DEMOCRACY IN SPANISH AMERICA: THE EARLY ADOPTION OF UNIVERSAL MALE SUFFRAGE, 1810-1853[1]

José Antonio Aguilar, Eduardo Posada-Carbó and Eduardo Zimmermann

Abstract: Universal manhood suffrage – the right to an equal vote for all adult males, regardless of racial, economic, or literacy conditions, as adopted by some Spanish American countries in the 1850s, at a time when very few countries in the Western world had done so – is the subject of this article. It considers in more detail the experience of New Granada (Colombia), with some comparative references, especially to Argentina and Mexico, in the wider context of the 1848 European revolutions. It offers a novel contribution to the wider historiography of the suffrage while also contributing to a growing literature that seeks to decentre the history of democracy. Additionally, in as much as issues related to the suffrage were central to the process of constitution-making, what we detail here has some bearing on the renewed interest on constitutional history. While this is above all an engagement with history, it is hoped that its findings will have relevance to theoretical discussions among social scientists on the expansion of the suffrage.

In a ceremony attended by a large crowd on 21 May 1853, the President of New Granada[2] signed a constitution adopting universal male suffrage, a suffrage celebrated by the press in Bogotá as a 'fundamental institution of democracies', and welcomed in the distant town of Roldanillo's Democratic Society as 'holy conquest of enlightened reason'. 'All Granadine citizens', meaning males over 21 years old, now acquired the 'right to vote directly and by secret ballot'.[3] New Granada was not the only Spanish American country to have adopted

[1] Our special thanks to Malcolm Deas, Michael Drolet, Margaret Lavinia Anderson and Louise Fawcett for having read and commented extensively on the various versions of this article. In the process of revising this piece, we received very helpful feedback and suggestions from two sets of referees, to whom were are also grateful.

[2] Colombia today.

[3] *Constitución política de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá, 1853), 42, and *El Neogranadino*, 20 and 27 May 1853. On the Roldanillo celebrations, James Sanders, *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World. Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham and London, 2014), 110, 265. Universal male suffrage and direct elections were approved for the elections of the president and vice-president, magistrates of the Supreme Court and the general attorney, senators, representatives and provincial governors; *Constitución*, 12.

universal male suffrage in the 1850s. Venezuela passed a similar measure in 1858 – though a subsequent coup impeded its implementation. Although the Argentine constitution of 1853 did not deal explicitly with the issue, the courts there, reasoning that all citizens were subject to legal equality under the law, declared that the constitution had given the vote to all male citizens. In Mexico, the 1857 constitution granted citizenship, and thus the right to vote, to all males over 21 who led an 'honest way of life' – a right both contemporaries and later historians understood as 'universal suffrage'.[4]

Universal manhood suffrage – the right to an equal vote for all adult males, regardless of racial, economic, or literacy conditions, as adopted by some Spanish American countries in the 1850s – is the subject of this article. It considers in more detail the experience of New Granada, with some comparative references, especially to Argentina and Mexico. It focuses on the extent of the suffrage, though acknowledging this is only one element of a larger picture that included questions regarding the ballot, direct elections, unicameralism, balance of powers between the central and provincial governments and between the executive and the legislative. It offers an explanation for the drivers behind the relatively early adoption of the measure rather than a discussion of its consequences. In sum, we examine the reasons and circumstances under which universal male suffrage was adopted by some Spanish American countries at a time when very few countries in the Western world had done so.

The article is structured around four sections. The first sets the story in the Atlantic context, locating it in the moment of the mid-nineteenth century within the wider age of

[4] David Bushnell, 'La evolución del derecho de sufragio en Venezuela', *Boletín Histórico*, 29 (1972), 204-5; 'El sufragio en la Argentina y en Colombia hasta 1853', *Boletín del Instituto de Historia del Derecho*, 19 (1968), 28-9; Eduardo Zimmermann, 'Elections and the Origins of an Argentine Democratic Tradition, 1810-1880', *Kellogg Institute Working Paper*, 365, January 2010; and José Antonio Aguilar, 'El veredicto del pueblo: el gobierno representativo y las elecciones en México, 1809-1846', in Aguilar (ed.), *Las elecciones y el gobierno representativo en México, 1810-1910* (México, 2010), 157.

democratic revolutions. It also establishes more precision to a term that continued to be used with a great deal of ambiguity in common parlance, legal texts and academic circles, claiming universality while keeping categories of exclusion. And it places the discussion and the argument against the backdrop of recent historiographical developments. The second section examines the relatively broad suffrage adopted in the Hispanic world during the independence period, looking into the nature and reasons for its inclusiveness, as a way of providing an account of the antecedents of universal manhood suffrage in mid-nineteenth century. While recognising some key commonalities with the Spanish peninsula, we offer a perspective that underlines American singularities and its distinct and multiple trajectories. Those trajectories are the subject of the third section, which includes a comparative overview of the various institutional paths to voting rights after independence, and discusses the extent to which the early experience with a wide suffrage determined the adoption of universal male suffrage by the 1850s. The final section focuses on New Granada to show that, even if suffrage reversals were possible, the dynamics of electoral competition worked in favour of expanding the electorate. This argument is explored by looking at the politics of New Granada between 1848 and 1853, in the context of the European revolutions which brought the issue of 'universal suffrage' to the fore.

By placing the story in an Atlantic context, this article aims at contributing to the wider literature on the history of the suffrage.[5] By highlighting the early Spanish American experience with universal male suffrage, it also aims at contributing to a growing literature that seeks to decentre the history of democracy.[6] Additionally, in as much as issues related to

[5] See the historiographical discussion in the next section.

[6] John Markoff, 'Where and When was Democracy Invented?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 41:4 (1999), 660-690; John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, (London, 2009); Joanna Innes and Mark Philp, 'Introduction', in Innes and Philp (eds.), *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions. America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750-1850* (Oxford, 2013), 7.

the suffrage were central to the process of constitution-making, what we detail here has some bearing on the renewed interest on constitutional history.[7] While this is above all an engagement with history, it is hoped that its findings will have relevance to the theoretical discussions among social scientists on the expansion of the suffrage.

I

Granting the right to vote to all adult males in mid-nineteenth-century was a relatively novel experience, though the idea itself was not new. While it had earlier advocates, universal manhood suffrage was first established by revolutionary France in 1793, but was never put into practice.[8] It continued to have support among radicals,[9] although it was only until 1848 when it was reintroduced by the French Second Republic, 'an experiment, a venture into unknown waters'.[10] For fleeting moments, the measure accompanied the revolutionary spirit of 1848 in Switzerland and parts of Italy, including the Roman republic in 1849.[11] Germany followed in 1867, when, as Margaret Lavinia Anderson observed, 'the franchise was

---

[7] George Athan Billias, *American Constitutionalism Heard Round the World, 1776-1989. A Global Perspective* (New York and London, 2009); and Linda Colley, *The Gung, the Ship and the Pen. Warfare, Constitutions and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 2021).

[8] Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1996), 103.

[9] See, for example, *People's Charter and National Petition* (Kilmarcock, 1839), 2.

[10] Charles Seymour and Donald Paige Frary, *How the world votes. The Story of Democratic Developments in Elections* (Springfield, Mass., 1918), I, 352.

[11] Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851* (Cambridge, 1994), 138-46. Germany is often cited as another case where 'universal suffrage' was adopted in 1848; but it is not clear to us that the expansion of the suffrage in Germany during these years amounted to what we will be defining here later in the article as 'universal manhood suffrage', since the resolution passed by the *Vorparlament* (self-appointed group of notables) on 4 April 1848, calling for a constituent assembly, granted the vote to 'every adult independent subject of the state', while the subsequent National Assembly that met in Frankfurt passed a voting law on 4 December 1849 that excluded those receiving poor relief from public or communal funds. See Ernest Rudolf Huber, ed., *Dokumente zur Deutschen Verfassungsgeschichte*, Bd. 1 (Stuttgart, 1961, in particular 271-74, 324, and 390. Our thanks to Margaret Lavinia Anderson for her translation and explanation of the relevant measures.

practically a novum for Europe'.[12] Two years later, republican Spain incorporated it but only briefly, to be brought back under the *Restauración* in 1890.[13] So for most European countries, universal male suffrage was a late nineteenth century or early twentieth century development. It was also a late development in that cradle of modern democracy, the United States. Scholars of US history highlight that the suffrage there had 'always been extraordinarily widespread … even before the country gained its independence'.[14] This was, however, a democracy of white people, whose advances during the first half of the nineteenth century run almost in the opposite direction of the rights of blacks and Native Americans.[15] On the eve of the Civil War, slavery in the south and the continued general exclusion of free men of colour were by themselves the very negation of universal manhood suffrage. Slavery also explains its negation at the time in Brazil, though the country experienced a broad suffrage that included free men of all races until the literacy restrictions introduced in 1881 drastically reduced the electorate.[16]

The adoption of universal male suffrage by some Spanish American countries by the mid-nineteenth century, the subject of this article, can thus be seen as part of the precocious,

---

[12] Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy. Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 2000), 5.

[13] Carlos Dardé, 'Citizenship and Political Representation in Spain, 1812-1923', in Fernando Catroga and Pedro Tavares de Almeida (eds.), *Res pública. Citizenship and political representation in Portugal, 1820-1926* (Lisbon, 2011), 315-19.

[14] Donald Ratcliffe, 'The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1778-1828', *Journal of the Early Republic* , 33:2 (Summer 2013), 220. See also Gary Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion. The Paradox of American Government* (Princeton and Oxford, 2015), 17-8, 155-6; and Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote. The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York, 2000). We thank Andrew Robertson for his valuable insights on US suffrage restrictions.

[15] Robert H. Wiebe, *Self Rule. A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago and London, 1995), 16.

[16] Jeffrey D. Needell, *The Sacred Cause. The Abolitionist Movement, Afro-Brazilian Mobilization, and Imperial Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (Stanford, 2020), 88.

if limited experiment with that institution in a handful of European countries. Such experiments were part of a larger trajectory which often underwent alternation between expansion and contraction of voting rights. Indeed, its reintroduction by the Second French Republic was followed shortly after by its contraction and, if it survived under the Empire of Napoleon III, it did so in an atmosphere of disenchantment among those who had previously placed their hopes in *suffrage universelle* only to see it now devouring the Republic and validating imperial rule.[17] The Spanish American experiments took place within a few years of the revolutionary measure in 1848 but after its subsequent *grande deception* that led to Louis Napoleon's coup d'état in 1851 – when the European revolutions had 'come to an end', and 'the reaction era of the 1850s began'.[18] Not so, it would seem, on the other side of the Atlantic, as a new wave of reforms swept the region, although in some countries the franchise rolled back later.

A powerful political slogan that peaked during the mid-nineteenth-century, 'universal suffrage', was an expression full of ambiguities. As commonly used, 'universal' excluded women. 'WE DEMAND UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE', the People's Charter stated in Britain – yet it excluded the insane, convicted criminals, minors, aliens, and women. In other countries, soldiers on active duty, clergymen, and debtors were also often excluded. And in nineteenth century Europe, 'universal suffrage' almost always omitted, sometimes silently, sometimes explicitly, economic dependents, such as domestic servants and stable boys.[19]

---

[17] Malcolm Crook, 'Universal Suffrage as Counter-Revolution? Electoral Mobilisation under the Second Republic in France, 1848, 1851', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 28 (2015); and J. A. W. Gunn, 'French Republicans and the Suffrage: The Birth of the Doctrine of False Consciousness', *French History*, 221:1 (2008)

[18] Sperber, *The European Revolutions*, 238.

[19] Hence the references in the literature to the advent of 'universal suffrage' in revolutionary France in 1792, which extended the franchise but did not include along with women, economically dependent males – similar to the German case discussed above. See Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution*, 80. The literature often refers to the establishment of universal male suffrage in El Salvador in 1841, and Greece in 1844. In both cases, however, the constitution of the electoral

Suffrage could also be 'universal' but 'unequal', as in Prussia in 1849, where a complex system of indirect voting weighted voters according to the amount of taxes they paid.[20] The term 'universal suffrage' was usually not discussed in isolation, but together with other measures related to voting systems, including direct elections. 'Universal suffrage, annual Parliaments and election by ballot' were, according to Bentham, the 'words commonly […] employed', knitted together to form a 'whole', 'for expressing the essential features of Radical Reform'.[21] An all-embracing concept, its supporters raised it as a banner of hope. 'Universal suffrage' would afford 'to every man a safe guarantee for individual liberty' read an 1838 pamphlet, while, for The People's Charter, it would bring 'peace' and 'prosperity' to the nation.[22] By the mid-nineteenth century, 'universal suffrage' had become the term most closely associated with both the sovereignty of the people and democracy. For some French contemporaries, the adoption of universal manhood suffrage in 1848 was '*la révolution véritable*', its '*fait capital*'.[23] Similar meanings were atributed to the term across the Atlantic. 'Without any doubt', stated *El Liberal* in Bogotá, 'universal suffrage' was 'the most democratic principle' adopted by the 1853 constitution in New Granada, 'the basis of the true republic'.[24]

---

legislation excluded the economically dependent, like domestic servants. We owe these insights on Greece to Michalis Sotiroupolos. On El Salvador, see Miguel A. Gallardo, ed., *Cuatro constituciones federales de Centroamérica y las constituciones políticas de El Salvador* (San Salvador, 1945), 116.

[20] Seymour and Frary, *How the world votes*, II, 21-3.

[21] *Bentham's Radical Reform Bill, with Extracts for the Reasons* (London, 1819), 1.

[22] S. V. Sankay, *Universal Suffrage* (Edinburgh, 1838), 8; and *People's Charter*, 24.

[23] Cited in Alain Garrigou, 'Le brouillon du suffrage universel. Archéologie du décret du 5 mars 1848', *Genèses*, 6 (1991), 161. Doi: 10.3406/genes.1991.1100.

[24] *El Liberal*, 20 Nov. 1853.

Modern historians have not shared such enthusiasm, though interest in the topic has received fresh impetus in recent decades, particularly following the work of Pierre Rosanvallon, for whom universal suffrage was 'the great theme of the nineteenth century'. Its adoption in France represented, in his view, a 'formidable intellectual rupture' with the Old Regime. It embodied 'a sort of sacrament of equality among men'.[25] While Great Britain did not adopt universal manhood suffrage in the nineteenth century, the expansion of the franchise has been the subject of a long scholarly debate.[26] There is also an extensive literature on the United States, where questions concerning universal suffrage, both its expansion or contraction, as noted by Keyssar, are seen as 'critical to an understanding of the evolution of democracy'.[27] It is mostly their concern with democracy that has motivated social scientists to engage with the history of the suffrage, sparking an ongoing theoretical debate about the reasons behind the extension of the franchise.[28]

Traditionally, the Latin American experience with the suffrage during the nineteenth century tended to occupy a marginal place in the general literature on the subject – be it among historians or social scientists. Those who paid it early attention, like Charles Seymour and Donald Paige Frary in what was perhaps the first global history of elections, published in

[25] Pierre Rosanvallon, *La consagración del ciudadano. Historia del sufragio universal en Francia* (Mexico, 1999), 10-11. For alternative interpretations but still acknowleding the significance of the topic: Kevin Duong, 'What Was Universal Suffrage?', *Theory and Event*, 23:1 (2020), 29-65; and Crook, 'Universal Suffrage as Counter-Revolution?, 49-66.

[26] The literature is vast, for a discussion of the subject during the mid-ninetenth-century, see Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848-1867. The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham, 2012).

[27] Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, xvii.

[28] See, for example, Stanley L. Engerman and Kenneth L. Sokoloff, 'The Evolution of Suffrage Institutions in the New World', *The Journal of Economic History,* 65:4 (December 2005); Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, 'Why did the West Extend the Franchise? Democracy, Inequality, and Growth in Historical Perspective', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (November 2000); and Adam Przeworski, 'Conquered or Granted? A History of Suffrage Extensions', *British Journal of Political Science,* 39 (2008).

1918, dismissed the suffrage in the region as 'one of extreme democracy on paper'. Elections, in their words, were 'a pure sham',[29] an interpretation that, with some variants, endured among later generations of scholars.[30]

Over the past two decades, however, a new historiographical wave has thoroughly revised the notion that Latin American elections in the nineteenth-century were meaningless or inconsequential.[31] As a result, we can now draw on a richer tapestry that not only provides a fuller understanding of the region's electoral developments, but also allows us to place them in appropriate comparative perspective. The centrality of elections during the independence process; the early broadening of the suffrage, incorporating popular sectors of all races; the communal and participatory nature of processes that included voters and non-voters, women and minors; the limited control of elections in spite of government manipulation, fraud and violence; the development of elements of persuasion and campaign organization that accompanied electoral contests where substantial issues were at stake: these are among the key themes that emerge from an rich body of literature upon which this essay builds. While the expansion of the electorate is a subject that underpins this renewed scholarship, little systematic attention has been given to the processes of electoral reform,

[29] *How the World Votes*, 266-8, 287.

[30] For a recent example: Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, 394-97, 406-7, 409.

[31] There now exists a vast literature on the topic – see: Hilda Sabato, *Republic of the New World. The Revolutionary Political Experiment in 19th-Century Latin America* (Princeton and Oxford, 2018), 50-88.

albeit with some important exceptions.[32] The adoption of universal manhood suffrage by mid-nineteenth century has received even less attention.[33]

Why and under which circumstances some Spanish American countries adopted universal male suffrage in this early period of experimentation deserves further exploration, and it is therefore the main question this article seeks to address. Explanations about the expansion of the suffrage, by and large based on the European and US experiences, vary, depending on the centrality given to popular agitation, socio-economic-structures, political competition or ideological diffusion. These explanations are not necessarily exclusive – historians typically (more than social scientists) offer a combination of factors, or emphasise some over others according to the timing of the broadening of voting rules. Indeed, as our account makes clear, the adoption of universal male suffrage by some Spanish American countries in the mid-nineteenth-century cannot be explained by a single variable and needs to be understood within a wider process which, rather than being unilinear, followed what Hilda Sábato described as a 'zig-zag path'.[34] Our argument is therefore multidimensional, tracing first, in the next two sections, the trajectory of the franchise since independence in the region, before focusing on New Granada to suggest that the 1853 measure was part of a reform

[32] Among the electoral reforms that have receive attention: those of 1861 in Ecuador, 1874 and 1890 in Chile, 1896 in Peru and 1912 in Argentina are the most notable. See Juan Maiguashca, 'The Electoral Reforms of 1861 in Ecuador and the Rise of a New Political Order' in Eduardo Posada-Carbó (ed.), *Elections Before Democracy: The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America* (London, 1996), 87-116; J. Samuel Valenzuela, *Democratización vía reforma. La expansión del sufragio en Chile* (Buenos Aires, 1985); and Gabriella Chiaramonti, 'Andes o nación: la reforma electoral de 1896 en Perú', in Antonio Annino (ed.), *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, siglo XIX* (Buenos Aires, 1995), 315-46.

[33] Although there are some valuable accounts of the various relevant constitutional provisions and legislation for the case of New Granada, they fall short of offering an examination of the reasons and circumstances that surrounded these measures. See in particular David Bushnell, 'El sufragio en la Argentina y en Colombia hasta 1853'.

[34] 'On Political Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century Latin America', *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 1297.

movement led by the Liberal party that took power in 1849. Such developments were not isolated from the European revolutionary spirit of 1848, but their proper understanding requires detailed attention to local circumstances, in particular, we argue, to the dynamics of partisan competition amid an atmosphere of social and political upheaval.

II

The arrival of modern elections in Spanish America was an abrupt and intricate development. Following the Napoleonic usurpation of the Spanish Crown in 1808, the question of who represented the absent King was soon replaced by concerns about how to establish new legitimate authorities and the form of government. 'From one to many' was the expression used by François-Xavier Guerra in an effort to understand the logic of independence, highlighting the 'simultaneity' and 'similarities' of the revolutionary movements in Spain and in America.[35] On both sides of the Atlantic such movements had some common features, from their point of departure to the problems and ideas they were grappling with. Common to all was the centrality acquired by elections during this period, be it in the various juntas set up to govern on behalf of the King, in the attempts to organize a Central Junta in Spain 1809, or in the convening of the Cortes in 1810. Also common to all was the broad franchise introduced on both sides of the Atlantic by 1812.[36] But how expansive was the newly adopted suffrage and what led to the measures taken then by the Cádiz Cortes and some provinces in America?

[35] François-Xavier Guerra, 'De lo uno a lo múltiple: dimensiones y lógicas de la independencia', in Anthony McFarlane and Eduardo Posada-Carbó (ed.), *Independence and Revolution in Spanish America. Perspectives and Problems* (London, 1999), 43-68

[36] Marie-Danielle Demélas-Bohy and François-Xavier Guerra, 'The Hispanic Revolutions: The Adoption of Modern Forms of Representation in Spain and America, 1808-1810, in Posada-Carbó, (ed.), *Elections Before Democracy*, 35.

It is not possible to do justice here to the complexities of the constitutional process set in motion as a result of the crisis of the Spanish Crown. If in the peninsula the rejection of Bonaparte was followed by a series of attempts to defend and reorganize the monarchy on behalf of the King, embodied in the sequence of 'juntas, Central Junta, Regency and Cortes',[37] in America such a sequence was further complicated by the uneasy combination of local juntas and *cabildos abiertos* (town hall meetings) that often clashed with vice-royal authorities, prompting the formation of provincial constituent assemblies and congresses that claimed independence. Efforts to rebuild a central government against Napoleon in the peninsula were met with resistance as sovereignty imploded.

While developments within Spanish America made it necessary to consider systems of representation, similar issues arose in the context of the transatlantic Spanish Monarchy. Within Spain itself, first the Central Junta (in 1809) and then the convocation to the Cortes (in 1810) invited Spanish Americans to send their representatives.[38] On both occasions, the glaring inequality of American representation, disproportionate to its larger population compared to that of the peninsula, was a source of grievance and alienation. When the news of the first gathering of the Cortes in Cádiz was published in New Granada, the press was quick to note the discrepancy in the number of deputies: 'for the peninsula: 75; for America: 29'.[39]

[37] José M. Portillo Valdés, *Crisis Atlántica. Autonomía e independencia en la crisis de la monarquía hispánica* (Madrid, 2006), 59.

[38] François-Xavier Guerra, *Modernidades e independencia. Ensayo sobre las revoluciones hispánicas* (Madrid, 1992), 178.

[39] *Argos Americano*, 7 Jan. 1811.

Almost immediately after the installation of the Cortes, on 24 September 1810, the issue of representation was raised by 'a party of Americans',[40] thus initiating one of the most intense debates that took place throughout its sessions, one that framed the discussion about Spanish citizenship, and thus the question around the suffrage.[41] Most American deputies favoured a more inclusive conception of citizenship for tactical reasons, as this would help to secure a larger parliamentary representation for their territories. Whether or not the indigenous peoples and the 'castas' (free people of colour) were given the vote on equal terms made a difference. The status of the former was less contentious. Though a variety of arguments to exclude the Indians were advanced by some deputies, from their lack of intelligence to their easy manipulation by their creole oppressors, these did not carry the day. As noted by James F. King, 'the nominal freedom and equality of the Indians were too firmly established in the Laws of the Indies to permit easy alterations of their status'.[42] Granting citizenship to the Indians would contribute to their further assimilation into the Hispanic culture. In addition, their support was needed to fight the growing insurrections against Spanish authorities in America. The issue of the 'castas' proved to be more divisive, though most American deputies again favoured their inclusion. Fears of another Haiti loomed large. In some places, *pardos*[43] had acquired notability as surgeons, judges, members of the clergy

[40] James F. King, 'The Colored Castes and American Representation in the Cortes of Cadiz', *Hispanic American historical Review*, 33 (1953), 38. The 'Instructions' to elect deputies to the Cortes in 1810 'gave the population of Spain as 10,534,985', based on the 1797 census. It was then estimated that the population of America and the Philipines was between 15 and 16 millions. Early in the nineteenth-century, Alexander von Humboldt estimated that Indians constituted 45 % of the population; *mestizos*, 32 %; whites, 19 % and blacks, 4%; John Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions, 1808-1826* (New York and London, 1986), 360. The category of *mestizo* might also include people of African descent.

[41] See King, 'The Colored Castes', 33-64; Marie Laure Rieu-Millan, *Los diputados americanos en las Cortes de Cadiz* (Madrid, 1990); and Marixa Lazzo, *Myths of Harmony. Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia, 1795-1831* (Pittsburgh, 2007), 35-67.

[42] King, 'The Colored Castes', 43-4.

[43] Free black people and those of African descent.

and the militia. Excluding the *pardos* would play into the hands of the rebels – it would lead to the 'dismembering of the Americas'.[44] Ultimately, the Cortes adopted a conception of citizenship that seems like a compromise. As a result, throughout the Spanish territories, all free adult males were given the vote, except those '*originarios del Africa*' (as the constitution referred to those of African descent); but the latter could apply for citizenship by virtue of their services to the 'patria', their talent and their good behaviour. Some were successful – in Lima, the *pardo* José Manuel Valdes wrote a poem celebrating the 'memorable' day when he voted in 1813.[45] Citizenship was denied, however, to domestic servants, the unemployed, debtors and those with criminal prosecutions. But there were no property, income, or tax qualifications. Nor were there immediate literacy requirements, although after 1830 the 'exercise of the rights of citizens' would be conditional on 'know[ing] how to read and write'.[46]

While news of the deliberations in Cádiz was closely followed in Spanish America, a significant number of provinces embarked upon their own constitutional processes, often a reaction against the decisions taken by the Cortes. Leading voices in New Granada in May 1810, even before the inauguration of the Cortes, were advocating for the 'right' of each 'kingdom and province' to organise its own government: 'all power, all authority has returned to its primitive origin, the people'. Given the 'deplorable state of affairs in Spain', and the practical difficulties for the voice of the people to be heard there, it was suggested that the *cabildos* convene 'all fathers of families and the enlightened men' to form their

---

[44] Rieu-Millan, *Los diputados*, 162-7.

[45] *Constitución política de la monarquía española: promulgada en Cádiz a 19 de marzo de 1812* (Lima, 1812), 2, 4, 5; and 'Oda con motivo de la elección popular', *El Verdadero Peruano*, 23 Feb. 1813, The John Carter Brown Library (JCBL), Providence, USA, BC812V383p.

[46] *Constitución política de la monarquía española*, 5.

respective governing juntas leading to the meeting of a general Congress.[47] This, like other contemporary demands, were appeals to the constituent power which, if by necessity broadly construed, was expressed in the language of 'rights'. 'Every *vecino* of known honesty, however miserable and poor, should be allowed to elect his representatives and be himself eligible', wrote the editor of *El Argos Americano* in Cartagena in November 1810.[48] A month later, *vecinos* in Cartagena were called to elect the deputies for their provincial *Junta*. Voters were to include 'whites, Indians, *mestizos*, *mulatos*, *zambos* and blacks' as long as they were 'fathers of a family' or, alternatively, possessed 'an inhabited house and live off their work'. The regulations explicitly declared that 'all Indians fully enjoyed citizen rights'. Vagrants, criminals, domestic servants and slaves were however excluded.[49] This election was one of a series of episodes that eventually led to the proclamation of a Constitution in Cartagena in June 1812. That proclamation was part of a conflictual process that pitted local interests against colonial authorities, and Cartagena against both Santafe and its neighbouring provinces. Within Cartagena the mulatto population reasserted itself in alliance with the radical elites that sought independence.[50]

---

[47] Letter from Camilo Torres to Ignacio Tenorio, Santafé, 29 May 1810, in 'Los tres Torres', *Boletín de Historia y Antiguedades*, 3:26 (1905), 265-70.

[48] *Argos Americano*, 22 and 29 Oct. and 24 Dec. 1810; and *Suplemento al Argos Americano*, 3 Dec. 1810. See also 'Representación anónima', 31 Dec. 1810, in Daniel Gutiérrez Ardila (ed.), *Las Asambleas Constituyentes de la Independencia. Actas de Cundinamarca y Antioquia, 1811-1812* (Bogotá, 2010), 41-2. These publications also suggest that contemporaries distinguished between elections for constituent powers and regular elections – favouring a wider franchise for the former.

[49] 'Instrucción que deberá observarse en las elecciones parroquiales, en las de partido y en las capitulares, para el nombramiento de Diputados en la Suprema Junta de la Provincia de Cartagena', 11 Dec 1810, in Ezequiel Corrales (ed.), *Efemérides y Anales del Estado de Bolívar*, (Bogotá, 1889), II, 48, 50.

[50] *Documentos para la historia de la provincia de Cartagena de Indias* (Bogotá, 1883), 485-546. 'Negros y zambos' were notable at the official launching of the constitution; see letter from A. Gutierrez to J.G. Gutierrez, Cartagena, 10 Aug. 1812, in Isidro Vanegas (ed.), *Dos vidas, una revolución. Epistolario de José Gegorio y Agustín Gutiérrez Moreno, 1808-1816* (Bogotá, 2011), 362. *Pardos* in Cartagena had a leading role in the movement that led to the declaration of independence

Developments in Cartagena were notable for the activism of its 'free people of colour', but variants of this process took place elsewhere.[51] By the time the Cádiz Constitution reached America, in September 1812, five constitutions had already been issued by several provinces in New Granada. In the context of this intense process, most provinces in New Granada broke with Spain, politically and ideologically – openly distancing themselves from Cádiz, while drawing from other constitutional and intellectual traditions. A translation of the US constitution, for example, was published in Santafé in 1811. That same year, a selection of US states constitutions, printed in Philadelphia, circulated widely in Spanish America, which also included several texts by Thomas Paine.[52] These texts served as inspirations but, when it came to suffrage matters, the constitutions of New Granada were innovative. None contemplated exclusions of voters based on race, property or literacy requirements. Some, like that of Cundinamarca in 1812, explicitly stated (like the Cartagena law cited above), that 'the Indians enjoy all the rights of citizens, and have voice and vote in all the elections.[53] New Granada was unique in the large *number* of constitutions it issued during this period, but other constitutions that similarly defied the authority of Cádiz, like those of Venezuela and that of Apatzingan (1814) in Mexico, also adopted suffrage rules that did not stipulate racial, property or literacy qualifications.

---

in 1811. 'According to the 1780 census, free people of color constituted 56.7 percent of Cartagena's population; slaves 15.7 percent; whites … 27 percent; and Indians 0.5 percent', Lasso, *Myths*, 18.

[51] Anthony McFarlane, 'Building Political Order: The "First Republic" in New Granada, 1810-1815', in Eduardo Posada-Carbó, ed., *In Search of a New Order: Essays on the Politics and Society in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (London, 1998), 9-33.

[52] This collection, edited and translated by the Venezuelan Miguel García de Sena, was published as *La independencia de la Costa Firme justificada por Thomas Paine Treinta Años Ha* (Philadelphia, 1811). We have consulted a reprinted edition (Caracas, 1949). Among the texts, it included Paine's *Dissertation in First Principles of Government* (1795), where he clearly advocated a broad suffrage – he had first advocated universal manhood suffrage in 1792; Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain. Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Cambridge, 2014), 206.

[53] M. A. Pombo and J.J. Guerra, (eds.), *Constituciones de Colombia* (Bogotá, 1951), I, 8.

As this account makes clear, in both the Iberian peninsula and in America, the crisis caused by the Napoleonic usurpation of the Spanish crown was met by responses that relied on the suffrage to restore the legitimacy of authority. In the absence of the King, the need to represent the sovereign led to a series of simultaneous constitutional processes on both sides of the Atlantic, whose very dynamics favoured an extensive franchise. Tactical considerations were certainly at work. *Peninsulares* (Spaniards born in the Spanish peninsula) in Cádiz needed the support of Americans to fight Napoleon – and though they feared being overruled by Americans if they conceded equality of representation, they could not risk alienating further the indigenous peoples. In turn, Americans saw the opportunity to gain parliamentary weight by embracing a more expansive notion of citizenship, and therefore they also supported the inclusion of 'free people of all colours'. However, as the historian Lazzo has noted, what might have started as a strategic move became part of the patriot narrative against colonial Spain.[54] Indeed while the Cortes debated, American provinces like those in New Granada were struggling to find their own way out of the crisis, in constitutional processes whose circumstances required a great deal of experimentation, all the while accommodating the demands of new social actors. Expediency, ideas and interests thus combined to shape a broad suffrage as the newly independent states emerged. Of course, 'broad' did not mean 'universal' suffrage (and there is no evidence that the term was invoked in these years). It included restrictions, and not just on slaves and women. The 'economically independent' criterion resulted in the exclusion of domestic servants and *jornaleros*. It was nonetheless an expansive suffrage that provoked extraordinary levels of political mobilisation, both in the American provinces where the Cádiz constitution was implemented (in Mexico, Perú, Central America and Ecuador), and on the rest of the

[54] Lazzo, *Myths*, 50.

continent under different rules (most of New Granada, Venezuela, the River Plate and Chile). Its legacy is still to be properly assessed. At the very least, it introduced a new political language while helping to diffuse ideas of equality and rights – in New Granada, the word 'democracy' started to take root, associated with 'representative, popular government'.[55]

III

Since the 'starting point' for the emerging representative systems in Spanish America was a broad franchise, it would be tempting to explain the developments of the mid-nineteenth-century as a 'legacy' of what happened during the independence period. The seeds of what the late historian François-Xavier Guerra referred to as 'an almost universal suffrage' would have set up a tradition that was reinforced by the dissemination of the 'democratic ideal' of the European revolutions of 1848, 'now identified with universal suffrage'.[56] This argument has some merits, as once posited by Tocqueville: 'the further electoral rights are extended, the greater the need of extending them'.[57] Countries that had experienced elections with a broad suffrage found difficulties in imposing restrictions, and some never reversed their earlier expansive franchise. However, most did, including some of those that adopted universal male suffrage in the 1850s. As this section will show next, national trajectories varied significantly, so any explanation for the adoption of universal manhood suffrage in the

[55] Isidro Vanegas, 'Colombia/Nueva Granada', in Gerardo Gaetano (ed.), *Democracia*, in Javier Fernández Sebastián, Dir., *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano, Iberconceptos II* (Madrid, 2014), 117-132.

[56] 'The Spanish American Tradition of Representation, and its European Roots', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 26:1 (1994), 17-20; and *Modernidad e independencias*, 377-79.

[57] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, 1990), I, 57. Tocqueville, however, overlooked the fact that free blacks had already lost their votings rights in several states of the Union; see footnote 15. But his conception of democracy excluded black and indigenous peoples – see chapter XVIII, 331-3.

mid-nineteenth-century needs to go beyond its common origins and take into account local circumstances at that time.

It is possible to identify at least three variants in the suffrage trajectories among the Spanish American countries that introduced the measure in the 1850s.. First is the case of Argentina, where the earlier broad franchise was never reversed. Since repeated attempts to bring the provinces of the River Plate together around a national constitution failed, each province issued its own suffrage regulations. Most provinces adopted a relatively broad franchise. In 1821, Buenos Aires had passed an electoral law that gave the vote to any 'free male' adult.[58] Called 'universal suffrage' by its critics in the 1830s, and generally referred to as such in the historiography, the measure in fact excluded slaves, while the 'free male' category left open the status of domestic servants and wage labourers. At this time, however, slavery was already in decline and, by not introducing property or literacy restrictions, the 1821 electoral law became a significant landmark in the local history of suffrage. Just as significant was the adoption of direct elections for Buenos Aires' provincial legislature. The new system opened a decade of intense electoral contestation and political instability that led to the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Yet when Rosas first seized power in 1829, he did not repeal the electoral law. Instead, he used it to his advantage by holding regular elections in plebiscitarian fashion – voters were called to renew the legislature through a ritualistic annual performance carefully choreographed by Rosas himself, until he was ousted in 1852.[59]

In Mexico, the legacy of an earlier broad suffrage mostly prevailed, although there were brief instances where the trend was reversed. Shortly after independence, the 1821

[58] Bushnell, 'El sufragio en la Argentina y en Colombia', 16.

[59] Marcela Ternavasio, *La revolución del voto. Política y elecciones en Buenos Aires, 1810-1852* (Buenos Aires, 2002), 234.

convocation for a constituent congress issued by General Agustín de Iturbide, later Emperor of Mexico (1822-23), expanded the franchise by eliminating the Cádiz-era racial requirements for citizenship. 'I am a mulatto and cannot accept a constitution that deprives me of citizenship', Vicente Guerrero, one of the leaders of the Mexican insurgency, is said to have responded to suggestions to emulate the Cádiz constitution following emancipation. [60] Following the fall of Iturbide, a new electoral law left the conditions for voter eligibility almost unchanged: all able men over 18 years continued to be enfranchised, while alleged criminals, debtors, those with 'unknown means of subsistence or residence' and domestic servants were excluded. The 1824 constitution adopted a federal system under which electoral regulations were left in the hands of individual states, which tended to follow the Cádiz model of indirect elections and a broad suffrage.[61] Most of them introduced literacy requirements, applicable from 1850. Slavery was abolished in 1829. Income requirements of an annual rent of 100 pesos were introduced for the first time in 1836. A far more restrictive suffrage was introduced in 1846, when an attempt to overhaul the representative system was put into practice. Rather than individuals, this short-lived experiment was designed to represent 'classes' according to various economic and social interests. A constituent congress was convened under such principles, but barely two months after its inauguration the government was toppled.[62] Weeks later the 1824 federal constitution was restored. This was followed by the *Acta de Reformas* in 1847, which granted voting rights to 'every Mexican national either by birth or by naturalization of 20 years of age who leads an honest

[60] In Israel Arroyo García, *La arquitectura del estado mexicano: formas de gobierno, representación política y ciudadanía, 1821-1857* (México, 2011), 532.

[61] Erika Pani, 'Ciudadanos, cuerpos, intereses. Las incertidumbres de la representación. Estados Unidos 1776-1787; Mexico, 1808-1828', *Historia Mexicana*, 53 (2003).

[62] For a full examination, José Antonio Aguilar Rivera, 'La Convocatoria, las elecciones y el congreso extraordinario de 1846', *Historia Mexicana*, 61: 2(2011), 531-588.

life, and who has not been convicted of a criminal offense',[63] a new and significant step, whose principles were ratified in the 1857 constitution.[64]

The trajectory followed by New Granada was close to that of Mexico, but with some important variations. Still at war with Spain, representatives from New Granada and Venezuela met at a congress in Cúcuta to discuss a constitution for their joint Republic of Colombia, which they approved in October 1821.[65] The new constitution stipulated literacy and property requirements as conditions for voting, but the literacy qualification would only be enforced from 1840 and the property requirement could be replaced by the exercise of any employment, trade or profession 'without depending on others'.[66] Thus, albeit in a reluctant language, the vote was granted to all free male adults, provided they were economically independent – domestic servants, *jornaleros* and slaves were therefore excluded. This criterion prevailed in the subsequent constitution that New Granada adopted in 1832, although this time the property qualification was dropped altogether.

Not for long, however. At the end of the decade, a complex combination of regionalist demands and religious grievances sparked a series of uprisings that led to the *Guerra de Supremos* (1839-42).[67] In July 1841, amid continued conflict, the central government launched a process of consultation on constitutional reform in the various

---

[63] Mexico, *Acta Constitutiva y de Reformas sancionada por el congreso extraordinario constituyente de los Estados-Unidos Mexicanos el 18 de mayo de 1847* (Mexico, 1847).

[64] Mexico, *Constitución federal de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (Mexico, 1857), 37.

[65] Roberto Cortázar and Luis A. Cuervo (eds.), *Congreso de Cúcuta. Libro de actas* (Bogotá, 1923), 53, 67, 75.

[66] Academia Nacional de Historia (ed.), *El pensamiento constitucional hispanoamericano hasta 1830* (Caracas, 1961), 335-7.

[67] Rebecca Earle, 'The War of the Supremes: Border Conflict, Religious Crusade or Simply Politics by Other Means?', in Earle (ed.), *Rumours of Wars: Civil Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (London, 2000).

territories under its control, through a set of questions that included one on the conditions for exercising 'suffrage rights'.[68] The answers were far from unanimous. A few advocated expanding the franchise. A good number of reports showed satisfaction with the existing system. But a larger number demanded raising the qualifications – although varied, they were all backed up by similar reasons: that, as a result of their lack of independence, voters were being taken like 'herds' to the polls.[69] Once it had suppressed the rebellion, the government pushed through congress a package of constitutional reforms, including amendments to the suffrage rules, finally approved in April 1843: voters were now required, in addition to being free adult males, to own real estate worth 300 pesos or earn an annual income of 150 pesos, and to have paid the corresponding taxes. Also included was the literacy requirement, now postponed until 1850.[70]

If no single pattern emerges from these stories, it is still possible to identify some common elements of inclusion in the ways the suffrage was conceived that should be more fully recognised. Relatively broad notions of the franchise were embraced by nascent states as new legitimizing processes to replace imperial fragmentation. Since racial qualifications were dropped while slavery itself was becoming a dying institution, the suffrage contained an important element of equality in highly heterogeneous societies.[71] All three countries proved

[68] *Gaceta de la Nueva Granada*, 25 Jul. 1841.

[69] *Gaceta de la Nueva Granada*, 31, 24 Oct, and 5, 19 Dec, 1841; 23 Jan. and 27 Feb. 1842.

[70] *Constitución política de la república de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá, 1843), 3. A law passed by Congress months later estipulated that each 'parish district' would establish a 'board' (formed by the president of the local council and two 'vecinos' designated by the council) in charge of organising an electoral register including those who met the suffrage conditions. See *Leyes i decretos espedidos por el congreso constitucional en el año de 1843* (Bogotá, 1843), 77.

[71] By the 1850s, Mexico had the largest population: some 7.5 million, followed by New Granada, over 2 million, and Argentina, over 1 million. Precise figures on racial composition do not exist for the period, but heterogeneity was the norm, with important regional variations. Nationally, the presence of the indigenous population was most significant in Mexico, much less so in New Granada and in Argentina – mixed races, including *mestizos and mulatos*, prevailed in New Granada and Mexico and among the *gauchos* in Argentina. Mexico abolished slavery in 1829, while New Granada

reluctant to exclude illiterates, the vast majority of the population – and when contemplated, the requirement to 'know how to read and write' kept being postponed. Definitions of the suffrage were often expressed in ambiguous terms, as when requiring 'economic independence', therefore conferring a great deal of discretion to those who administered the electoral processes. There was a sense of pragmatism in such expansive conceptions, particularly in the face of the difficulties to enforce rules without the relevant information or just because of the lack of physical state capacity to impose them.[72]

Yet neither these common features nor the earlier experience with the relatively broad franchise are of much help in explaining the adoption of universal male suffrage by some Spanish American countries in the 1850s. If to their different institutional trajectories, we add their political and social circumstances, it becomes clear that an understanding of the enactment of such measure requires further individual attention.

Let us consider the case of New Granada, notable for having introduced economic voting restrictions in 1843, which lasted until 1853. With the exception of the brief Bolivar dictatorship and the interregnum of its secession from the union with Venezuela and Ecuador, New Granada held regular elections, thereby following an almost uninterrupted constitutional calendar since independence in 1819. Just as significant, these elections became increasingly competitive. There were six presidential elections between 1833 and 1853 – one every four years. Congressional elections were also regular and frequent: half the Senate was renewed every other year, and half the House of Representative every year. Additionally, deputies for provincial assemblies were elected every year. The degree of competition in all these

and Argentina did so in the 1851 and 1853 respectively. By the time of abolition, the number of slaves had significantly diminished in New Granada and were almost non-existent in Argentina.

[72] These points deserve more attention. The possibility of establishing effective restrictions based on levels of taxation, income or property depended on the state having sufficient knowledge of people's assets.

elections has still to be studied in detail, but there is no doubt that presidential elections were fiercely contested.

From this feverish electoral calendar, political parties were formed and partisan loyalties with social roots developed. Those struggling for power through the ballot box had to count on popular support, which they sought to expand at times of acute electoral competition. The evidence for the 1820s is as scant as the literature on the topic – though there are records of electoral involvement during that period of the rank and file of the patriot army, Indians and humble villagers.[73] By the 1830s, however, partisan activities in pursue of the popular vote had become intense, in tandem with the emergence of new forms of sociability seeking to protect particular sectorial interests.[74] Levels of mobilisation mounted, first through a series of contested election, including the highly disputed presidential election of 1837, when the Liberals relinquished power to the opposition, linked to the forces that eventually formed the Conservative party. Then civil war, as noted above, broke out in 1839.

The 1843 restrictions to the suffrage were an attempt to demobilise the political nation that had gone to war. But electioneering, which continued amidst the *Guerra de Supremos*, further intensified once the war was over. By the end of the decade, as a new presidential election approached, social and political mobilisation escalated to extraordinary levels, with different manifestations of malcontent. Artisans organised to defend their trade against foreign goods. The Catholic Church rallied their flocks to elect representatives who could defend the interest of Catholicism. Land problems in the south west of the country triggered

[73] One rare comprehesive study covering the elections of the 1820s is Nohra P. Palacios Trujillo, 'La elección de la república. Historia de las elecciones en Colombia entre 1809-1838', (École de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, Ph.D. thesis 2014).

[74] Gilberto Loaiza Cano, *Sociabilidad, religión y política en la definición de la nación. Colombia, 1820-1886* (Bogotá, 2011); and David Sowell, *The Early Colombian Labor Movement. Artisans and Politics in Bogotá, 1832-1919* (Philadelphia, 1992).

social disputes which also revealed racial tensions in a region where slavery, although dying, remained significant. Elsewhere there were clamours for change, targeted against those who, identified with the remnants of the colonial past, controlled the central government since 1837.

In such a contentious setting, partisan competition peaked in the presidential elections of 1849, which brought the Liberal party to power and opened an era of sweeping radical reforms. It is against this background, in an ongoing highly charged atmosphere that gained momentum after the European revolutions of 1848, that the process of adopting universal manhood suffrage in New Granada, to which we now turn, ought to be understood.

IV

Granting the right to vote to all adult males without economic, racial and literacy conditions in 1853 was part of a broader reform movement led by the Liberals who attained power in 1849. This final section looks at the developments that, during these years, led to the adoption of such a measure. It considers first the extent to which the European revolutions in 1848 might have impacted New Granada. We show that, while the proclamation of 'universal suffrage' by the second French republic reverberated across the Atlantic, its adoption in New Granada five years later requires an explanation grounded in local circumstances. We offer an argument where the dynamics of electoral competition take centre stage, as the main parties struggled to expand their bases of popular support. But partisan competition did not take place in a social vacuum – indeed, its dynamic was responding to wider pressures from below. Furthermore, universal male suffrage was in the end a measure passed by Congress within a prolonged process of constitutional reform, whose intricacies therefore also demand detailed attention.

New Granada was one of the countries in the Americas where the revolutionary spirit of 1848 was felt particularly strongly.[75] A 'political prophecy has been fulfilled', observed *El Progreso* when registering the early news of the 1848 French Revolution: 'the destiny of humanity is democracy, and this will reign on earth as God in the universe'.[76] Not all shared the same enthusiasm but, during the following months, a growing number of newspapers covered their front pages with news about the spread of the revolution in Europe, and inserted transcripts of sessions at the French National Assembly, circulars of the revolutionary government in Paris, and interpretative historical accounts of the events. Some periodicals published the full text of the constitution of the French Republic, alongside extensive discussions on the reforms needed for New Granada.[77] Electoral issues, including the suffrage, were given prominent attention.

There is thus little doubt that the events across the Atlantic were closely followed in New Granada. However, the extent to which they shaped domestic politics, and in which direction, is more difficult to assess.[78] Contemporaries did acknowledge their general impact, but differed in their judgements. Those critical of the Liberal administration that took power in 1849 thought in retrospect that New Granadians were just 'imitating' the French in their attempts to change 'the very basis of society', and with disastrous consequences.[79] Some

[75] See Guy Thomson (ed.), *The European Revolutions of 1848 in the Americas* (London, 2002).

[76] *El Progreso*, 7 May 1848.

[77] See, for example, *El Aviso*, 24 Sep. 1848; *Gaceta Oficial*, 21 May 1848; *El Progreso*, 21, 28 May and 25 Jun. 1848; *La América*, 21 May 1848; *Gaceta Mercantil*, 24 May 1848; *idem*., 21 Jun. and 12 Jul., 30 Aug. 1848; *El Nacional*, 9 and 16 Jul. 1848; *La Epoca*, 21 and 23 May 1848.

[78] Jay Robert Grusin has argued that to consider the New Granada experience 'simply as an extension of European culture is both unjust and historically inaccurate'. See Grusin, 'The Revolution of 1848 in Colombia' (The University of Arizona, Ph.D. thesis, 1978), x, 254.

[79] *Ojeada sobre los primeros catorce meses de la administración del 7 de marzo, dedicada a los hombres imparciales i justos* (Bogotá, 1850), 9, 15.

Liberals agreed that the principles of the French revolution seemed 'transplanted' to New Granada, but they saw in their achievements a mirror to celebrate. Yet the basic fact that four years went by between the adoption of universal male suffrage in France and its approval in New Granada raises doubts about the idea that developments in the latter were mere imitations of the former. Indeed, by the end of 1848 the prospects of the electoral victory of Louis Napoleon as president of France fed fears among Liberals in New Granada about the consequences of the measure: as a result of 'universal suffrage', 'the enemies of the republic … were taking advantage of the ignorance of the masses'.[80] An explanation for what happened in New Granada therefore requires a close examination of the domestic factors at work behind the process that led to the 1853 reform.

When reports of the French revolution reached New Granada, the country was already in a state of turmoil. As social agitation grew, the electoral campaign to choose the successor of Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera (1845-49) to the presidency had acquired an extraordinary degree of intensity. It was a long campaign, contested by several candidates. It was also a key moment during which two main parties, Liberal and Conservative, emerged with their respective names, platforms, newspapers and nationwide networks, though they were still loosely organised, grappling with internal fractures and facing other forces in the struggle for power.

A glance at the main contenders serve to identify some of the main cleavages that were shaping the parties in dispute and also their efforts to articulate discourses with popular appeal. Liberals behind the candidacy of José H. López, a veteran of the wars of independence, claimed their party was the 'friend of the people, the party that works to see equality and fraternity established, […] that favours the abolition of slavery'.[81] They also

[80] *Gaceta Mercantil*, 13 Dec. 1848.

[81] *El Aviso*, 16 Jul. 1848.

took a strong stand against the Church and the clergy, particularly the Jesuits, and openly attacked the incumbent Mosquera administration whose regime they identified with the colonial legacy and an 'aristocracy', sustained by the continuity of those in power since 1837. Conservatives resented the Liberal rhetoric, as they saw *themselves* advocating liberal and democratic principles. In an explicit attempt to distinguish between the two parties, *El Nacional* identified Conservatives, whose cause the newspaper advocated, with 'men devoted to the family and work, legal liberty, security, defence of the constitution': the Conservative party, it went on, was 'moderate, judicious, religious'. Further, they claimed their party to be 'more liberal, more popular […] more truly democratic' than their adversaries.[82] In fact, however, Conservatives were split. Their most notable contender was José Rufino Cuervo, the vice-president, portrayed as the candidate of the government.[83] Another conservative civilian candidate, Joaquín Gori, was presented as a 'moderate liberal', in opposition to the government. There was, however, a third party that, under the *Moderado* name, defined itself against the 'extreme' positions of both Liberals and Conservatives. It criticised the former for its attachment to levelling doctrines that led to the 'tyranny of the barbarous majority' and the latter for its religious fanaticism. Both were faulted for courting the masses.[84]

While the details of the campaign should not detain us here, it is important to highlight the levels of mobilization, encouraged by the competing parties, which reflected the significant issues at stake. Discontent among the artisans had been mounting as a result of the policy of tariff reductions pursued by the government. Earlier in the campaign, the

---

[82] *El Nacional*, 21 May 1848. This newspaper was launched to 'defend the interests, rights, principles and doctrines of the conservative party of New Granada'; *ibid.*

[83] *Reseña histórica de los principales acontecimientos políticos de la ciudad de Cali, desde el añode 1843 hasta el de 1855 inclusive* (Bogotá, 1856), 12.

[84] *El Siglo*, 8, 22 and 29 Jun. 1848.

Sociedad de Artesanos, originally established in 1847 with the purpose of defending their trade agains foreign goods, backed the Liberal candidate, but the Liberal attacks on the Church alienated a significant number of artisans. There was also growing discontent within the Catholic Church, since at least 1845, when Congress had passed legislation curtailing the power of ecclesiastical courts. Increasingly assailed by the Liberal press, Catholics rallied in defence of the Jesuits, publishing leaflets and signing petitions to Congress, appealing to the 'principles of liberty, equality and tolerance, which are the fundamental basis of the republican, popular and representative government that we have established.'[85] Further discontent was manifested in some regions for specific local reasons, as was the case of Cauca, the South Western province where the enclosure of some *ejidos* (communal lands), in February 1848, had enraged the displaced peasantry, unleashing a wave of social unrest. A Liberal publication in the province described the grievances against the existing regime as 'ten years of a constant conspiracy against the democratic system'.[86] Conservatives in turn denounced their opponents of 'deceiving the common folk with the idea that there was an aristocracy in New Granada that oppressed the people', and that the latter were 'suffering the misery of the French'.[87]

In such a highly charged atmosphere, all candidates courted the popular vote during the parish elections to select the members of the provincial electoral colleges.[88] Artisans were particularly targeted in both partisan leaflets and newspapers seeking their support.

---

[85] *Honorables Senadores y Representantes en la Lejislatura de 1847* (n.p., 1847) 5; and Anonymous, *Lo que son los hombres* (Bogotá, 7 April 1846).

[86] *La América*, 21 May 1848.

[87] *El Nacional*, 25 Dec. 1848.

[88] Elections were still indirect. Citizens in the parishes voted for 'electores de canton', who then met in the electoral assemblies of their cantones (provinces) to elect the President and members of the Senate and the Chamber of Representatives; see *Constitución política* (1843), iv-vi.

Other publications addressed the Catholic population in general. *Deberes de los católicos en las próximas elecciones* was the title of a pamphlet instructing Catholics to go to the polls in defence of their rights and of the independence of the Church. The pamphlet did not single out individual candidates, but appealed to all 'religious men' to take an 'active part' in the elections to secure the victory of the Catholic cause.[89] On the ground, however, the clergy openly took sides. In the town of Cali, each party tried to reach 'even the most distant suburb' in search of votes, each party flattering 'the ears of plebeians'.[90]

Far from subsiding, these animosities continued after the parish elections, though with attention now focused on the provincial electoral assemblies, which met in August. Results were slow to come, feeding uncertainties and anxieties. These were not calmed when the results came out, since none of the candidates obtained the absolute majority required by the constitution.[91] Under these circumstances, the final decision rested with Congress, which only met in March 1849. The feverish campaign was thus further prolonged for a few more months, during which new partisan newspapers were set up and political mobilisation mounted to put pressure on congressmen. By the time it met, a fearful Congress found itself surrounded by a crowd of between 1,500 and 4,000 which protested and cheered as the results were announced in each of the four counts that were needed to reach a final decision on 7 March.[92] Conservative congressmen later alleged that, intimidated by dagger-wielding people in the crowd, they were forced to vote for the new president, José Hilario López.[93]

---

[89] Anonymous, *Deberes de los católicos en las próximas elecciones* (Bogotá, 1848).

[90] *Reseña histórica*, 12-17, and 19

[91] Though the results of the electoral assemblies gave López a clear lead (725 votes), followed by Gori (384), Cuervo (304), and four others (279).

[92] Bogotá had a population of 30,000 at this time.

[93] On the atmosphere surrounding these elections, see Posada-Carbó, 'New Granada and the European Revolutions of 1848', in Thomson, (ed.), *The European Revolutions*, 217-40.

López's election marked the beginning of an era of radical reforms that reached its peak under his successor, José María Obando, a fellow Liberal of outstanding popularity who was elected to the presidency four years later. The Liberals' accession to power boosted a renewed wave of social and political mobilization. Between 1849 and 1853 the official newspaper registered the establishment of 112 'democratic societies' in all corners of the republic.[94] Offshoots of the earlier 'Artisan Society', these soon became political clubs to defend the Liberal administration. In reaction, the Conservatives, allied with the clergy, set up the Sociedad Popular de Instrucción Mutua i Fraternidad Cristiana in December 1849, directly aimed at the artisan sector to provide Christian instruction and support. Its 'reglamento orgánico', however, also included overtly political aims: members of the society were to form a 'political union' to participate in all parish elections and to vote for their approved lists. Both 'democráticos' and 'populares' held regular weekend meetings that aimed to instruct members in arts and crafts as well as educate them in politics and law. These were often large popular gatherings, whose character is difficult to assess because of the highly partisan nature of contemporary accounts. Conservative descriptions convey an atmosphere of social tension. And the meetings themselves often led to clashes between 'democráticos' and 'populares', while manifestations of class struggle frequently typified street clashes. Congressional proceedings were also attended by large numbers. A similar atmosphere often prevailed elsewhere in New Granada, though the level of confrontation varied from province to province. In San Gil, a small town east of the country, a publication from the local *Sociedad Democrática* pitted plebeians against nobles , while claiming that its

[94] David Sowell, '"La teoría i la realidad": the Democratic Society of Artisans of Bogotá, 1847-1854', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 67:4 (1987), 619.

programme embodied the struggle of democracy against the aristocratic class that had dominated since colonial times.[95]

The new electoral cycle added to this state of agitation. After a period abroad, the return of the liberal leader José María Obando, in March 1851, marked the beginning of his presidential campaign – some 5,000 people welcomed him in Cali. Two months later, proclamations in favour of his candidacy, often endorsed by hundreds of signatures, started to be published by the press, while Democratic Societies throughout the country met to support his campaign.[96] To his followers, Obando represented more than the continuity of the López's reform programme: perceived as a man of the people, he was expected to 'consolidate the true democracy'.[97] As the news of the electoral results started to appear in August 1852, it became clear that Obando had won by a landslide. The day of his inauguration, in April the following year, Obando urged the deputies to approve the constitutional reform while expressing his support for the extension of the suffrage: any limitation based on wealth or education would be a 'blatant disregard for the nature of democratic governments.'[98] Obando's message was the final necessary push for the pending reform that had been on the public agenda over the previous four years.

---

[95] José Pascual Afanador, *La democracia en Sangil, o cartas del ciudadano José Pascual Afanador, dirijidas a los señores de la nobleza sanjileña, sobre la naturaleza i efectos de un programa* (Socorro, 1851). Mounting social unrest intensified in the following years. For a contemporary account of these events: Ramón Mercado, *Memorias sobre los acontecimientos del sur, especialmente en la provincia de Buenaventura, durante la administración del 7 de marzo de 1849* (Bogotá, 1853).

[96] '*Neogranadino*, 23 May, 19 Sep., 10 Oct. and 28 Nov. 1851. See also *Adopción del candidato de la Sociedad Democrátoca momposina para presidente de la república en el próximo período constitucional* (Mompós, 1851), in Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango, Bogotá: Raros y curiosos, Misc 1397, Folleto 13.

[97] *Neogranadino*, 30 Jan. 1852.

[98] *Gaceta Oficial*, 2 Apr. 1853.

The account in the precedent paragraphs may serve to support the view that suffrage expansions were responses to social unrest and popular agitation. Indeed, such was the climate that dominated the period under examination. But this cannot provide a sufficient explanation, neither for the measure itself nor for the timing of its adoption. Demands for 'universal suffrage' were rarely made in isolation. More often than not they came accompanying a broader agenda, as the symbol of reform rather than petitions from specific excluded classes – artisans, perhaps the most active sector involved in the agitations of the period, seem to have had the vote. In pursuing a radical reform agenda through Congress, Liberals had to make strategic calculations and, confronted by the potential challenges of their opponents, some hesitated to grant a measure that could benefit their enemies at the ballot box. In what remains of this section, we look at the vagaries of parliamentary politics and the extent to which the pressures from the ideologically driven segments of the Liberal party, within and outside Congress, finally tilted the balance in favour of granting the vote to all adult males.

Constitutional reform became the order of the day. For the Liberals who came to power in 1849, constitutional change was paramount, as the 1843 charter was for them the emblem of the past. But some Conservatives, imbued with the spirit of 1848, were also supportive of constitutional reform. During its first two years, the López administration was able to pursue a series of significant measures, including the end of slavery, the absolute freedom of the press, the sharp reduction in the size of the army, the final abolition of a tobacco monopoly, the curtailment of Church privileges, and the expulsion of the Jesuits.[99] Reforming the constitution itself proved to be a more difficult task. On the day of his inauguration, López pledged to work with Congress towards that aim – indeed, a cross-party

[99] For a detailed examination of the reforms, see Grusin, 'The Revolution of 1848', 92-216.

bicameral commission was set up to draft a new constitutional text.[100] However, the procedure laid down in the old charter made its reform almost impossible. An alternative, to adopt a new constitution through a special convention, was given consideration but soon abandoned as Liberals feared losing out to their Conservative opponents. Only in 1851, following new elections that allowed the Liberals to increase their number of seats in both Chambers, was Congress able to agree on the reform project. Yet the intricate procedure required a new cycle of hearings and approvals that could only take place in 1853.

Demands for constitutional reform had been prominent during the 1848-49 presidential contest and they were often accompanied by a set of fundamental principles among which universal manhood suffrage was for some pivotal. The latter seemed favoured by both main parties. Conservatives felt confident of carrying the majorities at the polls. After commenting positively on the measures taken by France, where 'the right to elect will be universal', where the poor and the wealthy, the ignorant and the learned would be members of the nation alike, *El Nacional* noted that it wanted to draw the attention of its readers to the principles of a 'plainly democratic constitution'. The basis for such constitution, *El Nacional* stated, was the right that all adult men had to elect and to be elected.[101] Indeed, one of the founders of the Conservative party defended 'the need for a radical reform: universal and secret suffrage' while disputing the claim that Liberals were the champions of democracy in what often looked like a tit-for-tat debate.[102] Liberals in turn questioned Conservatives' motives, accused their opponents of deceiving the people and

[100] *Gaceta Oficial*, 4 Apr. 1849.

[101] *El Nacional*, 21 May and 9 Sept. 1848.

[102] Mariano Ospina Rodríguez, 'Los partidos políticos' (1849), in Doris Wise de Gouzy (ed.) *Antología del pensamiento de Mariano Ospina Rodríguez,* 2 vols (Bogotá, 1990), i, 337-339.

manipulating elections as they asserted once and again their democratic credentials. Both parties claimed ownership over 'democracy' and 'universal suffrage'.

The debate was not confined to the chambers of Congress. The press was quick to reprint the text of the 1848 French constitution which adopted 'direct and universal suffrage'.[103] University students, congregated around the Escuela Republicana (a sort of debating society), gave speeches advocating 'universal suffrage'. The measure was often included in 'constitutional projects' presented to the public through pamphlets or newspaper articles. 'There is no democracy without universal suffrage' stated an essay in a booklet, also serialized in the press.[104] Some Liberal voices, however, raised warnings. For *El Neogranadino*, the republic was working towards universal suffrage, but such a route could be frustrated if the country did not improve the welfare of the majority. It was the independence of voters, particularly from the clergy, that concerned some Liberals who favoured keeping the literacy restriction. And when the constitutional reform project was first approved in May 1851, it limited the vote to those who knew 'to read and write'.[105]

When Congress reconvened in 1852, the government praised the reform project as the 'most liberal and democratic [constitution] that has hitherto been presented in any American country and perhaps in the entire world'.[106] But as Robert Grusin pointed out in his 1978 PhD thesis, the text 'did not placate radicals. They wanted more far-reaching reforms as universal suffrage'.[107] Given the procedural obstacles noted above, the government asked

[103] *El Aviso*, 24 Sept. 1848.

[104] See speech by José María Samper, in *Una sesión solemne de la Escuela Republicana de Bogotá* (Bogotá, 1850), 10; Ricardo Vanegas, *Proyecto de constitución* (Bogotá, 1851), 6-7; 'Reformas constitutionales' was the first of a series of articles published in *El Suramericano* on 19 Jan. 1850, soon as a booklet by León Hinestrosa, *Reformas constitucionales* (nd, possibly 1850).

[105] *Gaceta Oficial*, 31 May 1851.

[106] *Gaceta Oficial*, 10 Mar. 1852.

[107] Grusin, 'The Revolution of 1848', 117.

Congress to attend to other priorities until the following legislature. But the discussion continued in other forums. For example, José María Samper, a young Liberal who had been a Chamber representative in 1850, produced a textbook for his classes at the Colegio Nacional, where he argued that constitutional science was limited to nine principles, the first being popular sovereignty based on 'universal suffrage'. He accepted the existing restrictions on women, minors, criminals and the mentally impaired, but without the 'popular vote, the democratic government is completely denatured'.[108] In January 1852, the *Gaceta Oficial* started to publish a serialized Spanish version of George Sidney Camp's *Democracy*, which argued in favour of the 'right to vote' for all men. Published also in book form - its translator recommended it be read in the *Sociedades democráticas* established in the republic .[109] As the new presidential electoral campaign took-off, some of those who endorsed Obando raised their voice in support of a constitutional reform that included 'direct universal suffrage'.[110] Several provincial assemblies sent petitions to Congress requesting the approval of the reform, explicitly endorsing that measure. From Cipaquirá, for example, the local deputies complained that the principle of 'popular sovereignty' had been subverted by 'excluding from the banquette of citizenship the poor, the weak, the ignorant, the young, that is two-thirds of the nation'. After critiquing the 1843 constitution as 'useless even for a moderate

---

[108] José María Samper, *Cuaderno que contiene la esplicación de los principios cardinales de la ciencia constitucional* (Bogotá, 1852), 8, 15, and 26.

[109] *Gaceta Oficial*, 24 Jan. 1852; George Sidney Camp, *Democracia, o exposición de los principios fundamentales, naturaleza genuina y propiedad intrínseca y universal del gobierno republicano* (Bogotá, 1852). Its translator, Lorenzo María Lleras, was the founder of the first *Sociedad Democrática de labradores i artesanos* in 1838. In addition to its possible use as a democratic manual, what was perhaps appealing about this book to the likes of Lleras was Camp's universalism – that all mankind could aspire to be governed by democratic principles

[110] *El Pabellón Granadino*, 1 Aug. 1852.

monarchy', the Cauca assembly summarized 'in a single thought the fundamental truth upon which the new constitution ought to be based: 'direct and secret universal suffrage'.[111]

It is worth underlining that the income requirements had already been dropped in the 1851 reform project. This requirement was, according to the government, one of the most serious defects of the old constitution, together with the system of indirect elections. As noted, however, the project still imposed literacy conditions on voters.[112] Proposals to drop the latter were criticized by a few Conservative voices, such as *El Catolicismo*, which declared that, if universal suffrage were approved, 'the destiny of the *patria* will be left in the hands of the ignorant masses […] this is to decree demagogy and socialism'.[113] Some Liberals raised again their concerns about the need to guarantee the independence of voters. 'Without economic and social transformations, political reforms were of little value', reasoned Manuel Murillo Toro, as he questioned: 'what is the meaning of universal and direct suffrage, even if it be secret, when out of one thousand voters 999 are without secure subsistence?'[114] Both the literacy and economic requirements remained the subject of discussion when Congress was summoned to proceed with the second hearings of the project, in March 1853. But the majority favoured 'universal suffrage without any limitations', against the 'oligarchy of wealth' and the 'oligarchy of intelligence'.[115] Indeed, while an agreement over the suffrage was soon reached, other issues became the source of serious divisions within the Liberal camp, now in firm control of Congress: the existence of

[111] See the various petitions in *Neo-Granadino*, 15 and 22 Oct., 19 and 26 Nov., and 10 Dec. 1852.

[112] *Informe del Secretario de Estado* (1853), 5, 6.

[113] *El Catolicismo*, 1 Mar. 1853.

[114] *Neo-Granadino*, 15 Apr. 1853.

[115] *Neo-Granadino*, 18 Mar. 1853.

permanent armed forces, the death penalty, the nature of federalism, the level of tariffs – the latter motivating a renewed wave of mobilization among artisans during the congressional sessions.

Ultimately, not only was universal male suffrage approved but it was extended to the election of provincial governors. Even those who had previously toyed with the idea of restrictions, welcomed the new measure: 'Having established the direct and secret universal suffrage [together with the independence of the legislature, the judiciary and the municipalities], we are persuaded that the work accomplished by the legislature in 1853 is the last word of that glorious revolution that had its preamble in [the independence of] 1810'.[116]

V

'The decisions to extend the vote', observed the social scientist Stein Rokkan in a classical work on the subject, 'were not uniformly a response to pressures from below, they were often the results of contests for influence at the top and of deliberate moves to broaden the bases for an integrated national power structure'.[117] Similarly, historians studying suffrage extensions have grappled with these alternative explanations, like Robert Saunders in summarising the two main schools of thought regarding the Second Reform Act of 1867 in the UK: one privileging 'popular agitation', the other party rivalries and party crisis.[118] As this article has shown, explaining the drivers of universal male suffrage by some Spanish American countries in the mid-nineteenth-century is not a simple exercise of binary choice.

[116] *Neo-Granadino*, 27 May 1853.

[117] Stein Rokkan, 'Mass Suffrage, Secret Voting and Political Participation', *Europeam Journal of Sociology*, 2:1 (1960), 137.

[118] Robert Saunders, 'The Politics of Reform and the Making of the Second Reform Act, 1848-1867', in *The Historical Journal*, 50: 3 (2007), 572.

Our argument privileges the dynamics of electoral competition and partisan agency, yet it does so against the atmosphere of social and political unrest that surrounded the measure, while paying attention to the wider historical trajectory of the suffrage in the region. In common to most countries in Spanish America, New Granada, Argentina and Mexico had adopted a relatively broad suffrage as they gained independence. Indeed, they experienced what Gary Gerstle, writing about the United States, termed an 'electoral revolution', where the breadth and intensity of the electoral process had substantially expanded after 1800.[119] The early experience with a broad franchise, however, did not constitute a pre-determined path towards universal manhood suffrage. New Granada introduced economic restrictions to the vote in 1843. But if the government had been able to impose such restrictions as the victor in the *Guerra de Supremos*, the intensity of electoral life soon resurfaced. By 1848, two main parties, Conservatives and Liberals, had emerged from decades of regular contestation for power at the ballot box, with loyalties also rooted in the experiences of civil war. Levels of mobilisation mounted as new presidential elections approached, amidst a climate of unrest where the Liberals in opposition were able to rally discontent against a regime identified with the remnants of the colonial past. While the Liberal victory in 1849 inaugurated an extraordinary period of reforms that 'affected almost every facet of national life',[120] it took four more years, and another electoral cycle, before universal male suffrage was adopted in 1853.

It is of course important to place the Spanish American story within the wider context of the European revolutions of 1848, an age of experimentation with universal male suffrage. But by the time the measure was adopted in New Granada, the events in the old continent,

[119] Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion*, 151.

[120] Grusin, 'The Revolution of 1848', vi.

particularly those in France where 'universal suffrage' had paved the way for Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, could only serve as a cautionary tale for the Liberals. The fact that they went along with it is remarkable, as remarkable as the process of reform that made it possible. An understanding of its passage in 1853, as this article suggests, requires a detailed examination of the electoral strategies adopted by the competing parties and the intricacies of the parliamentary politics of the period – this was after all a measure approved by Congress. It also requires a fuller appreciation of the extra-parliamentary activities displayed in favour of the reform, including those led by a new generation imbibed by the revolutionary spirit of 1848. 'Universal suffrage' for them was the symbol of the ambitious reform programme pursued by the Liberals since 1849. Throughout these years, public debate was permeated by the language of democracy. Its concept, appropriated by all parties, if often used in opposition to 'aristocrats' and 'oligarchs' to designate the new principles of equality in social relations and of popular inclusion in the formation of governments, was also used to signal the dawn of a new age, the era of 'democracy', whose 'most complete expression' was 'universal suffrage'.[121]

Universal male suffrage also opened a new chapter in the history of the country. Its implementation was briefly interrupted by a military rebellion in March 1854, quashed by the two parties a few months later. The first experiences with the new institution bore some striking similarities to those in France: Conservatives gained the upper hand in the electoral battlefield – and won the control of the Supreme Court, the majorities in Congress in 1855, and finally the presidency in 1856. However, their reign was shortened by an uprising in 1859 led by General Mosquera, supported by Liberals, which gave way to a civil war that lasted until 1861, ousting the Conservatives from power. In 1863, a constitutional

[121] *Neo-Granadino*, 19 Dec. 1851.

convention adopted a federal system that left suffrage regulations in the hands of the states of the Union – four out of the nine states kept universal male suffrage, while the other five reintroduced economic or literacy restrictions, or both. The mixed regime continued until 1886, when the government, keen to centralise state power, extended the economic restrictions to all national elections. By then the country, at least a large portion of it, had experimented with universal manhood suffrage for over a quarter of a century, an experience whose fortunes (beyond the concerns of this article), still remain by and large ignored in the historiography of Colombia.

The early adoption of universal male suffrage in Spanish America merits therefore examination in its own right. But our findings have wider implications. At a minimum, by introducing greater precision to the very notion of 'universal male suffrage', as done here, comparative studies on the topic may need to rethink their selection of cases. This is not a marginal observation. Since the expression 'universal' masks exclusions (eg the 'economically dependent' or the racially other), there is a need to identify a common understanding of 'universal manhood suffrage' for the purpose of comparison. Such specifications are of course relevant to the wider conceptual history of 'universal suffrage' – how the notion of 'universal' evolved to incorporate the previously excluded in the franchise (black and indigenous peoples, domestic servants, women). In addition, our article offers suggestions for further engagement with the rich theoretical debate among social scientists regarding the expansion of the franchise. It serves to question, for example, Engerman and Sokoloff's assertion, based on their study of the United States, that 'where there was greater inequality or heterogeneity, the proportion of the population that had the right to vote was generally lower'.[122] It also adds layers of complexity to any attempt to answer the

[122] Engerman and Sokoloff, 'The Evolution of Suffrage', 895.

interrogation raised by Przeworski, 'Conquered or granted'?[123] As shown here, histories of suffrage extensions cannot be reduced to single factors, nor are they stories of simple advancement. They also need to account for all those related institutions that come with the vote, such as whether or not elections were direct, institutions that cannot be dismissed as minutiae. Above all, however, this article offers a Spanish American perspective on a growing historiography on the suffrage and democracy in the nineteenth century. If French republicans, along with historians, saw the 1848 experience as *la grande decéption*,[124] contemporaries in New Granada kept their illusions alive for longer. In spite of the European setbacks, some, like the editor of *Neo-Granadino*, proclaimed their faith in 'universal suffrage' as this would propel the forces of 'the democratic revolution'.[125]

[123] Przeworski, 'Conquered or Granted?'

[124] Crook, 'Universal Suffrage as Counter-Revolution?', 50.

[125] *Neo-Granadino*, 19 Dec. 1851. For the general optimism of contemporaries in Spanish America, particularly in New Granada and Mexico, when they compared themselves with Europe, see Sanders, *The Vanguard*, chapter 4, 81-135.