, the SPP lowers barriers to entry into subnational research and facilitates cumulative knowledge building. The dataset can be used to address a wide range of questions about federalism, subnational regimes, electoral competition, legislative politics, and territorial inequality in democratic representation. We hope that the SPP will serve as a foundation for future research on subnational politics in Latin America and beyond.

## Data availability

SPP datasets are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/spp>

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# Tables and Figures

Table A1: Dataset Coverage and Key Statistics by Subnational Unit

Unit	Coverage			Total Elections		Election-Years
	N	Period	Years	Executive	Legislative	Executive
<b>Argentina</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>1983–2024</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>252</b>	<b>532</b>	<b>235</b>
Buenos Aires	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Catamarca	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Chaco	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Chubut	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires	1	1996–2024	28	8	14	7
Córdoba	1	1983–2024	41	9	21	10
Corrientes	1	1983–2024	41	10	21	10
Entre Ríos	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Formosa	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Jujuy	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
La Pampa	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
La Rioja	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Mendoza	1	1983–2024	41	8	21	10

*(continued)*

Table A1 –

Unit	Coverage			Total Elections		Election-Years
	N	Period	Years	Executive	Legislative	Executive
Misiones	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Neuquén	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Río Negro	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Salta	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
San Juan	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
San Luis	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Santa Cruz	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Santa Fe	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
Santiago del Estero	1	1983–2024	41	10	21	10
Tierra del Fuego	1	1991–2024	33	9	17	8
Tucumán	1	1983–2024	41	11	21	10
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>1998–2024</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>162</b>
Acre	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Alagoas	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Amapá	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6

(continued)

Table A1 –

Unit	Coverage			Total Elections		Election-Years
	N	Period	Years	Executive	Legislative	Executive
Amazonas	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Bahia	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Ceará	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Distrito Federal	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Espírito Santo	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Goiás	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Maranhão	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Mato Grosso	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Mato Grosso do Sul	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Minas Gerais	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Pará	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Paraíba	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Paraná	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Pernambuco	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Piauí	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Rio de Janeiro	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6

(continued)

Table A1 –

Unit	Coverage			Total Elections		Election-Years
	N	Period	Years	Executive	Legislative	Executive
Rio Grande do Norte	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Rio Grande do Sul	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Rondônia	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Roraima	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Santa Catarina	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
São Paulo	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Sergipe	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
Tocantins	1	1998–2024	26	7	6	6
<b>Mexico</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>1985–2024</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>443</b>	<b>192</b>
Aguascalientes	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Baja California	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Baja California Sur	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Campeche	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Chiapas	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Chihuahua	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6

(continued)

Table A1 –

Unit	Coverage			Total Elections		Election-Years
	N	Period	Years	Executive	Legislative	Executive
Ciudad de México	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
Coahuila	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Colima	1	1985–2024	39	8	13	6
Durango	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Guanajuato	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
Guerrero	1	1985–2024	39	8	13	6
Hidalgo	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
Jalisco	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
México	1	1985–2024	39	5	13	6
Michoacán	1	1985–2024	39	8	13	6
Morelos	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Nayarit	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
Nuevo León	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Oaxaca	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
Puebla	1	1985–2024	39	9	13	6
Querétaro	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6

(continued)

Table A1 –

Unit	Coverage			Total Elections		Election-Years
	N	Period	Years	Executive	Legislative	Executive
Quintana Roo	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
San Luis Potosí	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
Sinaloa	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Sonora	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Tabasco	1	1985–2024	39	8	13	6
Tamaulipas	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Tlaxcala	1	1985–2024	39	7	13	6
Veracruz	1	1985–2024	39	8	13	6
Yucatán	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
Zacatecas	1	1985–2024	39	6	13	6
<b>Total (3 countries)</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>1983–2024</b>	—	<b>661</b>	<b>1157</b>	<b>661</b>