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Legitimacy and dispute: official narratives in response to international observation in contexts of crisis

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This article examines the tension between international electoral observation reports and the official narratives of national authorities in the context of elections marked by allegations of irregularities. Based on a comparative analysis of cases in Venezuela -2000, 2018, and 2024-, Mexico -2006-, Honduras -2017-, Bolivia -2019-, Nicaragua -2021-, and Guatemala -2023-, the reports of international organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU), are contrasted with official statements issued by national electoral bodies or analogous institutions. The study, grounded in discourse analysis, identified four recurring strategies employed by national authorities: the delegitimization of the impartiality of international observers, the reaffirmation of sovereignty through appeals to non-interference, the legal-institutional defense of internal procedures, and acceptance with reservations that project political continuity by acknowledging the general role of international electoral observation while expressing reservations about its assessments. These discursive practices can function as mechanisms of internal legitimization that help limit the impact of international reports and prevent tensions from escalating into governance crises. They illustrate how electoral institutions neutralize external criticism and preserve the stability of the political system.

KEYWORDS
democracy, discourse analysis, electoral observation, legitimacy, sovereignty

1 Introduction

In recent decades, international electoral observation (IEO) has become a key mechanism for assessing electoral quality. However, its findings often trigger defensive responses from national authorities, raising tensions between transnational democratic standards and domestic institutional reactions. Against this backdrop, this study examines the tension between transnational standards of electoral democracy and the responses of national institutions in contentious elections.

This concern is situated within a broader debate on the limits of international democratic governance and the principle of state sovereignty (Dahl, 2000; Zürn, 2018), particularly in political systems where formal democratic principles coexist with questionable electoral practices (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2013). The cases of Venezuela -2000, 2018, and 2024-, Mexico -2006-, Honduras -2017-, Bolivia -2019-, Nicaragua -2021-, and Guatemala -2023- are representative of this tension, and allow for the identification of patterns in how national electoral

institutions confront international scrutiny in scenarios marked by suspicion of fraud or irregularities. Across all cases, electoral authorities went beyond technical justifications and deployed political narratives to reaffirm their legitimacy—invoking sovereignty, questioning observers' impartiality, and projecting institutional normalcy.

By analyzing the divergences between the narratives of international electoral observations and official discourse, this article contributes to understanding the ways in which national electoral institutions seek to maintain symbolic authority and respond to international assessments in the context of electoral contestation. In doing so, this study engages with scholarship on institutional legitimation (Suchman, 1995), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2010), and democratic performativity (Schedler, 2013), providing empirical evidence of the role of narratives in managing controversies affecting electoral processes.

One of the article's main contributions is twofold: it develops a conceptual model to systematize the configurations of discursive confrontation between election observation missions and national authorities and applies a qualitative methodological approach to analyze these interactions. The study compares the arguments of both actors in selected cases within an interpretive framework. Given the novelty of the analytical framework and methodology, the research is exploratory and adopts a theory-building perspective (Gibbs, 2007). Rather than statistically testing hypotheses or producing generalizable claims, it seeks to understand how social phenomena are constructed in the analyzed documents and identify recurring discursive patterns. Thus, the cases serve as empirical illustrations that help refine the proposed analytical categories.

This article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical foundations of the study, focusing on the dual role of international electoral observation and the discursive tensions that arise in contentious elections. Section 3 presents the conceptual framework and typology used to classify both the functions of international observation missions and the dominant state responses. Section 4 explains the methodological approach, including case selection, data collection, and coding. Section 5 offers a comparative analysis of the selected elections, demonstrating how the framework operates across different regime types. The article concludes by discussing the broader implications of discursive confrontations between observation missions and national authorities for democratic governance and future research.

2 Electoral observation as a field of dispute

2.1 Observing, evaluating, and legitimizing: an approach to international electoral observation

International electoral observation (IEO) is a key mechanism for promoting and evaluating democracies. Its scope has expanded toward a full-cycle approach that combines a technical dimension—gathering empirical information throughout the electoral process—with a political one, issuing assessments that shape domestic and international perceptions of electoral legitimacy (Norris, 2014). In this sense, IEO performs a dual role (Hyde, 2011; Bjornlund, 2004): it produces systematic information across the electoral cycle while simultaneously influencing how elections are interpreted. As an external source of validation, it becomes particularly consequential in the context of weak institutions or high levels of distrust (Donno, 2013).[1]

The IEO authority is based on an epistemic foundation, including expertise, standardized methodologies, and comparative experience (Bjornlund, 2004; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012).[2] They have also contributed to resolving intra-party conflicts or disputes between political actors and electoral bodies "behind the scenes" (Freidenberg, 2017). Finally, the credibility of observers has been strengthened by the incorporation of international human rights principles into electoral observation standards (Merloe, 2015). Through this systemic authority and the assumption of neutrality, IEO produces narratives considered "objective" about what occurred in elections (Schedler, 2013).

Simultaneously, IEO has a performative dimension. The presence of observers in electoral missions not only records the reality of the electoral process but can also modify the behavior of the actors involved, either by reducing certain forms of fraud or by displacing them toward more subtle and difficult-to-detect practices (Hyde, 2011). Moreover, IEO is heterogeneous in nature, as not all missions operate under the same principles, and they do not enjoy the same level of credibility or influence. These variations reflect broader disputes over sovereignty, intervention, and the very meaning of democracy (Bjornlund, 2004). This capacity for influence and normative definition underscores that IEO transcends a merely technical or observational function.

Indeed, among the explicit objectives of IEO are strengthening public trust, deterring fraud, and promoting institutional reforms. Implicitly, however, it also contributes to establishing normative hierarchies between regimes considered democratic and those deemed undemocratic (Kelley, 2012). For this reason, several scholars have argued that IEO is not strictly neutral; its authority rests on normative standards that reflect a specific conception of liberal representative democracy (Kelley, 2012). These standards define what counts as a 'free and fair' election, privileging criteria such as political competition, pluralism, transparency, and procedural regularity, and thereby contributing to the diffusion of specific democratic norms across different political contexts (Hyde, 2011; Bjornlund, 2004). As a result, the IEO's authority stems not only from its evaluative function but, more importantly, from its alignment with the dominant normative frameworks of democracy that structure the international system.

In this regard, the role of IEO is debated: while it promotes transparency, it may also act as a political actor shaping legitimacy struggles (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012). In Latin America, the Organization of American States (OAS) has been at the center of major controversies, most notably in Bolivia -2019-and Venezuela -2018, 2024-, where its reports were contested by competing actors.[3] These debates have been extended by critical and post-colonial approaches, which argue that international electoral observation may reflect underlying power asymmetries, as certain actors are positioned as legitimate arbiters of

1 This argument is consistent with broader theories of legitimacy that emphasize the role of external recognition and normative justification in sustaining political authority (Beetham, 1991).

2 More widely, this type of authority reflects forms of epistemic and professional legitimacy commonly associated with international organizations (Sending et al., 2015).

3 In Bolivia, academic and policy analyses questioned the statistical basis and transparency of the OAS audit, linking its conclusions to increased polarization and crisis escalation (Curiel and Williams, 2020; Weisbrot et al., 2019; Long et al., 2020). Similarly, in Venezuela, OAS electoral assessments have been both supported and contested, reflecting broader disputes over legitimacy and international recognition (Serbin-Pont, 2018).

democratic standards in other states, thereby reproducing hierarchical relations within the international system (Tickner, 2014; Zürn, 2018).

Finally, more recent scholarship highlights the growing relevance of political polarization, democratic erosion, and sovereigntist discourses in shaping contemporary political dynamics (McCoy et al., 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Carothers and Hartnett, 2024). Although not directly concerned with electoral observation, this literature helps situate IEO within a broader context of contested democratic norms and increasing resistance to external scrutiny.

These dynamics have become particularly visible in several countries since the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by intensified debates over democratic backsliding, electoral integrity, and the legitimacy of international organizations (Edgell, 2021; Hellmeier et al., 2021). In this context, international electoral observation missions increasingly operate in politically polarized environments, where their assessments may become central elements in broader struggles over electoral legitimacy.

Analyzing international electoral observation highlights the blurred boundaries between observation, intervention, and legitimization in contemporary elections. This perspective shifts attention from the stated intentions of IEOs to their actual effects, opening space to examine how global norms interact with national political practices.

2.2 Contentious elections and crises of legitimacy

Elections are widely regarded as the heart of representative democracy (Dahl, 1971; Schattschneider, 1960). However, although democracy requires the holding of elections, it does not accept any type of electoral process (Schedler, 2002). Democratic integrity is threatened in contexts where irregularities, malpractice, or weaknesses in electoral governance emerge (Birch, 2011; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012).[4] Such conditions can give rise to contentious elections, characterized by systematic challenges to or manipulation of democratic rules that blend formal competition with informal practices undermining electoral fairness (Norris, 2014). These practices may include the misuse of state resources, biased media coverage, limited independence of electoral authorities, or restrictions on political competition (Birch, 2011).[5]

Building on this understanding of how electoral malpractice erodes democratic fairness, it is important to note that electoral conflict arises not only from overt fraud but also from declining trust throughout the entire electoral cycle (Schedler, 2002; Norris, 2014).[6] When actors perceive that different stages of the process are marked by irregularities, exclusion, or systematic bias, elections cease to function as legitimate mechanisms of arbitration and are instead interpreted as instruments for the reproduction of power. Thus, contentious elections stem from a gap between procedural legitimacy—based on formal rules and standards—and sociopolitical legitimacy, defined by the recognition of results by citizens and political actors (Easton, 1965; Beetham, 1991).

Under such circumstances, elections cease to function as institutionalized mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of political competition and instead become arenas of open disputes. When actors simultaneously question both the validity of the rules and the meaning of the results, the electoral process becomes a critical juncture at which preexisting political tensions converge.[7] The world is currently experiencing a broader process of democratic backsliding (V-Dem Institute, 2025), marked by increasingly repressive autocratic practices that restrict freedoms and target opposition actors (Diamond, 2015), as well as weak democracies and hybrid regimes that hold elections, which, while formally democratic, mask practices that conflict with the principles of the liberal order (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).[8]

2.3 Confronted narratives and the struggle over meaning: international electoral observation versus national authorities

In such contexts, elections tend to become contentious processes overshadowed by institutional distrust and disputes over the rules of the democratic game. Consequently, the social acceptance of both the results and arbiters of the process becomes a matter of controversy, and electoral legitimacy enters a crisis (Norris, 2017). International observation organizations act as an external source of validation at this point, seeking to compensate for the shortcomings of weak institutions (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012).

However, in highly concentrated power systems, authorities tend to intensify delegitimizing responses to external scrutiny (Hyde, 2011), turning international observation into a source of tension that challenges official narratives. These tensions are political, undermining governmental legitimacy; institutional, confronting sovereign authority with external epistemic authority; and symbolic, challenging official interpretations of democracy and legality (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Schmidt, 2008; Norris, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

This study therefore advances a set of analytical propositions, conceived as heuristic tools rather than testable hypotheses to guide the comparative interpretation of the cases. Proposition 1 addresses how states' perceptions of international electoral observation shift under declining democratic conditions:

> As democratic quality declines and power becomes increasingly concentrated, international electoral observation shifts from being regarded as a technical evaluation to being criticized or excluded by national authorities.

4 These dynamics appear across cases: in the 1994 Dominican Republic general election, irregular vote counting and low trust in authorities fueled contention (Hyde, 2011); in the 2005 Kazakh presidential election, biased media and restricted competition undermined fairness (Kelley, 2012); and in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, misuse of state resources eroded confidence in the process (Birch, 2011).

5 Norris (2014) illustrates these informal distortions with the case of Russia in the 2000s, where incumbents benefited from systematic media bias and administrative pressure. Birch (2011) similarly describes how the manipulation of voter registration and unequal access to campaign resources in several post-Soviet elections distorted the level playing field despite the existence of formal competition.

6 The erosion of trust across the electoral cycle has been documented in cases such as Mexico under hegemonic party rule (Schedler, 2002) and Afghanistan's 2009 elections, where cumulative irregularities undermined confidence in the process (Norris, 2014).

7 This dynamic is most evident in polarized or hybrid regimes, where elections become plebiscitary and outcomes hinge on competing interpretations, heightening the risk of post-electoral disputes, mobilization, and even political violence.

8 Diamond (2015) shows that in countries such as Turkey and Venezuela, competitive elections coexist with repression of opposition actors. Levitsky and Way (2010) describe similar patterns in hybrid regimes like Russia, where formally democratic elections operate within authoritarian frameworks. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) also show that democratic backsliding in Hungary involves weakening checks and balances while maintaining elections.

One of the central cores of this tension is the existence of two distinct sources of legitimacy. While IEO grounds its authority in expert and neutral knowledge, national authorities claim sovereign authority based on constitutional legality and a popular mandate. According to Barnett and Finnemore (2004), this reflects the structural tension between the technocratic rationality of international institutions and the political logic of governmental authorities.

When these two logics come into conflict, national authorities may discursively reconfigure international organizations, portraying them as politically motivated actors aligned with local opposition forces or external geopolitical agendas (Carothers, 2016). Moreover, such narratives often emphasize the uniqueness of the national context, the alleged lack of understanding on the part of observers, and the defense of constitutional order against external pressures (Schmidt, 2008; Wodak, 2015). Through these strategies, authorities may attempt to erode the credibility of IEO and reassert state control over the electoral narrative, shifting the dispute from the technical arena to the symbolic and political spheres.

Drawing on these dynamics, Proposition 2 considers how national authorities construct counter-discourses in response to international electoral observations:

> In response to international electoral observations (IEO), national authorities articulate a counter-discourse that draws on institutional, scientific, or legal elements to discredit the critical perspective.

Linking the state's response to the system's level of democratization leads to Proposition 3:

> When the democratic quality of a state is low, power instruments are frequently used to reinforce the official narrative.

This discursive confrontation affects governability by triggering mobilization and polarization, while weakening institutional trust (Hyde, 2011; Norris, 2017). Beyond the specific elections examined in this study, similar dynamics have been observed in other contexts, where international observation interacts with contested electoral processes. Rather than isolated episodes, these cases reflect recurring patterns in the uneasy coexistence between the growing internationalization of democratic standards and the enduring principle of state sovereignty. Consequently, the battle over narratives in contentious elections illustrates broader tensions within the global democratic order. This places IEO in a complex position, acting simultaneously as a mechanism of legitimization and a potential source of conflict, thereby revealing some of the limits and ambiguities of multilevel democratic governance (Schmidt, 2008).

3 The actors in conflict: a conceptualization proposal

3.1 The function of international electoral observation (IEO)

To classify the function of IEO, this section develops a conceptual synthesis grounded in the previously discussed dual technical and political dimensions. Drawing on the insights of Hyde (2011) and Kelley (2012), this proposal operationalizes these contributions by focusing on the degree of discursive and political intervention displayed by observational missions. This approach allows for the identification of functions that range from primarily technical assessments to more explicit political roles.

Hyde (2011) analyzed how international observers can influence the legitimacy of elections and how their impact varies depending on the political context. Although she did not propose a formal typology, she distinguished between passive observation, critical evaluation, and political effects. Kelley (2012), for her part, classifies electoral missions according to their influence on legitimacy and conflict, noting that while some missions have performative effects, others merely certify processes, and some are ignored.[9]

The contributions of Hyde (2011) and Kelley (2012) have been widely discussed in the literature. Subsequent research has questioned the consistency of observers' deterrent effects (Donno, 2013; von Borzyskowski, 2019) and highlighted the political uses of observation by states and international actors (Bush, 2015). These debates support the need for a typology that captures the spectrum of IEO functions, from technical validation to politically consequential intervention.

Drawing on the contributions of Hyde (2011) and Kelley (2012), as well as the critiques of their work, the following positions are proposed[10]:

- Technical validation: The IEO primarily acts as a certifier of the process with limited political impact.
- Critical evaluation: The IEO issues observations that question relevant aspects of the electoral process without becoming a central actor in the conflict.
- Central actor in the conflict: IEO assessments directly influence the escalation of conflict and the legitimacy of the outcome.
- Exclusion or absence: IEO is restricted or excluded and its role is relegated exclusively to the international arena.

3.2 Dominant state response

To construct the typology of state responses, the type of sovereign narrative deployed in relation to IEO has been used, drawing on Barnett and Finnemore (2004), Schmidt (2008), and Wodak (2015). This classification is grounded in Schmidt's (2008) argument regarding political actors' capacity to reinterpret norms in conflictive contexts, supporting the idea that states can discursively reconfigure IEO.

Barnett and Finnemore (2004) theorize how states react to international authority by adopting strategies based on cooperation, resistance, or the contestation of international norms. Wodak (2015)

9 Examples such as Armenia -2003-, the Dominican Republic -1994-, Serbia -2000-, and Kazakhstan -2005- illustrate the variation in observers' influence, ranging from passive certification to decisive political intervention (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012).

10 Technical validation reflects Hyde's notion of passive observation and Kelley's view of missions that certify processes. Critical evaluation aligns with Hyde's observers issuing substantive assessments and Kelley's missions influencing legitimacy without becoming central actors. Central actor in the conflict draws on Hyde's political effects and Kelley's emphasis on missions shaping disputes. Finally, exclusion or absence reflects Kelley's cases of restricted missions and Hyde's recognition of limited observer roles.

developed discourse-analytic tools to identify strategies of legitimation and delegitimation.[11]

Based on this framework, the following four categories are proposed[12]:

- Conditional recognition: General acceptance of the role of IEO, albeit with reservations regarding its assessments.
- Legal-institutional justification: Emphasis on domestic legality and formal procedures.
- Narrative delegitimization: Explicit questioning of the impartiality and legitimacy of IEO.
- Sovereigntist rejection: Open denial of the authority of IEO and appeal to the principle of non-intervention.

The framework on state responses to international authority has also generated debate. Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) account of IO autonomy has been criticized for underestimating state resistance (Krasner, 1999; Zaum, 2007), while Schmidt's (2008) discursive institutionalism has prompted discussion about unequal narrative power (Hay, 2010). Wodak's (2015) analysis of delegitimation strategies has been extended in studies of sovereigntist rhetoric (de Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017). Empirical illustrations include states' legal-institutional- challenges to UN or IMF interventions (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004) and Wodak's examples of political actors framing external scrutiny as interference. These debates inform the four categories proposed herein.

Overall, the typologies developed in this section build on and contribute to academic debates by translating existing theoretical insights and empirical findings into a framework specifically tailored to the interaction between IEO and national authorities in contentious elections.

4 Materials and methods

4.1 Studying language as an approach to the object of study

Based on the above, this study adopts an interpretivist approach. Discourse analysis of documents from international electoral observation missions and the reports and narratives of national regimes are considered valid for understanding the research problem and the symbolic and semantic communication of institutions (Krippendorff, 1990; Herzog and Ruiz-Ruiz, 2019). Accordingly, this article focuses on arguments used by international electoral missions, independent national bodies, and contracted independent organizations.

To this end, a typology of IEO roles and state responses is proposed, inspired by the approaches of Barnett and Finnemore (2004), Schmidt (2008), Hyde (2011), Kelley (2012), and Wodak (2015). This original analytical construction is based on literature on sovereignty, legitimacy, and political narratives. Through this framework, this study aims to systematize variations across cases and the intensity of discursive confrontation between IEOs and national authorities.

Discourse analysis is appropriate because IEO–state confrontation occurs through public and institutional texts that actively construct the meanings of legitimacy, sovereignty, and authority. Thus, they capture the symbolic dimension of electoral disputes that is often overlooked in more institutional or quantitative approaches.

4.2 Case selection

The case studies were selected from Latin America due to persistent discrepancies between international verification missions and domestic electoral oversight bodies from 2000 to 2024. The region's high incidence of populist governments and electoral disputes (Guevara, 2021) further justified this focus. The analysis includes elections in Bolivia -2019-, Guatemala -2023-, Honduras -2017-, Mexico -2006-, Nicaragua -2021-, and Venezuela -2000, 2018, and 2024-.

Cases were purposively selected to capture variations in regime type and levels of conflict between IEOs and national authorities. Rather than constituting a random or exhaustive sample of elections in the region, the cases represent analytically relevant scenarios in which tensions between international electoral observation and official narratives became particularly visible.

Case selection follows a theoretically guided logic aimed at maximizing the analytical variation between the roles of IEOs and state responses. In line with the methodological literature on comparative and small-N studies (George and Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2017; King et al., 1994), priority was given to electoral processes that illustrate distinct configurations of the relationship between IEOs and national authorities.[13]

This strategy allows this study to illustrate how the proposed analytical framework operates across different institutional contexts, ranging from electoral democracies to hybrid regimes and electoral autocracies. Although the cases differ in terms of regime type and institutional strength, they share a central dynamic: the struggle for electoral legitimacy shifts from a strictly technical to a discursive and political arena, as anticipated in the theoretical framework. Moreover, their location in Latin America allows for the analysis of comparable patterns within relatively similar sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

The justification for this case selection aligns with the literature on contested elections and weak democracies or hybrid regimes as all studies illustrate different forms of electoral legitimacy crises. The contexts vary from electoral autocracies Venezuela -2000, 2018, and 2024-, Nicaragua -2021-, where IEO has been restricted, questioned, or directly delegitimized, to hybrid regimes Honduras -2017-, Bolivia -2019-, and formal democracies with weakened institutions

11 Empirical studies clarify these categories of state responses. Barnett and Finnemore (2004) show how governments use legal arguments to resist international interventions, illustrating legal-institutional justification. Wodak (2015) documents how external scrutiny is framed as biased interference, reflecting delegitimization and sovereigntist rejection. Schmidt (2008) highlights the selective reinterpretation of norms to maintain authority, consistent with conditional recognition. These cases provide empirical support for the proposed typology.

12 Conditional recognition draws on Schmidt's (2008) notion of discursive reinterpretation and Wodak's (2015) strategies of legitimation. Legal-institutional justification follows Barnett and Finnemore (2004) on the use of formal rules to contest international actors. Narrative delegitimization builds on Wodak (2015) and Schmidt (2008). Finally, sovereigntist rejection is an original category, conceptually aligned with Barnett and Finnemore's (2004) analysis of resistance to international authority.

13 For this reason, other potentially relevant cases, such as Peru in 2000 and Ecuador in 2002, were not included because they replicate empirical patterns already present in the sample; their inclusion would have generated analytical redundancy without expanding the proposed theoretical categories.

(Venezuela -2000-, Mexico -2006-, Guatemala -2023-, where defensive governmental narratives were articulated in response to IEO.

4.3 Data collection

International observation missions analyzed primarily correspond to those conducted by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union. These organizations were selected because they are among the most active and institutionally consolidated international electoral observation actors in the region, regularly deploying missions and publishing detailed reports that assess the integrity of electoral processes and provide recommendations to national authorities.

The documents analyzed were obtained from official national sources and the websites of international organizations.[14] In the case of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) documents (Bolivia), they were retrieved from its official website. For international documents, the analysis was limited to the final reports, excluding annexes.

Specific reports were selected to focus on elements relevant to the research: "*Observing the Observers: The OAS and the Bolivian Elections of 2019*" (Bolivia) and the "*2006 Assessment on the Final Count of the Presidential Election of the United Mexican States*" (Mexico). In the Bolivian case, the executive summary was analyzed, whereas for Mexico, the analysis was limited to the chapters covering the 2006 elections. This decision was made to optimize the coding work and ensure similar weights across all study documents. In the case of Venezuela, Judgment No. 31 of 2024 was available only as excerpts because the full text was not posted on the Supreme Court website.[15]

4.4 Study variables and data treatment

The data were processed using MAXQDA, supported by the AI Assist module, which enabled the selection and disaggregation of the coded segments.[16] This coding facilitated the quantification of both values and the dominant language, thus providing a more consistent basis for data analysis. The coding operationalized the positions defined in Sections 3.1 and 3.2. Thus, Section 3.1 has been used to determine the OEI's position, while Section 3.2 has served to establish the positions of the States. To this end, the coding process focused on operationalizing each position through the arguments used by both the OEI and the States. Institutional, technical, discursive, and sovereignty-based arguments were used to justify each code. The first refers to the rules of the game and electoral institutions, whereas the second focuses on defining the procedural elements that make up the electoral process. The third, discursive arguments, relate to the management of national and international perceptions of elections. Finally, arguments regarding sovereignty refer to the autonomy of the state in exercising power within its territory (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012; Schmidt, 2008; Wodak, 2015). The coding was carried out by considering the stance of each party to illustrate the conflicting arguments and to establish the positions of the OEI and the State (see Figure 1).[17]

The study followed a sequential process: designing the framework and variables, reviewing documents, creating and revising a coding system, conducting manual and then automated coding, and finally refining the codes. The following section applies this methodology to the selected cases. Given the study's exploratory nature, the findings are not statistically generalizable but illustrate recurring narrative strategies; future research should test the framework on a larger, systematically selected sample.

5 Analysis

To reinforce the comparative logic of the study and illustrate the analytical propositions proposed in the theoretical framework, cases are presented according to the level of democratic quality of the regime at the time of the election based on the V-Dem electoral democracy index.[18] Cases are presented according to their level of democratic quality, allowing a comparative examination of how IEO functions, state responses, and discursive conflicts vary across electoral democracies, hybrid regimes, and electoral autocracies.

5.1 Electoral democracies

The three cases illustrate how international electoral observation operates within electoral democracies facing different kinds of institutional and political stress. In Venezuela -2000-, still regarded as an electoral democracy with relatively robust institutions despite early signs of erosion, observation functioned mainly as technical validation and ultimately endorsed a process deemed acceptable after procedural adjustments and civil society pressure. In Mexico -2006-, a formally strong electoral democracy confronted a crisis of public confidence; although IEO was not especially prominent, reports such as those from the EU shaped national debate while the electoral authority defended the legality and transparency of its procedures. Guatemala, by contrast, shows how IEO can become central to protecting an electoral democracy when institutions are vulnerable, political actors behave disloyally, and citizen distrust creates openings for attempts to delegitimize results and manipulate the process.

In all elections, procedural and resource constraints were central to the discourse of international observers (Figures 2a–c).

In Venezuela, the main issues identified concerned procedural shortcomings and weaknesses in the legal-institutional framework. The organization of the May 28 "mega-elections" lacked adequate infrastructure and drew criticism from political actors, observers, and civil society. The Supreme Court ultimately postponed the vote due to technical and fairness concerns, a decision initially contested but later upheld, allowing the rescheduled July 30 elections to proceed under more acceptable conditions. Even so, observers reported deficiencies—delays, malfunctioning voting machines, limited capacity among polling staff, and human error—many of which stemmed from

14 See the document type and author in detail in Supplementary Table 1.

15 For more information on the segments included in this study, we recommend consulting the references in Supplementary Table 1 in the Supplementary Materials. All segments and their provenance documents are referenced in this document.

16 The process is illustrated in Supplementary Figure 1.

17 See the coding system in Supplementary Table 2.

18 To classify the countries, the following criteria were used: (a) Countries with an EDI > ~0.50 reflect relatively significant electoral institutions, characteristic of electoral democracies; (b) countries with an intermediate EDI (~0.30–0.50) tend to fall into hybrid regime zones; and (c) countries with a very low EDI (< ~0.30) exhibit traits of electoral autocracy (i.e., elections are held but without minimally competitive conditions).

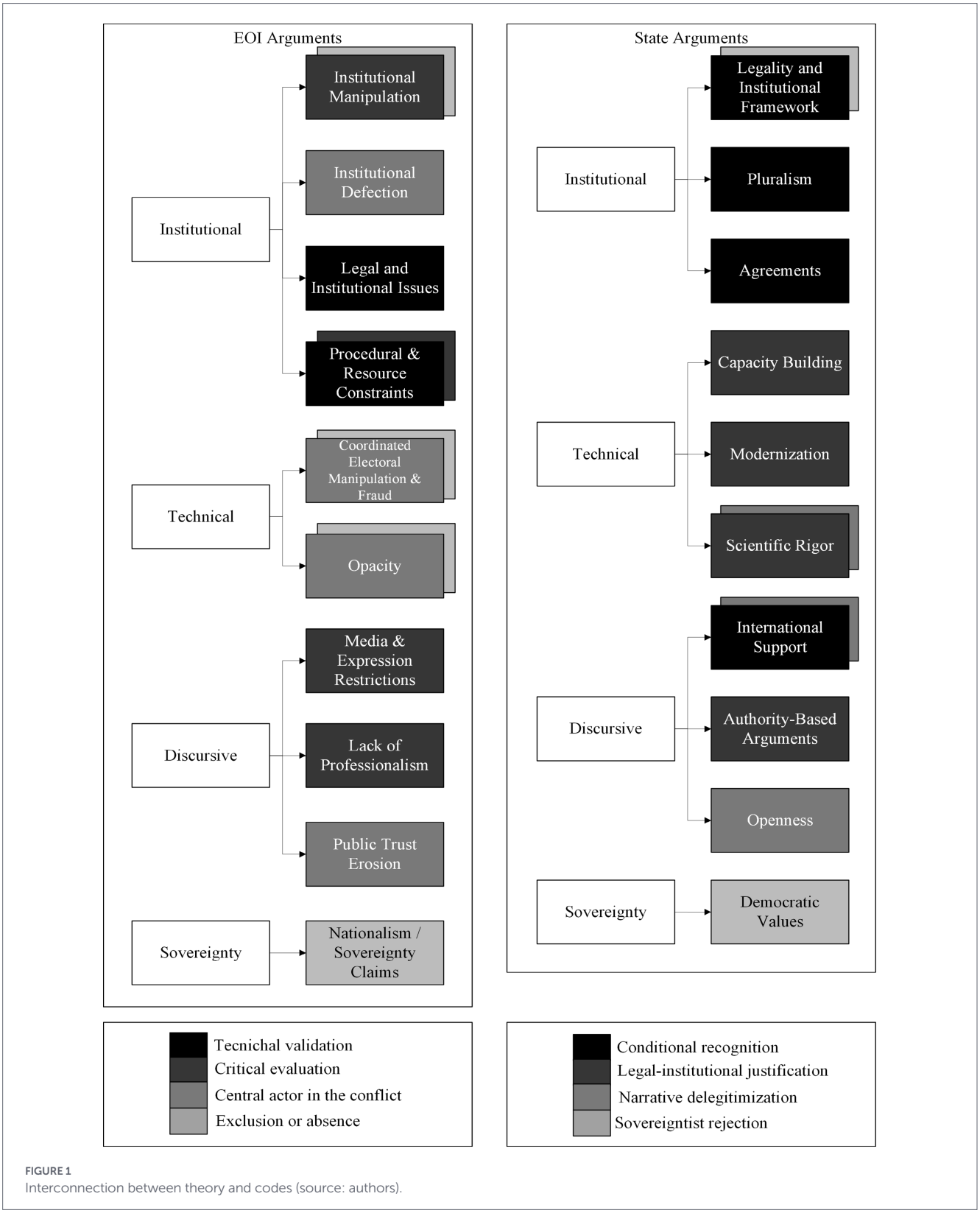

FIGURE 1
Interconnection between theory and codes (source: authors).

the rushed adjustments following the postponement. According to the OAS, these problems were not intentional:

> "The technical problems observed in the organization of the elections, particularly regarding the automated system, to the extent observed, are not attributable to an intention to alter the popular will that was to be expressed on Sunday, May 28, nor to the irregularities observed in the elections of July 30" (OAS, 2000, p. 41).

Legal and institutional problems were also related to the electronic system, including references to complaints filed during the elections,

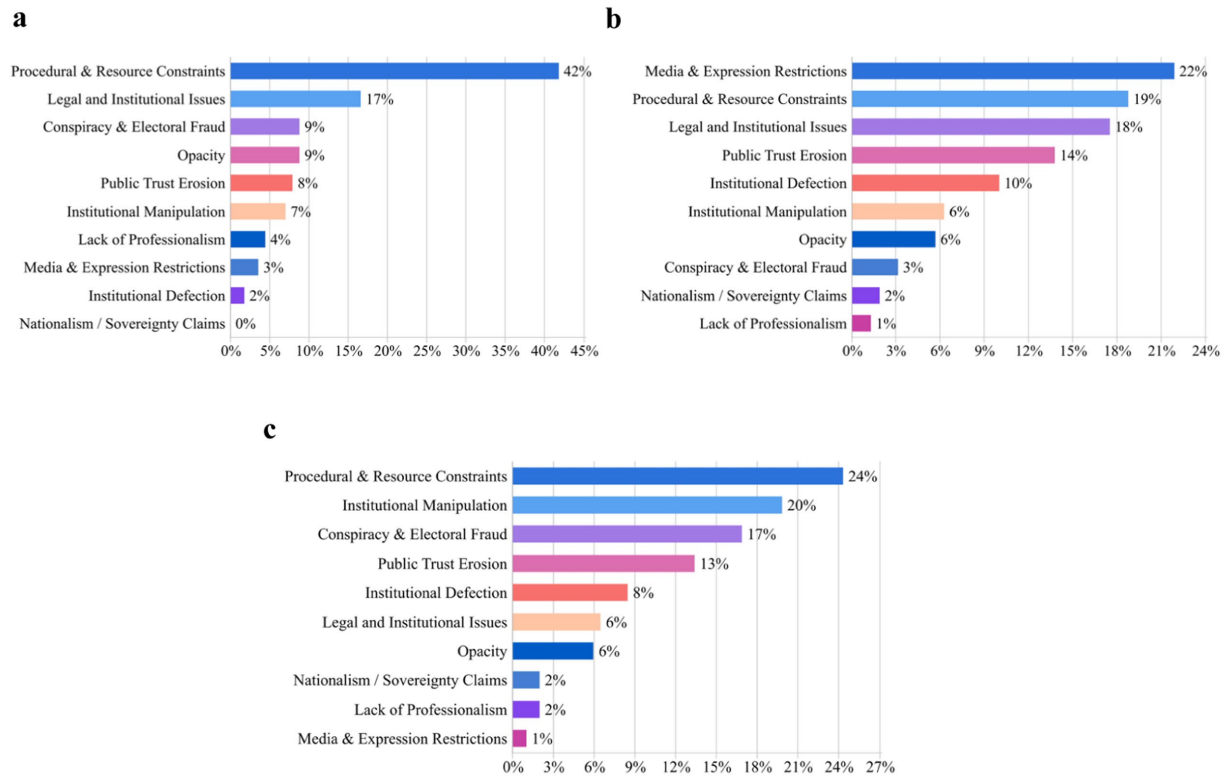

FIGURE 2
Segments referring to criticisms raised by the EOI in the electoral democracies. Colors are used only for visual differentiation of categories and do not represent substantive analytical distinctions. Source: authors. **(a)** Venezuela -2000-. **(b)** Mexico -2006-. **(c)** Guatemala -2023-.

issues in the electoral registry or the establishment of polling stations, among others.

> "Several complaints were received from candidates in different states regarding irregularities on election day. Among them is a complaint submitted to the Attorney General of the Republic by the Governor of Mérida State, with a copy to the OAS" (OAS, 2000, p. 39).

Other notable elements included a lack of professionalism, limited references to the use of state media and advertising campaigns, and the active participation of the opposition in electoral oversight.

Mexico in 2006 is different in this regard, as it highlights problems with the media system and the partisan use of institutions. It is important to note that procedural problems were limited to minor areas for improvement, such as the role of national electoral observers, improvement of registries, procedures for voting abroad, and the role and limitations of special polling stations. Other elements centered on logistical problems, inconsistencies, and errors in vote counting, and minor irregularities in the voting process. As noted, voting at special polling stations was particularly problematic:

> "[…] the decision, taken at the recommendation of political parties, to limit the number of ballots at so-called special polling stations to 750 worked against a large number of voters who were denied the right to vote […]" (EU, 2006, p. 14).

These issues were exacerbated by institutional and legal problems, including issues with the electoral registry, lack of neutrality of the IFE in its actions, problems with party financing, and absence of spending limits. A notable example of campaign financing is as follows:

> "[…] Although some political parties exceeded spending limits during the campaign, the IFE imposed no sanctions for violations of campaign finance laws. This may be because the IFE could not commit to conducting the extensive investigations required to determine violations within such a short period" (EU, 2006, p. 29).

In addition, the code of institutional manipulation was used by Vicente Fox and some officials in the administration.

> "Although it also criticized interference from the outgoing president and the private sector in the campaign, it expressed concern over the impact these actions could have had under other circumstances" (EU, 2006, p. 1).

All of these institutional and procedural failures led to a loss of trust in the institutions, which in turn sparked the mobilization of López-Obrador's supporters:

> "López Obrador rejected this ruling, as well as the victory of the PAN candidate, and at public assemblies of his supporters on September 16 and November 20, 2006, he proclaimed himself 'legitimate president,' leading a parallel government […]" (EU, 2006, p. 1).

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Unlike in Venezuela, in Mexico there was a loss of public trust in institutions that led to instability. This was caused by an election campaign, amplified by the media, which fostered a climate of distrust in institutions:

> "[…] the IFE and the Electoral Tribunal had to intervene in some cases to demand the removal of certain electoral propaganda considered offensive and defamatory" (EU, 2006, p. 2).

Despite problems during elections, the international mission deemed them fair.

As in previous cases, the 2023 elections in Guatemala were characterized by procedural and resource-related problems, which were the main issues highlighted by the IEO. However, the Guatemalan case goes beyond institutional or procedural failures and reveals the use of the judiciary as a tool to obstruct the electoral process and prevent access to government:

> "Even on June 23, two days before the election, changes were made to the registered candidacies, requiring the reprinting of ballots in two municipal corporations, as described in the section on electoral organization" (OAS, 2023, p. 10).

More widespread issues were also observed in the region, such as security and custody failures, delays in opening polling stations, and problems with voting overseas.

Procedural issues were closely linked to institutional manipulation, stemming from the lack of loyalty of some political forces. Complaints were filed in the courts, which at times acted inconsistently, all of which hindered the victory of the "Movimiento Semilla." These events also led to the institutional persecution of certain groups and suspension of political parties:

> "Coinciding with the officialization of the presidential election results, a series of actions began by the Public Ministry and a judge of the criminal jurisdiction, reaching the level of harassment against electoral authorities and political persecution against one of the competing options […]" (OAS, 2023, p. 17).

Among these, one can point to the attempt to obstruct the registration of Movimiento Semilla and to manipulate a judicial and police investigation. The aim was to prevent this political party from coming into power. These actions led to street-level conflict and widespread distrust in institutions and the electoral process:

> "These actions sparked deep popular discontent, with massive mobilizations and a climate of extreme social tension, in which episodes of violence occurred despite the predominantly peaceful nature of the protests" (OAS, 2023, p. 6).

The three national authorities relied on the robustness of legal procedures and institutions to validate elections. These authorities argued that their decisions were grounded in a legal framework. They also invoked scientific arguments or arguments based on institutional authority. Similarly, they upheld democratic values and the role of election observations through international support and transparency (Figures 3a–c).

Regarding the institutional and legal narrative, in Venezuela, this is reflected through court rulings and the application of the law. For example:

> "By decision dated May 23, 2000, the Court declared itself competent to hear the present case and admitted the request for constitutional protection (amparo), ordering the Secretariat of the Court, due to the urgency of the case and the imminent holding of the elections on May 28 of the current year, to schedule an oral and public hearing […]" (Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) 2000, p. 1).

In addition to these arguments, there is international support, which in this case is indirect, as the claimants cited statements from countries such as the United States and international missions calling for the suspension of the elections. The most relevant aspect is that the Court considered these arguments and ordered a postponement:

> "OAS observers suggested deferring the elections if delays at the CNE continue" (TSE, 2000, p. 7).

Other arguments were related to democratic principles developed through the prevailing legal framework, ranging from democratic foundations to elements specific to the electoral process.

> "The act of voting and the suffrage that emanates from it constitute the culminating moment of the exercise of popular sovereignty and, therefore, the most eminent and respectable" (TSE, 2000, p. 18).

These rulings also show that the opposition was able to assert its right to legal protection (amparo) before the courts while simultaneously participating in the electoral process. Indeed, the organizations "Queremos Elegir" and "COFAVIC" succeeded in postponing elections through their legal challenges.

As in the previous case, the Electoral Tribunal (ET) offered purely legalistic arguments. While they recognized issues related to the media and the partial role of the outgoing president, they relied on arguments grounded in Mexican legality and institutional frameworks. This created a seemingly solid bureaucratic body that served to justify actions taken during the electoral process:

> "Formally, the preparatory phase of the 2005–2006 federal electoral process began on October 6, 2005, with the first session held by the General Council of the Federal Electoral Institute (CGIFE) in the first week of October of the year prior to the elections; however, as had become customary in recent federal elections, the CGIFE issued various agreements directly related to the conduct of the election in advance […]" (ET, 2006, p. 18).

These arguments were supported by the work of renowned researchers, thereby lending them scientific authority and rigor.

> "Professor José Roldán Xopa has argued that, although it is an administrative procedure, it grants them greater freedom (discretion) to fulfill their obligation to investigate potential serious violations of the election […]" (ET, 2006, p. 53).

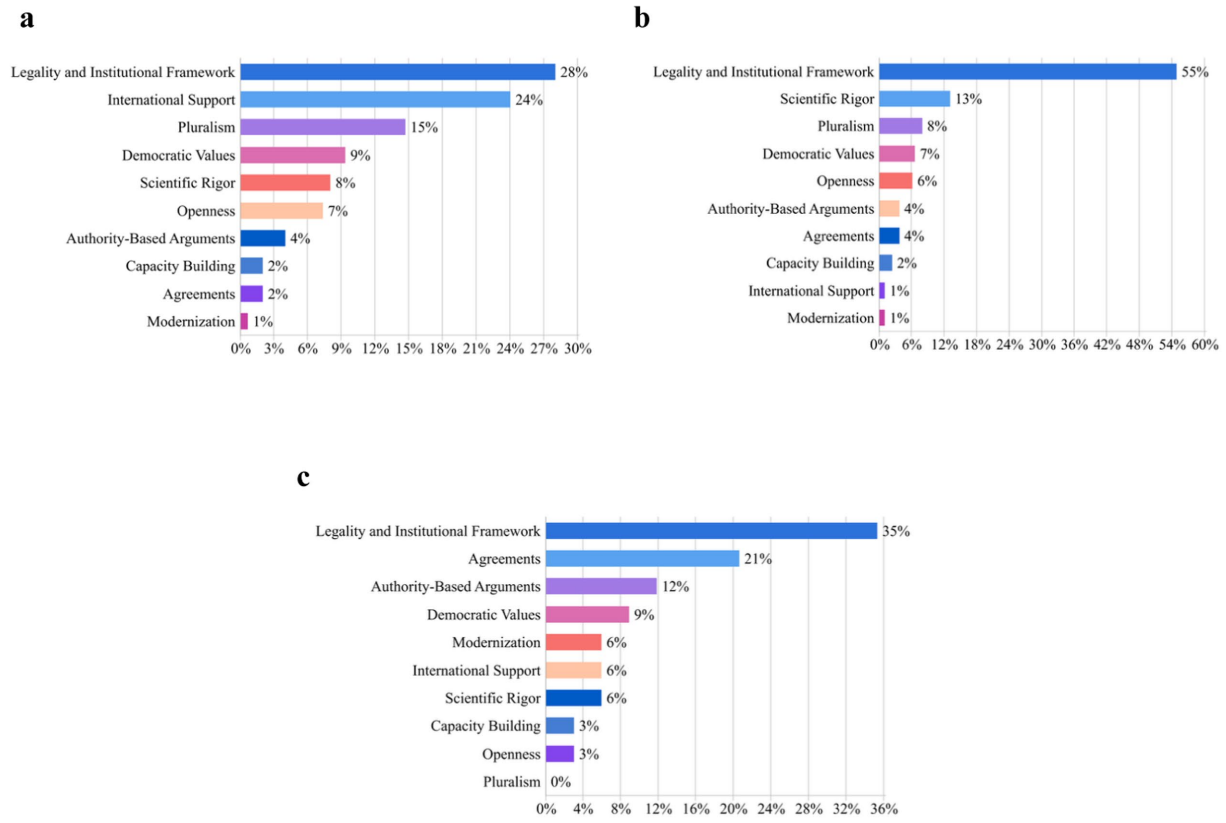

FIGURE 3
Segments referring to arguments advanced by national authorities in the electoral democracies. Source: authors. **(a)** Venezuela -2000-. **(b)** Mexico -2006-. **(c)** Guatemala -2023-.

Similarly, in Guatemala, a similar pattern emerges, and the legal system is invoked:

> "The Government of Guatemala has respected the results formalized by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal for both the presidential ticket and the 340 mayors, as well as the 160 elected deputies" (Government of Guatemala, 2023, p. 1).

However, with regard to Guatemala, the legal arguments were supplemented by agreements and arguments based on precedent that support the concept of an institutional framework and the prominent role of the electoral mission. For example:

> [Agreements] "[It] must proceed to issue the corresponding Agreement for the Award of Positions to the District Municipal Corporation, in accordance with the final results of said scrutiny" (JEDC, 2023, p. 2).

> [Authority-Based Arguments] "This process, which had the oversight and support of the Organization of American States (OAS), concluded with the delivery, on December 6, of the Final Government Transition Report to the elected authorities, with the presence of Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the OAS" (Government of Guatemala, 2023, p. 1)

In short, and given the classification system used, Venezuela -2000- corresponds, according to the proposed classification, to a technical validation conducted by the IEO, as despite the noted deficiencies, the process was considered generally valid. The state response falls under conditional recognition, supported by legal and institutional arguments. The level of conflict was low, as the dispute did not escalate into a structural confrontation with international observers. Both the Mexican and Guatemalan cases are examples of critical evaluations. In the former, there was no structural contestation of the process, and the state response fell under legal-institutional justification, supported by the Electoral Tribunal's legal reasoning. The level of conflict was medium, concentrating on internal political disputes rather than confrontations with international observers. In the latter, the IEO pointed out irregularities and denounced attempts at institutional instrumentalization without invalidating the process. The dominant state response falls under legal-institutional justification, supported by formal respect for the decisions of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and legal arguments. The level of conflict was medium–high due to the judicialization of the process and social mobilization, although without a total rupture with international observation.

5.2 Hybrid regimes

Both the 2017 elections in Honduras and the 2019 elections in Bolivia took place under hybrid regimes. In the Honduran elections, the conflict between international observers and local authorities became explicit. The process was defined by the IEO as low quality, and it declared that it was impossible to fully guarantee the electoral results. The Bolivian elections represent one of the most paradigmatic cases of how international observation can become central to political conflict, generating strong citizen mobilization and significant

pressure on state authorities. According to reports issued by the OAS, the 2019 Bolivian presidential elections experienced a series of irregularities that prevented the "validation of the results originally issued by the Bolivian electoral authorities" (OAS, 2019, p. 22).

Although the two cases differ, they share certain similarities in terms of the arguments put forward by IEOs. Key issues include procedural and resource constraints, as well as opacity, conspiracy, and electoral fraud (Figures 4a,b).

In Honduras and Bolivia, the procedural and resource constraints highlight problems in electoral organization and operations, specifically in data transmission and the detection of unauthorized remote access. In Honduras, it also emphasizes deficiencies in coordination and a general lack of professionalism, which, in many cases, led to irregularities in the handling of electoral materials. Finally, it points out the absence of protocols for dispatching materials and widespread misinformation about procedures. In Bolivia, other contentious issues were also a lack of custody and security during electoral material transfers, delays in receiving electoral materials, and insufficiently trained party observers. Some examples of this were:

> [Server Failures Honduras -2017-] "On Wednesday, November 29, the Integrated Electoral Scrutiny and Disclosure System (SIEDE) experienced failures for 13 h, six of which it was unavailable" (OAS, 2017, p. 21).
>
> [Server Failures Bolivia -2019-] "OAS auditors noted that the interruption of TREP and the subsequent rerouting of data flow to an external server made the system completely manipulable. Indeed, a forensic analysis revealed that a parallel IT structure was deliberately constructed, capable of altering electoral results and erasing any trace of this activity." (OAS, 2019, p. 22)
>
> [Procedural Problems Honduras -2017-] "The Mission considers that copies of the minutes delivered to political parties as a control measure are not foolproof. This is because the parties do not have all copies; some were filled out by hand, lacked security measures, and discrepancies exist among them" (OAS, 2017, p. 22).

These procedural problems were compounded by a clear lack of transparency in both countries. In Honduras, this lack of transparency, combined with the use of institutions and legal frameworks, created significant barriers to verifying the quality of the results. In general, the mission faced numerous obstacles owing to a lack of information provided by the authorities:

> "The Mission requested, in writing from the TSE, the inventory of ballot boxes processed without closing reports or sensitive material, the report of scanned acts in INFOP, all images of acts being scanned in the ballot box reception process in INFOP, and a plan for unloading trucks and entering boxes. Unfortunately, the Mission did not receive this information from the tribunal" (OAS, 2017, p. 14).

At the institutional level, this control was reinforced by the lack of pluralism in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. Additionally, the prohibition on presidential reelection was removed:

> "[…] no regulatory law has been issued regarding presidential reelection, despite an initiative promoted by executive power. Therefore, the possibility remains that a president could perpetuate themselves in office indefinitely" (OAS, 2017, p. 9).

In 2019, it was the institutions that facilitated institutional manipulation, as they managed to get the court to disregard a referendum so that Morales could remain in office.

> "Thus, the Mission considers that if the Bolivian people had expressed that Article 168 of the Constitution should not be reformed, […] the authorities should not have acted against that popular will under the pretext of protecting the fundamental rights of public officials, as such actions undermine the democratic mechanism provided for in Article 411 of the Constitution." (OAS, 2019, p. 14).

This was because of the ruling party's control over the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. Additionally, there was inequality in campaign resources and a dominant position in the media using institutional communication as electoral propaganda. Opacity was chosen by the Bolivian government to avoid answering questions about the external server or suspending the vote count, which reinforces the notion that institutions were manipulated to secure a favorable outcome for Evo Morales.

The mission reports highlight attempts at electoral fraud by Honduran and Bolivian authorities as significant. Instances of electoral fraud included vote-buying, manipulation of credentials,

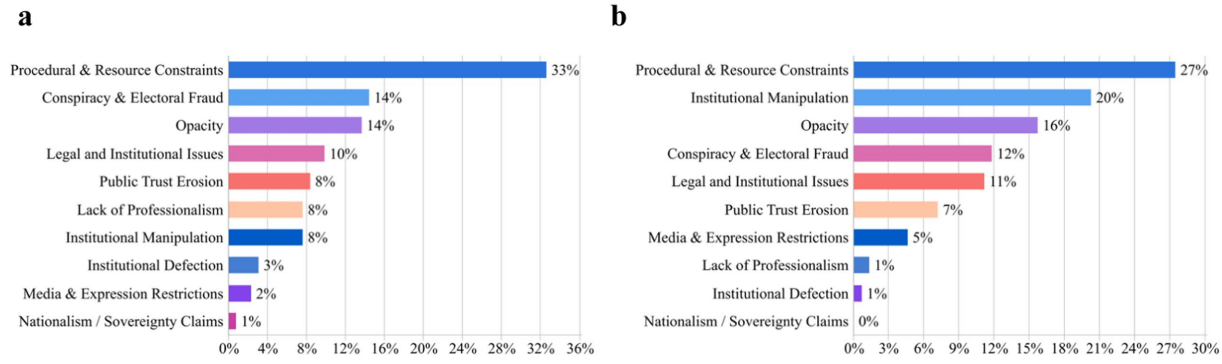

FIGURE 4
Segments referring to criticisms raised by the EOI in the hybrid regimes. Source: authors. **(a)** Honduras -2017-. **(b)** Bolivia -2019-.

falsification of statistics, and unauthorized access to servers. Examples include:

> [Vote Buying] […] "Massive transportation of voters was observed in various parts of the country and vote-buying in three departments" (OAS, 2017, p. 3).
>
> [Credential Buying] […] "The alleged purchase of credentials of MER members by major parties from smaller parties that could not appoint representatives for all MERs […]" (OAS, 2017, p. 11).
>
> [Unauthorized Access] […] "This uncontrolled access to the TSE server (without witnesses present) with administrator privileges represented a severe security risk […]" (OAS, 2017, p. 11)

Electoral fraud is evident in the suspension of TREP and the use of an unauthorized server in the case of Bolivian elections. Irregularities were also found in voting acts, and a highly improbable voting trend was detected:

> [Voting Trend] "[…] The auditing team detected a significant break in the voting trends of MAS and CC when 95% of TREP votes were counted." (OAS, 2019, p. 22).
>
> [Voting Acts] "[…] Specifically, 226 cases were identified in which two or more acts from the same polling station were filled out by the same person […]" (OAS, 2019, p. 25).

Other issues included census problems, the lack of gender equality instruments, and Indigenous representation:

> "Regarding the election, designation, or nomination of candidates for special constituencies, the law establishes that it must be carried out in accordance with the norms and procedures specific to each Indigenous community. The Mission observed that the OEP does not have systematized information on how these processes are carried out" (OAS, 2020, p. 37).

The main difference between Honduras and Bolivia lies in the types of arguments used to defend the legitimacy of the elections. While the 2017 elections in Honduras cited legal and institutional factors, the arguments in Bolivia were more scientific. Both types of arguments were accompanied by references to the openness of elections to international observers (Figures 5a,b).

In response to criticism, the government of Honduras questioned the impartiality of observers and appealed to defend constitutional order. The arguments of the Honduran authorities have focused on reinforcing the country's legal and institutional aspects. The documents used legalistic language and procedures to justify the electoral results and relied on judicial institutions to defend them.

For example:

> "In strict adherence to the Principle of Legality recognized by our Constitution in Article 321 and in compliance with the authority established in Article 13 of the Electoral and Political Organizations Law, as a Full Magistrate of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, as a constitutionally autonomous and independent entity with legal personality and jurisdiction throughout the Republic, whose function covers all acts and procedures related to elections, I issue […]" (TSE, 2017, p. 15).

Other elements concerned international support and openness, including references to the participation of international observers:

> "[…] the Supreme Electoral Tribunal invited Missions from the Organization of American States (OAS), the European Union (EU), members of the Inter-American Union of Electoral Organizations (UNIORE), the Tikal Protocol Electoral Organizations, the Council of Electoral Experts of Latin America (CEELA), and other international observers […]" (TSE, 2017, pp. 14–15).

Finally, democratic values were rhetorically referenced, emphasizing Honduras as a democratic state under the rule of law. The texts highlighted the principles underpinning the Honduran electoral system: freedom, impartiality, transparency, honesty, and legality. Popular sovereignty and the role of the constitution were also emphasized:

> "Honduras is a sovereign State under the rule of law, constituted as a free, democratic, and independent republic to ensure that its inhabitants enjoy justice, liberty, culture, and economic and social welfare" (TSE, 2017, p. 13).

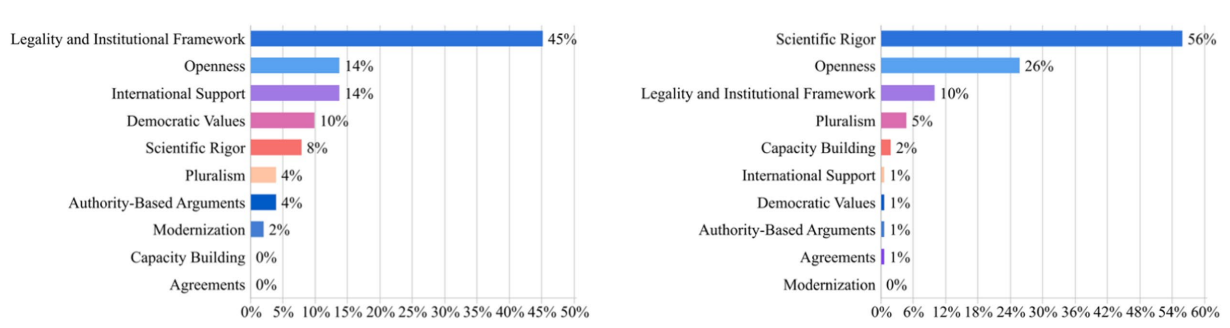

FIGURE 5
Segments referring to arguments advanced by national authorities in the hybrid regimes Source: authors. **(a)** Honduras -2017-. **(b)** Bolivia -2019-.

In the case of Bolivia, arguments were put forward to denounce OAS assessments as political intervention and interference in Bolivia's internal affairs, characterizing the reports as a destabilization campaign against Evo Morales' government. These intense tensions culminated in a political crisis, leading to the president's resignation due to pressure from the civilian and military sectors. The arguments were mainly based on a series of reports produced by the CEPR and national institutional bodies. The CEPR reports questioned both the IEO's work and the methodology used by the mission, employing statistical techniques and methodological critique, reinforced by authority arguments:

> "It is true that the OAS Final Report identifies several real electoral management problems that must be addressed; however, despite claiming otherwise, the Report provides no evidence that these irregularities altered the election results or were part of a deliberate attempt to do so" (CEPR, 2019, Observer Report, p. 4).

They also highlighted the openness of Bolivian authorities in terms of collaboration and assistance to the mission, such as the ability to consult voting acts online:

> "[…] Anyone wishing to verify that the information on the physical counting sheets matches the information entered in the system can do so. This facilitates checking inconsistencies and promptly correcting any errors." (CEPR1, 2019, p. 5).

Regarding legality and the institutional framework, the documents underscore key elements of the 2019 elections and the OAS audit, such as the use of two vote-counting systems, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, electoral juries, and regulations for general elections.

In conclusion, the IEO acted as a central actor in the conflict by declaring it impossible to guarantee the results. The state response leaned toward narrative delegitimization combined with legalist arguments. The level of conflict was high, with strong polarization and post-electoral contestation in both cases.

5.3 Electoral autocracies

In the cases of Venezuela -2000, 2018, and 2024- and Nicaragua -2021-, the elections were deemed to lack legitimacy and were declared fraudulent. The arguments put forward focus on the use of institutions for electoral manipulation (Figures 6a–c). In the case of Venezuela, if in 2000, the OEI still received conditional recognition from national institutions; by 2018, the conflict had become overt: broad sectors of the international community questioned the legitimacy of the presidential elections, while the Venezuelan government systematically delegitimized the OAS, accusing it of bias and interference (OEA, 2018). The aim was to control the electoral narrative and discredit external evaluations, opening a deep gap between the official narrative and OAS standards. In 2024, the exclusion or restriction of external observation missions consolidated the state narrative that invalidated the authority of the OAS and reaffirmed near-total control over the electoral narrative, illustrating an extreme case of disconnection between the national narrative and international standards (Hyde, 2011). The 2021 Nicaraguan elections share similarities with previous cases. Under a competitive authoritarian regime, the

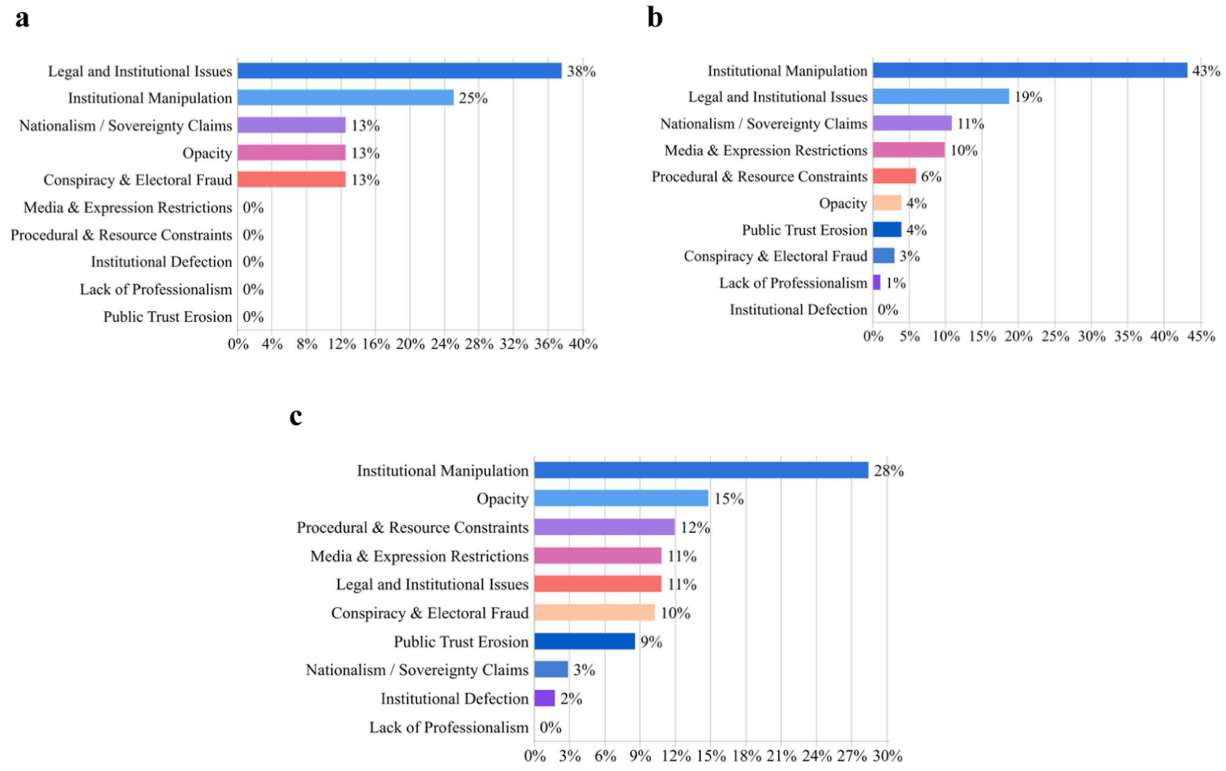

FIGURE 6
Segments referring to criticisms raised by the EOI in the electoral autocracies. Source: authors. **(a)** Venezuela -2018-. **(b)** Nicaragua -2021-. **(c)** Venezuela -2024-.

near-total exclusion of the OAS and the criminalization of the opposition significantly reduced public contestation over the electoral narrative. Nevertheless, the OAS classified the elections as a formal process organized by an authoritarian government, due to the active role of the state in restricting rights and freedoms.

The main arguments of the OAS highlight institutional manipulation and procedural and resource constraints as key factors in declaring the elections invalid. In all three cases, these arguments are based on manipulation and procedural and resource constraints.

Regarding institutional manipulation, this was based on legal and institutional issues in Venezuela in 2018. Thus, the OAS highlights the institutional deterioration of the country resulting from the lack of separation of powers and non-compliance with the constitution. Internationally, this has contributed to the perception of the regime as illegitimate. The absence of liberal constraints led to a de facto seizure of institutions that no longer represented national sovereignty:

> "Urge the Government of Venezuela to take steps to guarantee the separation and independence of constitutional powers and restore the full authority of the National Assembly, the rule of law, and the guarantees and freedoms of the population" (OAS, 2018, p. 2).

This led to a vitiated process in which part of the population could not participate under fair conditions. Consequently, there was a restriction on active and passive suffrage and a manifest lack of transparency:

> "Declare that the electoral process developed in Venezuela, which concluded on May 20, 2018, lacks legitimacy for failing to meet international standards, for not including the participation of all Venezuelan political actors, and for taking place without the necessary guarantees for a free, fair, transparent, and democratic process" (OAS, 2018, p. 2).

In the case of Nicaragua in 2021, electoral manipulation was based on the control of electoral institutions and the curtailment of fundamental rights through restrictions on freedom of expression and the arbitrary application of the law. First, there was a co-optation of the electoral authority, accompanied by restrictions on the right to stand for election and the banning of political parties, for example:

> "On May 18, the Supreme Electoral Council cancelled the legal status of the Democratic Renewal Party (PRD), which was part of the National Coalition" (OAS, 2021, p. 7).

This situation reflects the procedural use of electoral instruments to defend the regime.

Second, civil rights and freedom of expression were limited, resulting in the imprisonment of journalists and the closure of civil society organizations, which were connected to restrictions on the press and expression freedom.

Third, state powers and laws were used arbitrarily to eliminate opposition. Consequently, a state emerged in which legality and institutional independence were effectively nullified.

> "The commission also describes the process of consolidating a police state in Nicaragua, aimed at silencing any hint of dissent through violent repression of protests, arbitrary arrests of opposition figures, manipulation of criminal law, and irregular raids on human rights organizations and media" (OAS, 2021, p. 12).

Another significant argument refers to the creation of an "enemy of the state," understood as anyone dissenting from official positions or assisting foreign powers to destabilize the country. For instance, regarding an opposition figure's detention:

> "He is accused of 'undermining independence, sovereignty, self-determination, and inciting foreign intervention" (OAS, 2021, p. 12).

The 2024 elections confirm the shift toward authoritarianism and follow a much more overt strategy of institutional manipulation, according to the IEO. Unlike previous elections, this is based on opacity and arbitrary control over the media, electoral processes, and institutions. In this regard, both Nicaragua in 2021 and Venezuela in 2024 confirm an autocratic shift, as the state apparatus and its resources are dedicated to perpetuating the ruling party regardless of checks and balances. Electoral manipulation was evident in the use of state resources to benefit the ruling party through the manipulation of electoral rules, control of the National Electoral Council (CNE), obstruction of the right to vote, and persecution of the opposition. The following paragraph illustrates the regime's abuse of power:

> "As 6 years ago, the 2024 presidential election was an extremely inequitable contest. The excessive concentration of power and elimination of checks and balances again produced clear electoral consequences: the detention and persecution of opposition members and collaborators, the creation of an atmosphere of intimidation and threat, the application of legal subterfuges to neutralize rival forces and marginalize segments of the electorate, the use of public resources and clientelist networks for proselytizing purposes, lack of transparency, and restrictions on the right to information, among others" (OAS, 2024, p. 4).

This was compounded by opacity, manifested through restrictions on international electoral observations, obstruction of party observers at polling stations, media blockages, and non-publication of results. These elements facilitated electoral fraud as part of a coordinated institutional strategy:

> "Opposition members reported that over 400 polling centers did not provide tally sheets to witnesses. In some cases, witnesses were expelled from the venue. It should be noted that the legislation explicitly mandates the delivery of this document to witnesses" (OAS, 2024, p. 17).

Opacity was reinforced by restrictions on freedom of expression and the press, including media closures and attacks on journalists, alongside the governmental use of media and personal attacks:

> "During the event to nominate his presidential candidacy at the CNE headquarters, Nicolás Maduro attacked several news agencies, accusing them of lacking morality and hiding the reality of Venezuela" (OAS, 2024, p. 11).

The main procedural problems were delays at polling stations, restrictions on witness accreditation, and limitations on external

voting, the latter being significant because of the large Venezuelan diaspora. Additional procedural problems included issues with tally sheets and the publication of results.

Procedural issues also affected institutions, such as the arbitrary role of the armed forces and the Public Prosecutor's office:

> [Armed Forces] "Furthermore, beyond the aforementioned arbitrary detentions and acts of intimidation by security forces and legal persecution, serious questions persisted regarding the role of the armed forces during the elections" (OAS, 2024, p. 13).
>
> [Prosecutor] "Similarly, exercising powers from the CNE, Attorney General Tarek William Saab announced that 'within the next few hours, the results by table will be available on the National Electoral Council's website, as has historically been done thanks to the Automated Voting System" (OAS, 2024, p. 20).

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The arguments put forward by national authorities have been grounded in institutional legitimacy (TSE and CSE), as well as in the rule of law to justify the actions they have taken in their electoral processes (Figures 7a–c). These institutional arguments have been accompanied by rhetoric on democracy based on popular sovereignty and freedom. Furthermore, these narratives highlight the transparency provided by the publication of judicial rulings or participation in pseudo-international missions.

Regarding the TSE in Venezuela in 2018, the tribunal used regime norms to dismiss the petitioners' claims and stated that their requests could not be addressed. Norms have become a shield against the rights of Venezuelans, invoked to ignore requests or justify regime misconduct:

> "Furthermore, the announcement or execution of social programs does not constitute electoral offenses nor undermine the free exercise of the constitutional right to vote, as the nature of these initiatives falls within the Social Democratic State under the Rule of Law and Justice, enshrined in Article 2 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" (TSEa, 2018, p. 9).

Something similar is happening in Nicaragua in 2021, regarding legality, they reference party legislation and present the CSE as the primary guarantor of the electoral process:

> "The Supreme Electoral Council, in exercising the powers granted by Articles 173 of the Political Constitution of the Republic and Article 10 of the Electoral Law, and in accordance with Articles 48, 131 paragraph three, 133 of the Political Constitution, and Articles 153, 154, 155, and 160 of the Law…" (CSEa, 2021, p. 2).

In the case of Venezuela in 2024, the courts used legal mechanisms to silence any discrepancies, employing both the CNE and the

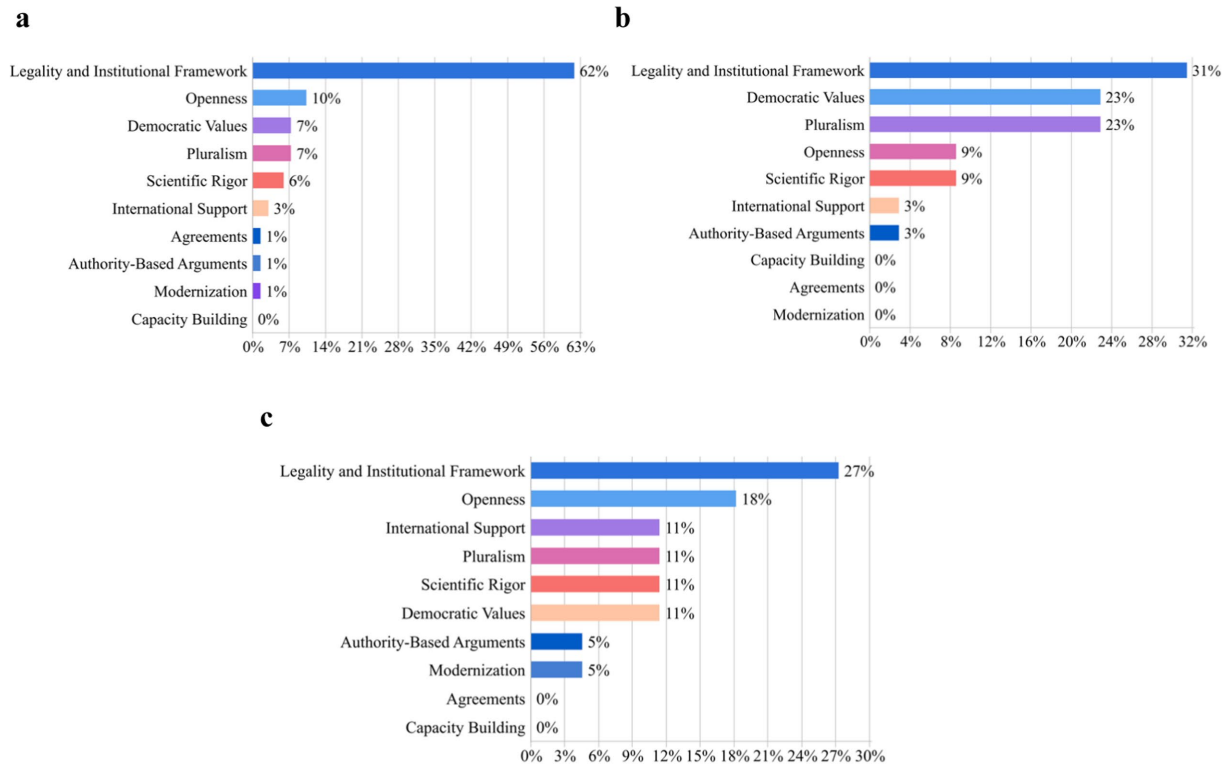

FIGURE 7
Segments referring to arguments advanced by national authorities in electoral autocracies. Source: authors. **(a)** Venezuela -2018-. **(b)** Nicaragua -2021-. **(c)** Venezuela -2024-.

Supreme Court as legitimate instruments. Expert reports, current legislation, and formal institutional legitimacy were invoked to validate the elections:

> "The Electoral Power, in compliance with the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the Organic Law of the Supreme Court of Justice, and electoral regulations, complies with the decision and, within the legal period, will execute what was ordered by the Electoral Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice" (CNEa, 2024, p. 2).

> "Based on the results obtained in the audit process, we can conclude that the bulletins issued by the National Electoral Council regarding the 2024 Presidential Election are supported by the tally sheets from each voting machine deployed in the electoral process, and these tally sheets fully coincide with the databases of the National Totalization Centers" (TSE, 2024, p. 5).

This legality was reinforced through transparency in result publication, auditing, participation of international observers, and communication of outcomes.

> "[…] we were urged to publish the two definitive results as provided in Article 155 of the Organic Law of Electoral Processes" (CNE, 2024, pp. 1–2).

This concept of democracy is based not only on the invocation of relevant constitutions but also on democratic principles, such as elections, which are inherent in a democratic system.

> [Nicaragua -2021-] "It is worthy to recognize the civic celebration expressed through the spontaneous and patriotic participation of Nicaraguans to exercise their right to vote on November 7, 2021, under the supervision and administration of the Electoral System, where the Supreme Electoral Council ensures that voting and counting reflect the authentic, free, and spontaneous will of citizens, expressed directly and secretly" (CSEa, 2021, p. 1).

In the case of Venezuela in 2018, reference was made to the Court's role as a guarantor of rights, a point that was also raised in 2024:

> "It is important to highlight the criterion of this Electoral Chamber, according to which precautionary measures are intended to guarantee temporary protection of the rights of the interested party, until a final decision resolves the main action" (TSEb, 2018, p. 11).

The concept of pluralism is also present in the discourse of the three previous cases. In Venezuela in 2018, pluralism refers to the ability of the opposition and civil society to turn to the courts to defend their interests. In the case of Nicaragua in 2021, however, the authorities emphasized this through the recognition of national and international electoral observers, justifying the CSE's reference to international support:

[Nicaragua -2021-] "This electoral process was witnessed by 232 electoral observers from 27 countries, more than 1,300 national observers, and over 600 Nicaraguan and international journalists" (CSEb, 2021, p. 5).

"Venezuela -2024-" incorporates both ideas and demonstrates pluralism through the inclusion of the opposition and the public release of results. In this case, it also draws on scientific arguments presented by comparing these elections with those in Mexico and Brazil.

In 2018, Venezuela conducted a definitive critical evaluation because the OAS questioned the legitimacy of the process. The state response adopted a narrative delegitimization strategy, framing criticism as interference. The level of conflict was high, consolidating the rupture between international standards and the official narrative. In the cases of Nicaragua in 2021 and Venezuela in 2024, these correspond to scenarios of exclusion or absence. The state response is articulated as a sovereign rejection, appealing to domestic legality and non-interference. The level of conflict was high internationally, although limited domestically because of restricted pluralism.

6 Discussion

Across all cases, several common patterns emerge. Every state responded—though with varying intensity—to the criticisms raised by international electoral observation missions. Legal and institutional frameworks were consistently invoked to legitimize electoral decisions, transforming technical objections into political arguments and framing democracy and national sovereignty as shields against external scrutiny.

In electoral democracies, IEOs tend to play a technical or constructively critical role, while states respond through conditional recognition or legal-institutional justification, emphasizing procedural legality and a willingness to address problems. In hybrid regimes, however, IEOs often become central actors in the conflict, as their findings trigger institutional and legitimacy crises. States in these contexts typically seek to delegitimize the missions through narrative strategies, relying on scientific or institutional arguments to challenge their conclusions.

In electoral autocracies, IEOs face exclusion or severe restrictions, limiting their influence internationally. These regimes prioritize asserting national sovereignty over the institutional role of observation missions, using state power to reinforce the official narrative—often through the criminalization or restriction of opposition actors.

A comparison of the cases broadly supports Proposition 1 (Table 1). As democratic quality declines and power becomes more concentrated—as in Venezuela and Nicaragua—international electoral observation shifts from technical validation to more critical evaluation or even exclusion, while national authorities increasingly rely on delegitimizing or sovereigntist responses. In intermediate contexts such as Bolivia and Honduras, IEO becomes an arena of contestation used to obscure irregularities. In weaker democracies like Mexico and Guatemala, observation missions tend to adopt a critical yet constructive role.

In summary, electoral autocracies tend to engage in critical evaluations or outright exclusions, often expressed through delegitimization or sovereignist rejection. Hybrid regimes typically position the IEO as a central actor while relying on delegitimizing strategies. Electoral democracies, by contrast, gravitate toward

TABLE 1 Comparison of the cases.

Election	Regime type (V-Dem electoral democracy index)	Role of IEO	Dominant state response
Venezuela -2000-	Electoral democracy (0.57)	Technical validation	Conditional recognition
Mexico -2006-	Electoral democracy (0.67)	Critical evaluation	Legal-institutional justification
Guatemala -2023-	Electoral democracy (0.51)	Critical evaluation	Legal-institutional justification
Honduras -2017-	Hybrid regime (0.41)	Central actor in the conflict	Narrative delegitimization
Bolivia -2019-	Hybrid regime (0.48)	Central actor in the conflict	Narrative delegitimization
Venezuela -2018-	Electoral autocracy (0.21)	Critical evaluation	Narrative delegitimization
Nicaragua -2021-	Electoral autocracy (0.153)	Exclusion/absence	Sovereign rejection
Venezuela -2024-	Electoral autocracy (0.20)	Exclusion/absence	Sovereign rejection

Source: authors.

technical validation or critical evaluation, leading to conditional recognition or legal-institutional justification that helps mitigate conflict.[19]

Regarding Proposition 2, the cases show that legality and institutionalism are central tools used by states to counter the criticisms of international electoral observation. These arguments are often reinforced with scientific or technical claims. Legal-technical reasoning is employed to legitimize electoral decisions and challenge OAS assessments, as seen in Venezuela -2018, 2024- and Nicaragua. Similar strategies appear in Honduras, Mexico, and Guatemala, where authorities rely on institutional arguments and appeals to authority, sometimes combined with calculated gestures of openness to project a democratic façade.

With respect to Proposition 3, contexts marked by institutional and electoral manipulation—characterized by weak separation of powers and rights violations—tend to reinforce their positions through aggressive narratives. Venezuela -2018, 2024- and Nicaragua exemplify such environments. Although similar tendencies appear in degraded regimes like Bolivia and Honduras, these remain more limited and still acknowledge the role of IEO. In Mexico and Guatemala, by contrast, state responses are more defensive and rely heavily on judicialization.

7 Conclusion

This study examined the discursive interactions between electoral observation missions and national authorities in contentious elections. The comparative analysis of eight cases shows that electoral disputes are shaped not only by irregularities but also by the strategic narratives deployed by domestic and international actors. While observation missions consistently identified governance deficiencies, their political impact depended on how national authorities framed, contested, or rejected these assessments. The findings demonstrate that, in moments of crisis, struggles over electoral legitimacy unfold not only through institutions but also through competing narratives and symbolic claims.

The article contributes to the literature by highlighting the arguments used by international organizations and state authorities in contested elections, showing that legitimacy battles are fundamentally discursive. Understanding these dynamics helps explain why similar criticisms can produce divergent political outcomes across hybrid and backsliding regimes.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Case selection was purposive rather than systematic, aiming to illustrate the analytical framework rather than generate generalizable conclusions. The study relied primarily on documents from international organizations and state institutions, leaving out systematic analysis of political parties, civil society, and domestic observers. It also focused mainly on the OAS and the European Union.

Future research could broaden the comparative scope by incorporating additional observation missions—such as the Carter Center or regional bodies—and applying the framework to a larger, more systematically selected set of elections. Expanding the range of actors and sources would deepen understanding of how electoral legitimacy is constructed, contested, and defended in contexts marked by democratic erosion.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Author contributions

MB: Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Supervision, Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft. GP-B: Supervision, Software, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Data curation. MG: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Resources, Data curation.

19 The typology and relationships proposed in this study have potential applicability beyond the cases examined. Although the empirical examples come from Latin America, similar tensions between international electoral observation missions and national authorities have been documented in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The analytical categories developed here may therefore serve as a useful conceptual tool for examining comparable discursive dynamics in other regional contexts where electoral legitimacy is contested.

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Supplementary material

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