



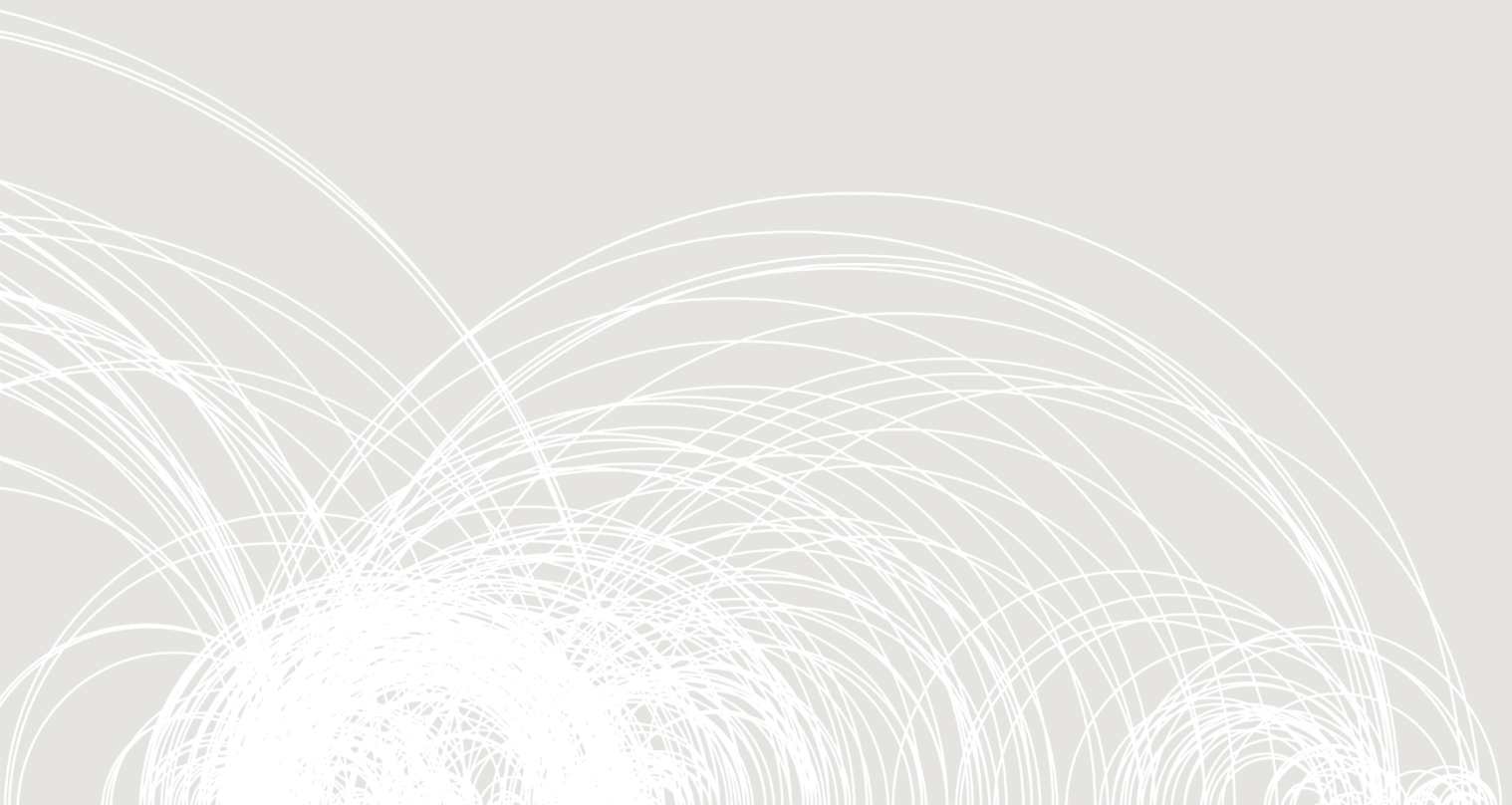
FINAL REPORT

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Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: Nicaragua Report

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Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: Nicaragua Report

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Acronyms

CEN	Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua
COSEP	Superior Council of Private Enterprise (Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada)
HDBScan	Hierarchical Density-Based Clustering
FSLN	Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional)
LAPOP	Latin American Public Opinion Project

Presentation

In recent years, governance, political crises, insecurity, and longstanding issues of corruption, inequality, and lackluster economic performance—have eroded democratic legitimacy and public trust in government in Latin America. Indeed, the 2019 *Pulse of Democracy* report from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) states that “the region has settled into a malaise with respect to public views of democracy.”¹ Support for and satisfaction with democracy declined sharply in 2016 compared to prior survey rounds and remained low in 2018-2019. While support for democracy remained steady between 2018-2019 and 2021, support for centralizing power in the executive increased in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.²

In a context of global and regional democratic backsliding, in which domestic and foreign actors are actively working to undermine democracy, a citizenry that remains committed to democratic principles and values—even if dissatisfied with politics and governance—can be critical to staving off democratic decline. A citizenry with highly democratic attitudes is more likely to discourage those in power from undermining democracy from within. Perhaps more importantly, citizens with highly democratic attitudes are less likely to support authoritarian candidates at the ballot box in the first place, and more likely to mobilize against elite actions that undermine democracy.

To respond to the challenge of eroding democratic attitudes in cooperating countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) conducted a study that examines how democratic attitudes have evolved in the recent past. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- Can the citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean be classified into groups with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes?
- What are the most salient attitudinal, economic, and other characteristics of the citizens in each group, and especially those groups that hold worrisome democratic attitudes?
- How have the groups and democratic attitudes evolved in the past ten years? What system-level, contextual factors have contributed to changes over time in patterns of democratic attitudes?

To answer the first two questions, NORC identified trends in democratic attitudes between 2012 and 2021 using cluster analysis, a classification technique described in greater detail below, to group citizens into “clusters” with distinct democratic attitudes. The team then identified the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics differentiating the citizens in

¹ Castorena, Oscar, and Sarah L. Graves. 2019. “Support for Electoral Democracy.” In Zechmeister, Elizabeth J., and Noam Lupu (Eds.). *Pulse of Democracy*. Nashville, TN: LAPOP, p. 23.

²Lupu, Noam and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2021. “The Pulse of Democracy in 2021.” In Lupu, Noam, Mariana Rodríguez, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Eds.). *Pulse of Democracy*. Nashville, TN: LAPOP, p. 2-5.

each cluster from the rest of the population using data from the last five waves of the AmericasBarometer³ (2012, 2015, 2016-2017, 2018-2019, 2021) for each country. To address the third question, NORC recruited experts in the politics of each country to make sense of the cluster analysis results and examine the relationship between democratic attitudes and political, economic, and social developments over time.⁴

This report presents the analysis for Nicaragua. It was authored by Diego Ignacio Laínez, social scientist using a pseudonym for security reasons. Study coordinators Luis A. Camacho, Mollie Cohen (Assistant Professor, Department of International Affairs, University of Georgia), and Ingrid Rojas (Research Scientist, NORC at the University of Chicago) revised the report to ensure alignment with the study objectives.

³ The AmericasBarometer by the LAPOP Lab, www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop.

⁴ NORC recruited experts through an open call for contributors issued in December 2021. The call targeted academics and researchers with advanced degrees in political science or other social science at institutions in LAC and beyond. Subsequent targeted recruiting efforts relied on NORC's academic and professional networks. NORC ultimately recruited experts for 12 of 16 countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru.

Introduction

Nicaraguans' democratic attitudes have transformed dramatically in the last decade amid the increasingly authoritarian maneuvers of President Daniel Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN). Democratic backsliding has shaped how Nicaraguans understand their democracy.⁵ Whether citizens justify authoritarian maneuvers or are motivated to engage in pro-democracy mobilizations, these attitudes are both caused by and a consequence of Nicaragua's complex political situation.

This study examines how patterns of support for democracy and other democratic attitudes have changed among Nicaraguans in the past ten years. To do so, we draw on NORC's cluster analysis of AmericasBarometer survey data, which grouped Nicaraguans into clusters with distinct democratic attitudes. Specifically, this report describes the profiles resulting from the cluster analysis and tracks their evolution over time. The analysis shows that the proportion of institutionalists, individuals who support democratic institutions, increased substantially in 2016. At the same time, however, authoritarians and presidentialists—individuals who support extralegal governmental action and unilateral actions by the president, respectively—increased.

The study then documents how developments in Nicaraguan politics have contributed to changes in democratic attitudes. We argue that Ortega's increasing authoritarianism and the mass protests starting in 2018 played an important role. Ortega's authoritarianism polarized and mobilized sectors of the public. However, broad public approval of Ortega's policies contributed to citizens' tolerance for his increasingly authoritarian maneuvers and created consensus around his leadership. The 2018 mass protests and their aftermath reoriented citizens' democratic attitudes, making Nicaraguans more discerning about and critical of their deteriorating democratic institutions.

The remainder of this report is organized as follows. First, it introduces the cluster analysis methodology and presents the key findings. In addition to tracking the relative size of cluster families over time, the section shows that while clusters are distinct in terms of their attitudes toward executive aggrandizement and military coups, they are similar when it comes to political tolerance, democratic inclusion, and support for democracy. It also documents a declining trend in support for democracy across the board. Next, the report explores the factors that contributed to changes in democratic attitudes. The conclusion provides a summary of the findings and reflects on the future of democracy in Nicaragua.

Cluster Analysis

NORC used data from the AmericasBarometer and cluster analysis to classify Paraguayans into clusters with distinct attitudinal profiles. The aim is to maximize similarity *within* each cluster

⁵ Diamond, Larry. 2015. "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1: 141–55.

while maximizing dissimilarity *between* clusters. One advantage of cluster analysis compared to other classification schemes is that it is highly inductive, meaning that it lets respondents speak for themselves without making assumptions in advance about how to group them. Annex I provides detailed information regarding the study's methodology. NORC used five democratic attitudes to generate clusters:

- *Support for democracy*: The extent to which respondents agree or disagree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.”
- *Opposition to military coups*: Whether respondents believe it would be justified for the military to take power in a military coup in certain circumstances.
- *Opposition to executive aggrandizement*: Whether respondents believe it would be justified for the president to close Congress and the Supreme Court and govern without them.
- *Tolerance of protest and regime critics*: The extent to which respondents support the right to demonstration and other political rights of regime critics.
- *Support for democratic inclusion*: The extent to which respondents support the political inclusion of homosexuals.

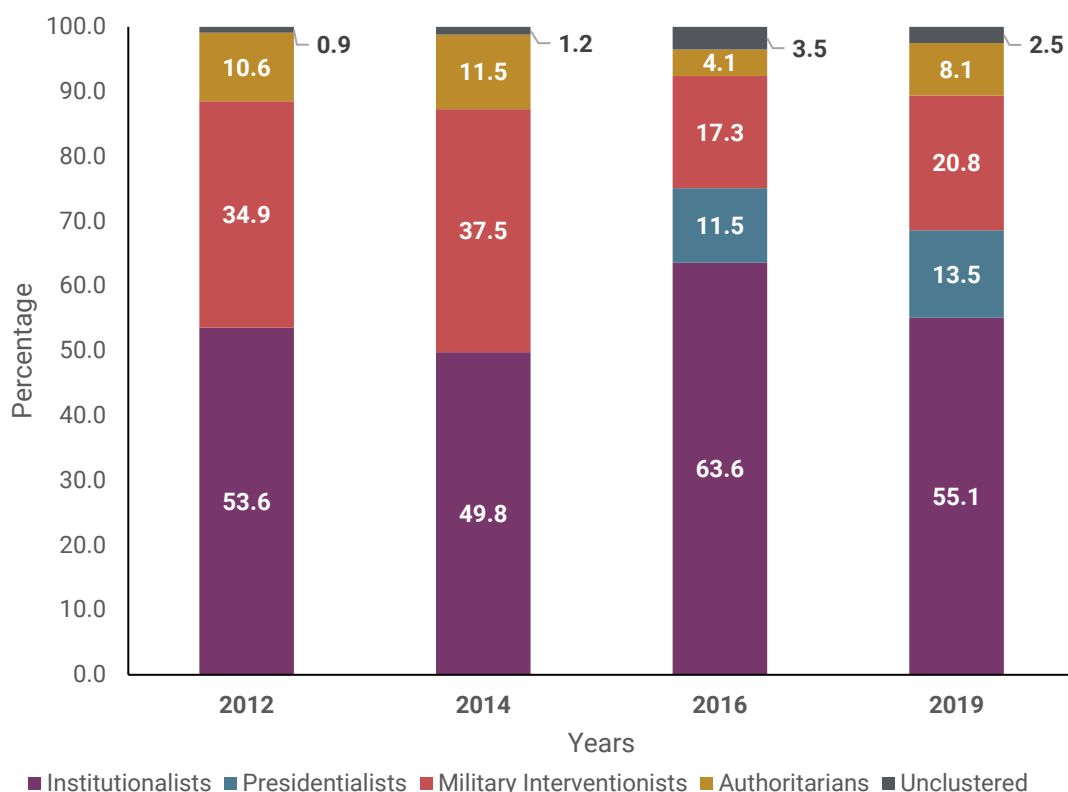
Questions to measure all five attitudes were included in the first four AmericasBarometer survey waves (2012, 2014, 2016-2017, and 2019). Only two attitudes were available in 2021: support for democracy and opposition to executive aggrandizement. The 2021 cluster analysis results are therefore not comparable to those of prior waves and not discussed at length. Annex 2 presents the main cluster analysis results for all waves.

The analysis identified three clusters in 2012 and 2014 and four clusters in 2016 and 2019. In all waves, a small share of respondents was not classified into any cluster. To facilitate comparisons across survey waves, NORC grouped respondents into four families that share a set of defining characteristics:

- *Institutionalists*: Nicaraguans in this cluster have full opposition to military coups and executive aggrandizement.
- *Military Interventionists*: Nicaraguans in this cluster have less-than-full opposition to military coups to deal with crime or corruption.
- *Presidentialists*: Nicaraguans in this cluster strongly oppose military coups and have low resistance to executive aggrandizement. In other words, they justify actions like the president closing the Supreme Court or Congress. This group first emerged in 2016.
- *Authoritarians (including authoritarians and ambivalent-military interventionist presidentialists)*: Nicaraguans in this cluster family have less-than-full opposition to both military coups and executive aggrandizement. The authoritarians cluster has null opposition to coups and null opposition to executive aggrandizement. The ambivalent-military interventionist presidentialists cluster has moderate opposition to coups and null opposition to executive aggrandizement.

Figure 1 shows the relative size of these cluster families over time. As mentioned above, figures showing the distribution of democratic attitudes for each year are available in Annex 2.

Figure 1: Evolution of Cluster Families in Nicaragua, 2012–2019



In what follows, we describe the evolution of the cluster families between 2012 and 2019. For each family, we discuss their share of the population, the evolution of their average democratic attitudes scores, and their demographic, socioeconomic, and attitudinal characteristics.

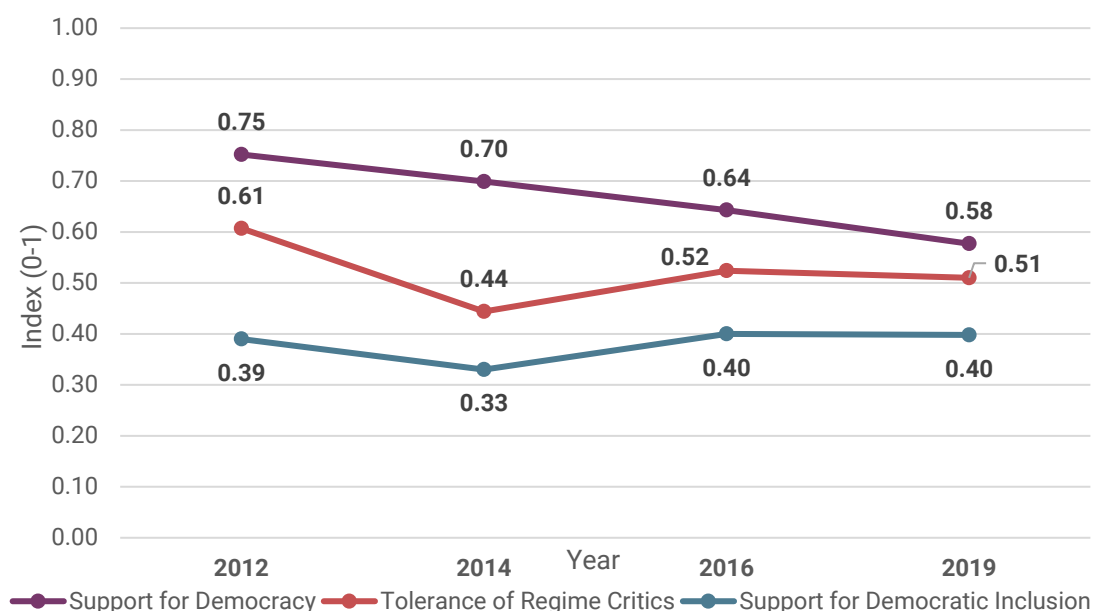
Institutionalists

From 2012 to 2019, the institutionalist profile represented the plurality or majority of Nicaraguans. This cluster is characterized by full opposition to both military coups and executive aggrandizement. In 2012, institutionalists made up 53.6 percent of the Nicaraguan population. In 2014, the size of this group declined slightly, accounting for 49.8 percent of Nicaraguans and remaining the largest cluster. By 2016, 63.6 percent of Nicaraguans were classified as institutionalists, a noteworthy increase of 13.8 percentage points compared to the previous wave. In 2019, the share of institutionalists declined substantially. Only 55.1 percent of

Nicaraguans were in this profile, a decline of 8.5 percent. Still, institutionalists accounted for the largest share of the public.⁶

Figure 2 plots the evolution of average support for democracy, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion scores for institutionalists. Scores ranged from zero to one, with one being the most democratic.⁷ This group's support for democracy declined from 2012-2019, as did tolerance for regime critics and support for democratic inclusion. Tolerance decreased significantly between 2012 to 2014, recovered somewhat in 2016, and remained stable thereafter. Support for democratic inclusion remained stable at a moderate-to-low level throughout the period of analysis.

Figure 2: Evolution of Institutionalists' Democratic Attitudes in Nicaragua, 2012–2019



At first glance, the sharp increase in the share of institutionalists between 2014 and 2016 shown in Figure 1 might suggest that democratic attitudes improved in Nicaragua despite democratic backsliding. However, while institutionalists continue to show full opposition to military coups and executive aggrandizement, Figure 2 showed that the other three attitudes deteriorated, suggesting that institutionalists became less democratic. Moreover, as we show below in Figure 3, Figure 4, and Figure 5 and the corresponding discussion, institutionalists were no more supportive of democracy, tolerant of protests, or supportive of democratic inclusion than Nicaraguans in other clusters.

NORC's cluster analysis identified the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics that significantly distinguish respondents in each cluster from the rest of the

⁶ Although the 2021 results are not directly comparable to prior years, institutionalists represented 71.3 percent of Nicaraguans, the highest proportion observed over the time series.

⁷ Opposition to coups and executive aggrandizement remain constant over time (value of one), so we do not present these values here.

sample for each survey wave. The study examined several variables, including age, gender, wealth, race, education, crime victimization, corruption victimization, political efficacy (the belief that politicians respond to citizens' preferences), and political participation. While respondents in all clusters are statistically significantly different from others in a few variables in each wave, there are few stable patterns across all waves and the differences are substantially small. These caveats aside, there are some recurrent statistically significant differences.

Institutionalists are, on average, older than all other Nicaraguans. From 2012-2016, institutionalists were less likely to report being the victims of crime compared to other Nicaraguans. In 2014 and 2016, institutionalists were more likely to report voting in recent presidential elections than other Nicaraguans, although this trend disappears after the 2018 protests. In 2016 and 2019, institutionalists were significantly *less* likely to report participating in political protests than other Nicaraguans. In other words, institutionalists generally have positive experiences with the political system and engage in politics through conventional, non-contentious modes of participation.

Military Interventionists

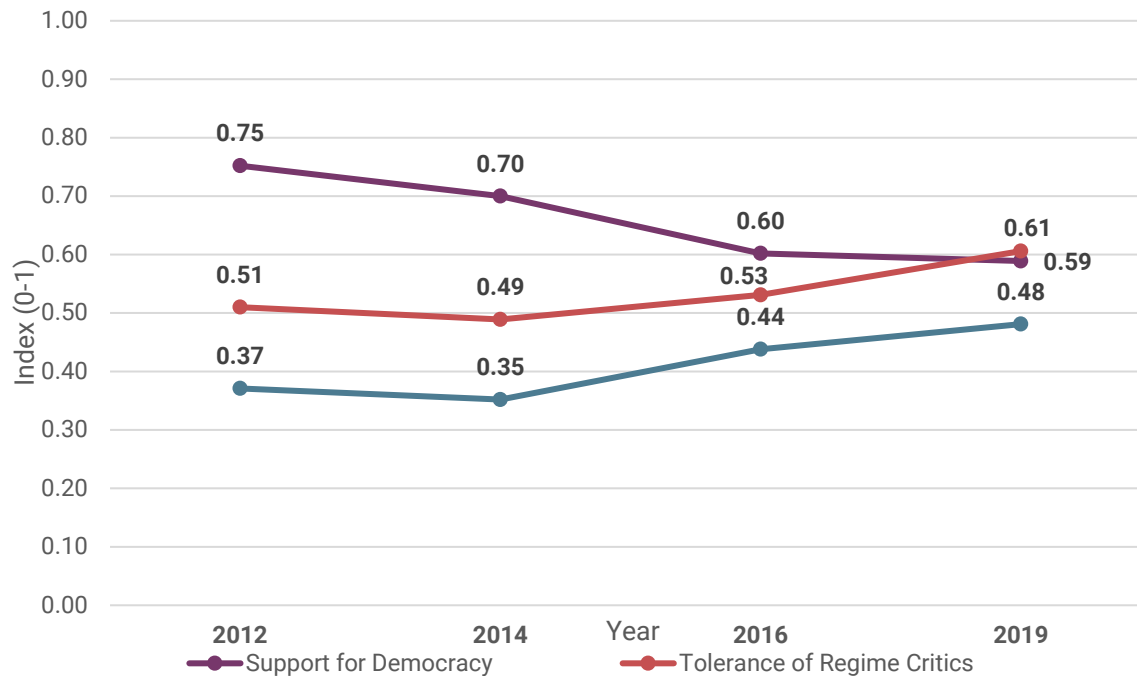
Military interventionists are those who do not oppose military coups but oppose executive aggrandizement. Military interventionists were 34.9 percent of the population in 2012 and 37.5 percent in 2014. Two years later, in 2016, the share of military interventionists substantially declined to only 17.3 percent of Nicaraguans 2014. By 2019, military interventionists represented 20.8 percent of Nicaraguans.

Figure 3 plots the evolution of average support for democracy, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion scores for military interventionists.⁸ As with institutionalists, support for democracy among military interventionists declined between 2012 and 2019. By contrast, tolerance for protests and support for democratic inclusion increased.⁹ Average scores for the three variables, especially support for democracy and support for democratic inclusion, for military interventionists are substantially similar to those for institutionalists.

⁸ Opposition to coups and executive aggrandizement remain constant over time (value of zero for opposition to military coups and one for opposition to executive aggrandizement), these values are not presented here.

⁹ We do not show opposition to coups and executive aggrandizement in Figure 3 since they remain constant (value of zero, non-opposition).

Figure 3: Evolution of Military Interventionists' Democratic Attitudes in Nicaragua, 2012–2019



In most years, military interventionist Nicaraguans were significantly more likely to have been victimized by crime or corruption and to live in violent neighborhoods compared to other Nicaraguans. At the same time, in some years, military interventionists were significantly less likely to think that the government is interested in what people like them think. These personal experiences with crime and corruption, combined with the persistent belief that government is unrepresentative of their interests, likely contribute to this cluster's willingness to consider military coups as an alternative to restore order in circumstances when crime and corruption are rampant.

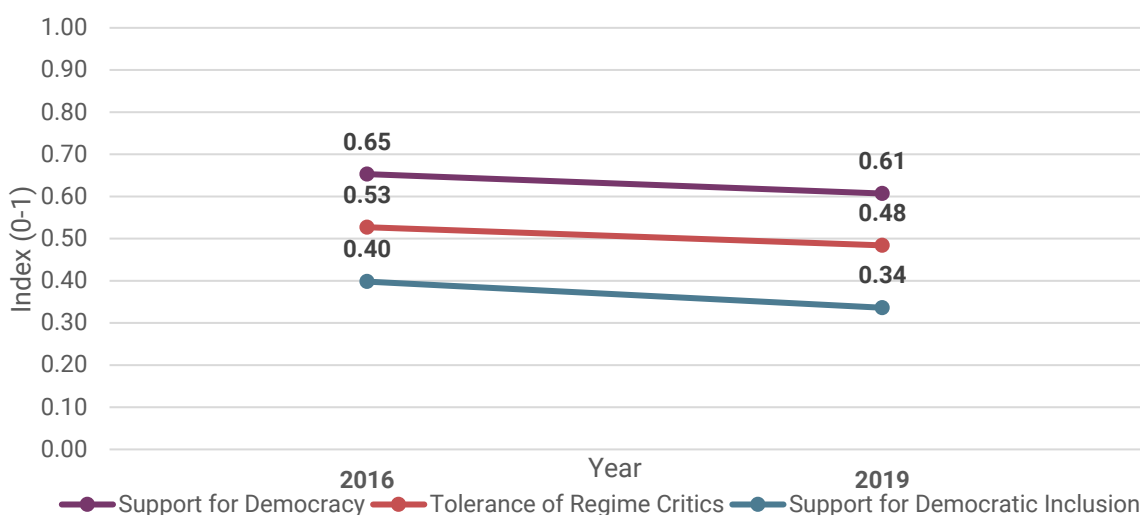
In 2019, presidential approval was substantially lower among military interventionists compared to the rest of the population: only 16.6 percent of military interventionists approved of the president, compared to 39.3 percent among other groups. Members of this cluster were also more likely to have participated in a demonstration in the previous year than others (15.8 percent vs. 10.3 percent). This combination of characteristics suggest that this group was likely active in the massive 2018 protests, demanding immediate regime change and more diligent military action.

Presidentialists

Presidentialists are those who do not oppose executive aggrandizement but oppose military coups. Presidentialists made up 11.5 percent of Nicaraguans when they emerged for the first time in 2016. In 2019, the share of presidentialists increased by two percentage points to

account for 13.5 percent of Nicaraguans.¹⁰ Figure 4 plots the evolution of average support for democracy, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion scores for presidentialists.¹¹ Attitudes toward democratic principles declined slightly from 2016 to 2019. Average scores for support for democracy and tolerance of regime critics for presidentialists are substantially similar to those for institutionalists.

Figure 4: Evolution of Presidentialists' Democratic Attitudes in Nicaragua, 2016–2019



Presidentialists expressed strong approval of Ortega's performance compared to other Nicaraguans: in 2016, 81 percent of presidentialists approved of Ortega, compared to 63 percent in the broader public. While average presidential approval declined among all Nicaraguans in 2019, presidentialists still expressed higher approval than other Nicaraguans (51.7 percent vs. 31.7 percent).

Beyond their approval of Ortega, presidentialists reported engaging in politics at higher rates than other Nicaraguans. In 2016, presidentialists were nearly twice as likely to have participated in public demonstrations or protests as other Nicaraguans in 2016 (11 percent vs. 6 percent). This political participation likely includes mobilizations in support of Ortega's policies and programs.¹² Following the massive public demonstrations in 2018, this gap in protest participation disappeared. Presidentialists were more likely to have voted in the 2016 presidential elections than all other Nicaraguans (64 percent vs. 50 percent). In 2019, presidentialists were also more likely than the rest of the population to believe that authorities were interested in what people like them thought (53 percent vs. 41 percent).

¹⁰ In 2021, the share of presidentialists grew to 28.7 percent, a considerable increase from the previous wave of data. Although much of this increase is likely due to the 2021 wave's methodological changes, the increase could indicate a consolidation of this group in Nicaragua.

¹¹ Opposition to coups and executive aggrandizement remain constant over time (value of one for opposition to military coups and zero for opposition to executive aggrandizement), these values are not presented.

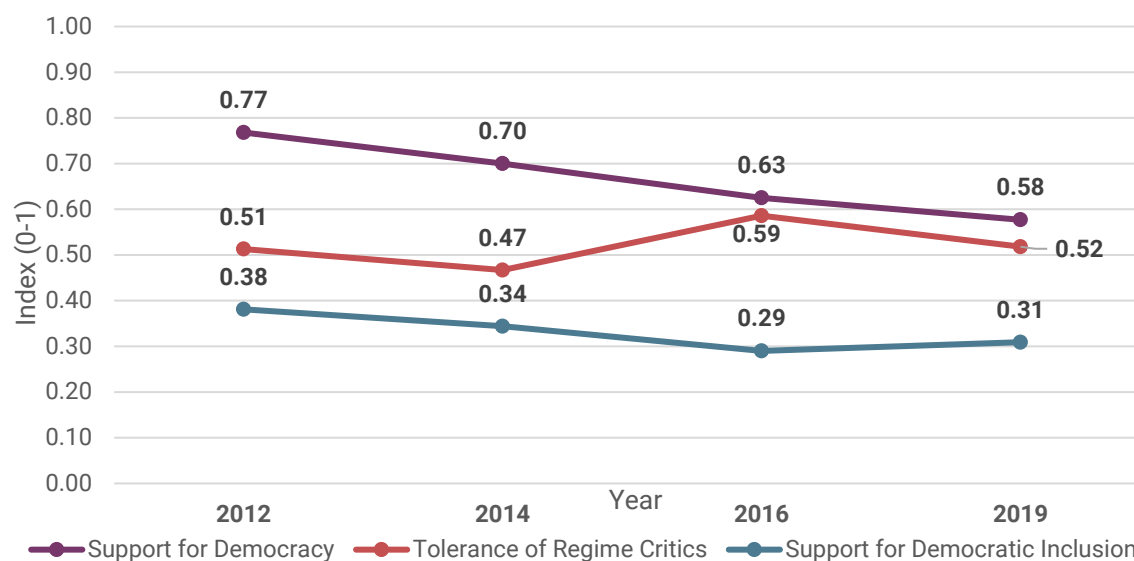
¹² López, K. D. (2020). FSLN realizó más de 350 marchas «por la paz» mientras imponía el terror en toda Nicaragua. *Artículo 66*.

Authoritarians

Authoritarians are those who do not oppose military coups or executive aggrandizement. The authoritarian cluster family first appeared in 2012, when it accounted for 10.6 percent of Nicaraguans. This proportion stayed relatively stable in 2014, when authoritarians accounted for 11.5 percent of the population. In 2016, this group declined substantially, to account for only 4.1 percent of the population. The authoritarian cluster grew somewhat in 2019, when 8.1 percent of Nicaraguans were grouped in this cluster.

Figure 5 plots the evolution of average support for democracy, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion scores for authoritarians.¹³ Support for democracy and democratic inclusion declined between 2012 and 2019; the decline was more pronounced for support for democracy. Tolerance of protest and regime critics remained relatively stable. Average scores for support for democracy and tolerance of regime critics for authoritarians are substantially similar to those for institutionalists.

Figure 5: Evolution of Authoritarians' Democratic Attitudes in Nicaragua, 2012–2019



In 2016, authoritarians were more likely to have been a victim of violence in the previous year than other Nicaraguans. This gap is sizeable: 31 percent of authoritarians reported being the victim of a crime in 2016, compared to 18 percent of all other Nicaraguans. This direction of this gap reversed in 2019, however, when 11 percent of authoritarians reported being the victim of a crime, compared to 18.3 percent of other Nicaraguans. Beyond crime, in all but the 2019 wave, authoritarian Nicaraguans were significantly more likely to believe that those who govern are interested in what people like them think than other Nicaraguans.

¹³ Opposition to coups and executive aggrandizement remain constant over time (value of one), so these values are not presented.

Summary

This section showed that institutionalists made up the largest cluster in Nicaragua between 2012 and 2019. Non-institutionalist Nicaraguans were divided between military interventionists and authoritarians in 2012 and 2014, and between these two clusters and presidentialists starting in 2016. Support for democracy has been in decline across clusters throughout this period and clusters are not too dissimilar in their levels of support for democracy, tolerance for protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion. The next section delves into political developments in Nicaragua that both shaped and responded to these trends in democratic attitudes.

Explaining Changes in Democratic Attitudes

In this section, we argue that two contextual factors likely impacted Nicaraguans' attitudes during the 2010s. First, Ortega, who from 1979-1990 headed a military junta and later served as president, was reelected in 2007. His increasing authoritarianism polarized and mobilized the public. However, broad public approval of President Ortega's policies contributed to citizens' tolerance for his increasingly authoritarian maneuvers and created consensus around his leadership. Second, the unprecedented mass protests of 2018 significantly reoriented democratic attitudes and represented a critical juncture for the country.

Increasing Authoritarianism and Consensus Around Ortega

President Ortega's drift towards authoritarianism was a constant during the decade. The first signs emerged in the municipal elections of 2008, the first since his return to the presidency in 2007. The 2008 elections occurred amid allegations of electoral fraud, arbitrary cancellation of opposition political parties, and political violence in several municipalities. Nicaragua has not held competitive elections since 2008.¹⁴

Before the 2011 presidential election, Ortega appealed to the Supreme Court to lift a ban on presidential reelection, which up to then had been constitutionally forbidden. The judges approved the appeal and for many Nicaraguans, this served as concrete evidence of the president's control over the justice system.¹⁵ The 2011 election laid bare the country's institutional deterioration and impacted Nicaraguans' democratic attitudes. President Ortega won 62.7 percent of the vote and gained a majority in the National Assembly. The leading

¹⁴ Martí I Puig, S. 2013. "Nicaragua: The Consolidation of a Hybrid Regime." *Revista de Ciencia Política* 33, no. 1: 269–86.

¹⁵ Perez-Baltodano, Andrés. 2010. "Nicaragua: Se Consolida El Estado Por Derecho (y Se Debilita El Estado de Derecho)." *Revista de Ciencia Política* 30, no. 2: 397–418.

opposition candidate and his supporters did not accept the results, arguing that Ortega had engaged in electoral fraud and demanding that the election be annulled. This election, like subsequent ones, was not considered free and fair by independent observers.¹⁶

By 2011, influential groups had begun to raise criticisms of the government's increased authoritarian practices. Leaders of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua denounced the "democratic regression," evidenced by the government's growing intolerance of criticism and rising political violence.¹⁷ Some international entities also expressed concerns and froze funds in an attempt to discredit Ortega in the wake of his antidemocratic maneuvers.¹⁸ However, Ortega's government strengthened its partnership with Venezuela, which enabled the financing of numerous social programs and projects. These programs contributed to public approval of Ortega's performance.¹⁹

Most Nicaraguans justified the executive's steps toward authoritarianism, with many saying that the quality of democracy would improve when "objective conditions" allowed it.²⁰ This perspective gave more weight to Ortega's successes, such as implementing social programs that met previously unmet, basic needs, than to the threat of his increasing control of other political institutions.²¹ Despite concerns about Ortega's growing authoritarianism, economic elites also saw and approved of the macroeconomic and political stability under his leadership.²²

The FSLN also began to drift toward authoritarianism in the early part of the decade. The party aspired to achieve non-competitive electoral victories and campaigned on overtly authoritarian messages in 2011. Tomás Borge Martínez, one of the most iconic FSLN leaders, illustrated this tendency:

"Anything can happen here, but not the Sandinista Front losing its power (...) they can say whatever they want, but we will do what we must do. The highest price will be losing our power. There will be a Sandinista Front today, tomorrow, and forever."²³

The advance of authoritarianism, epitomized by fraud in the 2012 municipal elections, increased political apathy among Nicaraguans.²⁴ Some scholars point to 2012, which fraudulently installed

¹⁶ Martí, Salvador, and Claire Wright. 2018. "The Adaptation of the FSLN: Daniel Ortega's Leadership and Democracy in Nicaragua." *Latin American Politics and Society* 52, no. 4: 79–106.

¹⁷ Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN). 2011. "Comunicado de La Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua Sobre Los Resultados Electorales de 2011 (16 de Noviembre de 2011)." Managua: CEN.

Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua. 2008. "Exhortación de La Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua Ante Las Actuales Circunstancias Del País y Las Elecciones Municipales de 2008." Managua: CEN.

¹⁸ Equipo Envío. 2009. "Sin Ningún Borrón y Con Muchas Cuentas Nuevas." *Revista Envío*, January 2009.

¹⁹ Chaguaceda, Armando. 2015. "Regímenes Políticos y Procesos Desdemocratizadores En Nicaragua y Venezuela." *Perfiles Latinoamericanos* 23, no. 45: 5–29.

²⁰ Cruz, Arturo. 2011. "Nicaragua y Su Dilema Perenne." Arturo Cruz. 2011.

²¹ Carter Center. 2011. "The November 2011 Elections in Nicaragua: A Study Mission Report of the Carter Center." Atlanta. https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/americas/nicaragua_2011_report_post.pdf.

²² Hernandez, J. C. 2011. "Nicaragua Is Poised to Re-Elect Ortega." *New York Times*, November 7, 2011.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/world/americas/president-daniel-ortega-poised-to-win-third-term-in-nicaragua.html>.

²³ Editorial El Nuevo Diario. 2011. "Todos Contra PLI-UNE." *El Nuevo Diario*, October 14, 2011.

²⁴ Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua. 2012. "Mensaje de La Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua Con Motivo de Las Próximas Elecciones Municipales de 2012 (26 de Septiembre de 2012)." Managua: CEN.

FSLN leaders in power and consolidated the party's territorial reach, as the point when Nicaragua became a regime that was more authoritarian than democratic.²⁵

Several events also spurred social movements during this time, including controversial concessions to an international company to build a transnational canal,²⁶ social security reforms,²⁷ and concessions to mining companies in rural communities.²⁸ These mobilizations, many of which led to repression,²⁹ were broadly covered in the media and likely impacted Nicaraguans' democratic attitudes. In 2014, Ortega expanded his powers by restructuring the Army and the National Police, which became subordinate to the president.³⁰

Amid these political maneuvers, Ortega also strengthened alliances with the business sector and economic elites. Cooperation between the public and private sector contributed to an average annual growth of 4.2 percent from 2007 to 2018, one of the highest growth rates in Latin America.³¹ As a result of the booming economy, many Nicaraguans continued to justify and approve of Ortega's actions. This sympathy might have affected citizens' democratic attitudes in the 2014 wave by decreasing some Nicaraguans' support for democratic principles and their tolerance of protest.

In 2016, Ortega was re-elected for a third time. The election featured high abstention, low competition, and the fragmentation of an already weak opposition.³² The President's power increased once again when the FSLN won control of both the executive and legislative branches. Nicaragua's move toward authoritarianism consequently accelerated.³³ The repression of social movements, notably the peasant movement against the interoceanic canal project, also increased.³⁴ Additionally, the National Police became a key mechanism of repression.³⁵

The private sector, represented by the Superior Council of Private Enterprise (Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada, COSEP), avoided criticizing Ortega.³⁶ Despite COSEP's purported support of democratic values, its members supported Ortega.³⁷ COSEP's actions offer a useful

²⁵ Martí I Puig, S. 2013. "Nicaragua: The Consolidation of a Hybrid Regime." *Revista de Ciencia Política* 33, no. 1: 269–86.

²⁶ Huete-Pérez, Jorge A., Pedro J.J. Alvarez, Jerald L. Schnoor, Bruce E. Rittmann, Anthony Clayton, Maria L. Acosta, Carlos E.M. Bicudo, et al. 2015. "Scientists Raise Alarms about Fast Tracking of Transoceanic Canal through Nicaragua." *Environmental Science and Technology* 49, no. 7: 3989–96.

²⁷ Chamorro, Luciana, and Emilia Yang. 2018. "Movilización Social y Tácticas de Control En El Neosandinismo: El Caso de #OcupalNSS." *Cahiers Des Amériques Latines* 87 (September): 91–115.

²⁸ Sánchez, Mario. 2016. "Los Recursos En Disputa. El Caso Del Conflicto Minero En Rancho Grande, Nicaragua." *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos* 42: 93–131.

²⁹ Martí i Puig, Salvador. 2016. "Nicaragua: Desdemocratización y Caudillismo." *Revista de Ciencia Política* 36, no. 1: 239–58.

³⁰ Cuadra-Lira, Elvira. 2018. "Dispositivos Del Silencio: Control Social y Represión En Nicaragua." In *Nicaragua En Crisis: Entre La Revolución y La Sublevación*, edited by Aleksander Aguilar Antunes, Esteban De Gori, and Carmen Elena Villacorta, 245–56. CLACSO.

³¹ Chamorro, Carlos F. 2018. "¿'Modelo COSEP', o El Régimen de Ortega?" *Confidencial*.

³² Martí i Puig, Salvador. 2019. "Nicaragua: Análisis de Una Crisis Inesperada." *Documentos de Trabajo— Fundación Carolina* 10.

³³ Economist Intelligence Unit. 2017. "Democracy Index 2017. Free Speech under Attack."

³⁴ Serra, Luis. 2016. "El Movimiento Social Nicaragüense Por La Defensa de La Tierra, El Agua y La Soberanía." *Encuentro*, no. 104: 38–52.

³⁵ Vílchez, Anagilmara. 2016. "Orozco: 'La PN Ya Funciona Como Policía Sandinista'." *Confidencial*. July 5, 2016.

³⁶ Orozco, Manuel. 2016. "El COSEP También Es Un Actor Político." *The Dialogue*.

³⁷ For instance, COSEP declared that "democracy is essential for the current and future social, political and economic development of Nicaragua." COSEP. 2016. "COSEP Celebra El Día Del Empresario Nicaragüense." *COSEP*.

illustration of many Nicaraguans' behavior at the time, subordinating democratic priorities in favor of short-term benefits from Ortega's administration.

By the end of the 2012–2017 period, it was clear that Nicaraguans' democratic attitudes reflected their disapproval of President Ortega and his party. Although most Nicaraguans approved of Ortega's administration (Figure 6), support for authoritarian measures varied significantly. While institutionalists and military interventionists likely did not agree with Ortega's democratic regression, authoritarians and presidentialists likely were more supportive of such actions. This attitudinal configuration would change significantly with the mass protests of 2018.

The 2018 Mass Protests: A Critical Juncture

Nicaragua faced a crucial moment in April 2018, when a wave of mass protests opposing proposed social security reforms began. Reforms would have increased citizens' and employers' contributions to pensions while reducing benefits. Students, feminists, workers, environmental groups, Catholic organizations, and others joined the demonstrations. These protesters faced significant state repression.

However, unlike previous protests, new factors activated the sociopolitical crisis of 2018. Groups across society perceived the proposed social security reforms and repression as severe threats. The reform affected ordinary citizens, including traditionally non-political groups, and businesspeople alike; all rejected it. Repression was also more visible for many Nicaraguans in 2018 in part due to expanded access to social media. The visibility of police repression generated anger and more mobilization.³⁸ High-profile support for the protests from national and international groups also influenced public participation in and acceptance of the protests. Likewise, Nicaraguans' revolutionary historical memory contributed to the 2018 protests by branding the mobilization against Ortega as a new anti-dictatorial struggle.³⁹

As a result of repression and increased mobilization, protesters started to demand an immediate regime change. In response, the state unleashed levels of authoritarian repression unprecedented in recent history. The most significant violence came during the so-called "Clean-Up Operation," which used state and para-state forces to repress protesters.⁴⁰ This political violence generated extensive changes in Nicaraguans' democratic attitudes.

Presidential approval declined in the 2019 AmericasBarometer wave. Before the mobilization, Ortega was one of the most popular presidents in Latin America.⁴¹ In the wake of the 2018

³⁸ Amnistía Internacional. 2018. "Disparar a Matar. Estrategias de Represión de La Protesta En Nicaragua." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr43/8470/2018/es/#:~:text=A%20ra%C3%ADz%20de%20protestas%20sociales,Estado%20y%20cientos%20gravemente%20heridas>.

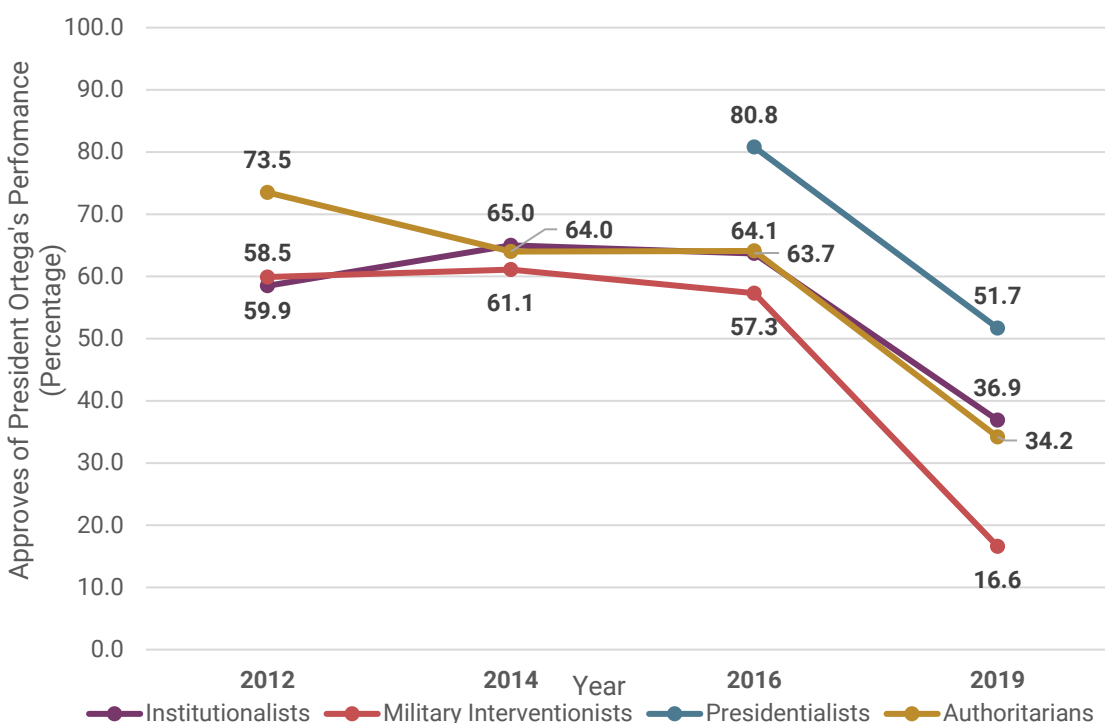
³⁹ Mosinger, E., K. M. Thaler, D. Paz García, and C. Fowler. 2022. "Civil Resistance in the Shadow of the Revolution: Historical Framing in Nicaragua's Sudden Uprising." *Comparative Politics* 54, no. 2: 253–77.

⁴⁰ Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes. 2018. "Informe Sobre Los Hechos de Violencia Ocurredos Entre El 18 de Abril y El 30 de Mayo de 2018."

⁴¹ Cruz, J. M., E. Marengo, M. Rodríguez, and E. Zechmeister. 2018. "Cultura Política de La Democracia En Nicaragua 2016/17: Un Estudio Comparado Sobre Democracia y Gobernabilidad." Vanderbilt University.

mobilizations, presidential approval fell dramatically in all four clusters families (see Figure 6). Military Interventionists showed the steepest decline in presidential approval in 2019.

Figure 6: Evolution of Approval of the Executive, by Clusters Families, 2012–2019



The 2018 social security reform immediately generated a breakdown in the alliance between the private sector and the government. While COSEP had been characterized by its implicit tolerance of Ortega's authoritarian maneuvers, it rejected the social security reform and the government's repression of demonstrators. The business sector even called for further demonstrations to reject state violence. The willingness of different groups to oppose Ortega in 2018 exemplified how the protest movement brought core concerns about democracy, such as free speech, to the forefront of Nicaraguan political life. At the same time, new political organizations emerged and became the new face of the opposition. They actively promoted pro-democracy actions, sought dialogue with the government, and organized social movements and protests. These organizations demanded democracy, including electoral reforms, and justice, mainly the release of political prisoners.

The role of the military during the protests is also crucial to understanding the evolution of public opinion in 2019. Traditionally, the military enjoyed high levels of credibility among Nicaraguans. However, this changed after Ortega captured the military and increased repression. In 2018, activists and organizations denounced the military's involvement in the violent repression during the protests.⁴² At the same time, many still considered a military coup to remove Ortega from

⁴² Expediente Abierto. 2021. "Los Militares En La Represión Política de Nicaragua." Managua, Nicaragua.

power as a potential solution to the crisis.⁴³ These developments pair well with the results of the cluster analysis, where military interventionists remained a distinct cluster in 2019, but with a smaller share of respondents than in 2012 and 2014.

In contrast, the FSLN saw the 2018 protests as an attempted coup by the international community in coordination with civil society and the Catholic Church.⁴⁴ Ortega supporters defended him and threatened violence against the opposition. In 2019, a group of Sandinistas identified as the Carlos Fonseca Amador North Front threatened the opposition if it were to uprising against the President, saying: “We are alert to any coup (...) if they (the opposition) raise their hands, we will lower them.”⁴⁵ During 2018 and 2019, Ortega supporters engaged in counterprotests, including more than 350 marches and rallies that reaffirmed their support and active defense of the president and his party.⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, the presidentialist cluster grew from 11.5 to 13.5 percent between 2016 and 2019.

Religious leaders, particularly from the Catholic Church, also guided Nicaraguans’ views during these protests. The church’s pro-democracy stance shaped the sociopolitical crisis. Pastoral messages appealed for political tolerance, peace, and justice. Bishops were mediators in the official dialogue process resulting from the protests. Additionally, religious leaders intervened in specific conflicts throughout the country. The Catholic Church therefore became one of the most credible institutions during the critical juncture, promoting democratic values.

Democratic attitudes have changed in Nicaragua in the aftermath of these protests. The transformation is evident when comparing the 2019 results with the rest of the years analyzed in this article. Beyond changes in the size of clusters, Nicaraguans’ attitudes shifted, becoming increasingly perceptive and critical of authoritarian political maneuvers. The protests brought Ortega’s anti-democratic actions to the foreground and made democracy a national priority.

Conclusion

NORC’s cluster analysis indicated that institutionalists made up the largest cluster in Nicaragua in the period under analysis. Non-institutionalist Nicaraguans were divided between military interventionists and authoritarians in 2012 and 2014, and between these two clusters and presidentialists in 2016 and 2019. Moreover, the analysis showed that support for democracy was in decline across the board and that clusters were not too dissimilar in their levels of

⁴³ Many saw similarities between events in Nicaragua and in Bolivia in 2019, where incumbent president Evo Morales, a political ally of Ortega, faced a crisis that led to his resignation after losing military support. Some Nicaraguans called for the military to follow the Bolivian example and “side with the people” and request Ortega’s resignation “for the wellbeing of Nicaragua.” (Gómez, 2019. “Universitarios Llamam Al Ejército de Nicaragua a Que Tome El Ejemplo de Bolivia y Les Ayuden a Sacar Al Dictador.” *Artículo 66.*)

⁴⁴ Chamorro, Emiliano. 2018. “Daniel Ortega Acusa de Golpistas a Los Obispos Nicaragüenses En Su Discurso Del 19 de Julio.” *La Prensa.*

⁴⁵ Aragón, William. 2019. “Parapolicias Del «Frente Norte Carlos Fonseca Amador» Amenazan a Opositores Con «aniquilarlos Totalmente».” *La Prensa.*

⁴⁶ López, K. D. (2020). FSLN realizó más de 350 marchas «por la paz» mientras imponía el terror en toda Nicaragua. *Artículo 66.*

support for democracy, tolerance for protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion.

Nicaraguans' democratic attitudes have both enabled and responded to rapidly changing political realities. Ortega's moves to implement authoritarian policies led to the political capture of state institutions and shaped how Nicaraguans understood democracy and their political institutions. In the first years of his government, Ortega's economic success legitimated his presidency and improved his support across all Nicaraguans, including those with more democratic attitudes. Because they supported Ortega's policies, many citizens withheld criticism of Ortega's growing authoritarianism, viewing it as a temporary or acceptable tradeoff. Other Nicaraguans, who were less supportive of democracy in the first place, responded to Ortega's backsliding by expressing increased support for authoritarianism.

The mass protests in 2018 and Ortega's response reoriented Nicaraguans' democratic attitudes. The public's response to Ortega's reaction was negative and his approval rating rapidly declined. Some Nicaraguans also reexamined the implications of his long-lasting rule and increasingly came to view democracy as a priority. While the data collected in 2021 are not directly comparable to prior survey waves, they do suggest concern about democracy and polarization. Support for democracy increased from 19 percent in 2019 to 28 percent in 2021. At the same time, however, support for both military coups and executive aggrandizement increased. The share of Nicaraguans who say that the president is not justified in closing the legislative assembly and governing without it if the country is facing "very difficult times" declined from 78 percent in 2019 to 69 percent in 2021. Similarly, the proportion of Nicaraguans who answered that a military takeover of the state would not be justified under certain circumstances decreased from 68 percent in 2019 to 54 percent in 2021.

Public response to the protests did not slow Nicaragua's authoritarian decline. In 2021, Ortega implemented a series of increasingly repressive laws that enabled the jailing of opposition candidates and citizens who publicly expressed discontent with the regime. In short, although many Nicaraguans believe in institutional or military solutions to Ortega's authoritarianism, a lack of consensus among the opposition has contributed to strengthen his grip on power. It does not appear that public opposition to his increasingly authoritarian policies will result in re-democratization in the near future.

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Annex I. Methodology

NORC employed cluster analysis to classify citizens into clusters with distinct attitudinal profiles. Cluster analysis entails analyzing a collection of heterogeneous objects and grouping them in smaller, homogenous clusters according to two or more measurable attributes. The aim is to maximize similarity *within* each cluster while maximizing dissimilarity *between* clusters.

There are several variants of cluster analysis. NORC used Hierarchical Density-Based Clustering (HDBScan) as developed by Campello, Moulavi, and Sander.⁴⁷ HDBScan identifies groups of observations that are closely packed together in space and leaves outliers unclassified. HDBScan only requires one parameter—the minimum size of a cluster—and chooses the number of clusters endogenously through a hierarchical process that retains the most stable clusters. We employed Mahalanobis distances as the criteria for computing the distance metric used by HDBScan.

By using cluster analysis, we let survey respondents speak for themselves instead of making assumptions in advance about how to group them. We did not forcibly group observations that did not belong together by predefining acceptable combinations of attitudes or setting arbitrary cut-offs for scores to classify respondents into a given cluster. However, our analysis has one main limitation: the variables used are not continuous and do not share a common scale. Ideally, we would conduct cluster analysis with continuous variables that can be standardized to ensure comparability.

The democratic attitudes used for this analysis include support for democracy, opposition to military coups, opposition to executive aggrandizement, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion. Table A1.1 presents the full wording of the AmericasBarometer questions we used to measure each democratic attitude. We use these questions to create attitudinal scores, ranging from zero (least democratic attitude) to one (most democratic attitude). When more than one question is available for a given democratic attitude, we calculate the attitudinal score by averaging responses.

Table A1.1: AmericasBarometer Items and Underlying Democratic Attitudes

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES ¹	QUESTIONS
Support for democracy	ING4. Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? <i>Response options: Seven-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree.</i>

⁴⁷ Campello, Ricardo, Davoud Moulavi, and Jörg Sander. 2013. "Density-based clustering based on hierarchical density estimates." Pacific-Asia conference on knowledge discovery and data mining. Springer. p. 160-172.

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES ¹	QUESTIONS
Opposition to military coups²	<p>Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified...</p> <p>JC10. When there is a lot of crime</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.</i></p>
	<p>Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified...</p> <p>JC13. When there is a lot of corruption</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.</i></p>
Opposition to executive aggrandizement²	<p>JC15A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Legislative Assembly and govern without the Legislative Assembly?</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.</i></p>
	<p>JC16A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to dissolve the Supreme Court and govern without the Supreme Court?</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.</i></p>
Tolerance of protest and regime critics	<p>D1. There are people who only say bad things about the form of government of Nicaragua, not just the current government but the system of government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's right to vote? Please read me the number from the scale.</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
	<p>D2. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views? Please read me the number.</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
	<p>D3. Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the form of government of Nicaragua, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office?</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES ¹	QUESTIONS
	<p>D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
<p>Support for democratic inclusion</p>	<p>D5. And now, changing the topic and thinking of homosexuals, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of homosexuals being permitted to run for public office? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>

¹ In the 2021 round of the AmericasBarometer, only questions ING4, JC13, and JC15A were included in the survey. Items JC13 and JC15A were administered to a split sample so that 25 percent of respondents were only asked question JC13, and another 24 percent of respondents were only asked question JC15A. Meanwhile, 50 percent of respondents were not asked either of these questions. We decided to use JC15A for cluster analysis as we believe that executive aggrandizement currently represents a greater threat to democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean than military coups.

² For the 2012-2019 waves, opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement included up to two questions each (JC10 and JC13, and JC15A and JC16A, respectively). In 2012, respondents were asked all four questions. In 2014, respondents were asked JC10, JC13, and JC15A (JC16A was missing). In 2016, respondents were asked either JC10 or JC13 (split sample) and JC15A (JC16A was missing). In 2018, respondents were asked either JC10 and JC15A or JC13 and JC16A. We verified that responses to JC10 and JC13 had similar distributions. To ensure consistency across years, we artificially created a split sample by randomly taking the value of one of the two questions for each respondent in 2012 and 2014.

Annex 2. 2012–2021 Cluster Results

The bar graphs below present the main results of the cluster analysis. There is one bar graph per wave studied: 2012, 2014, 2016, 2019, and 2021. The bars indicate the average scores for the attitudes for each cluster. All attitude scores range from zero (least democratic) to one (most democratic). The percentages next to each cluster label in the legend indicate the share of respondents that was classified into the cluster. Thus, the graphs allow for comparing the clusters in terms of their democratic attitudes and their relative size.

Figure A2.1: 2012 Cluster Results

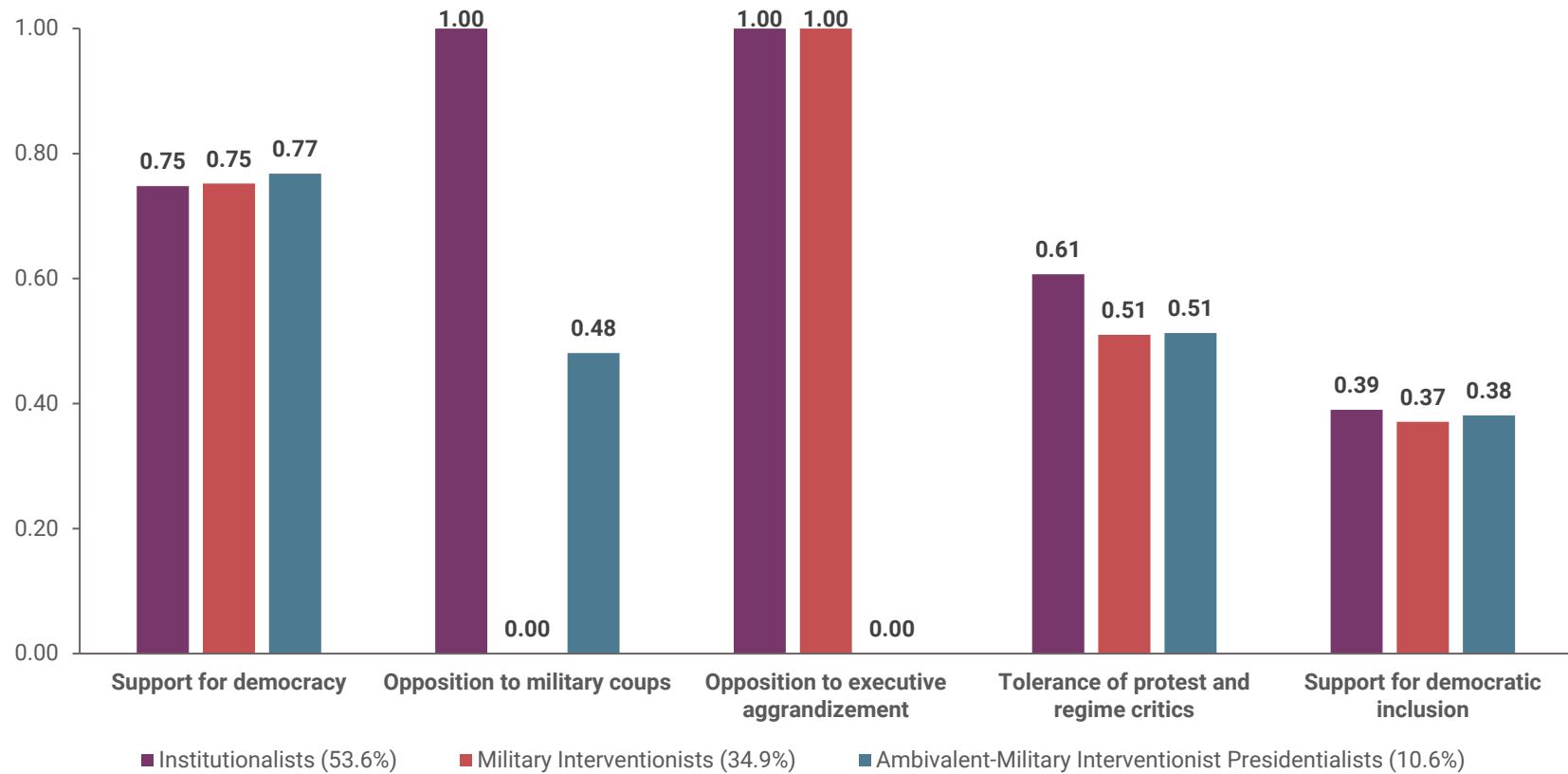


Figure A2.2: 2014 Cluster Results

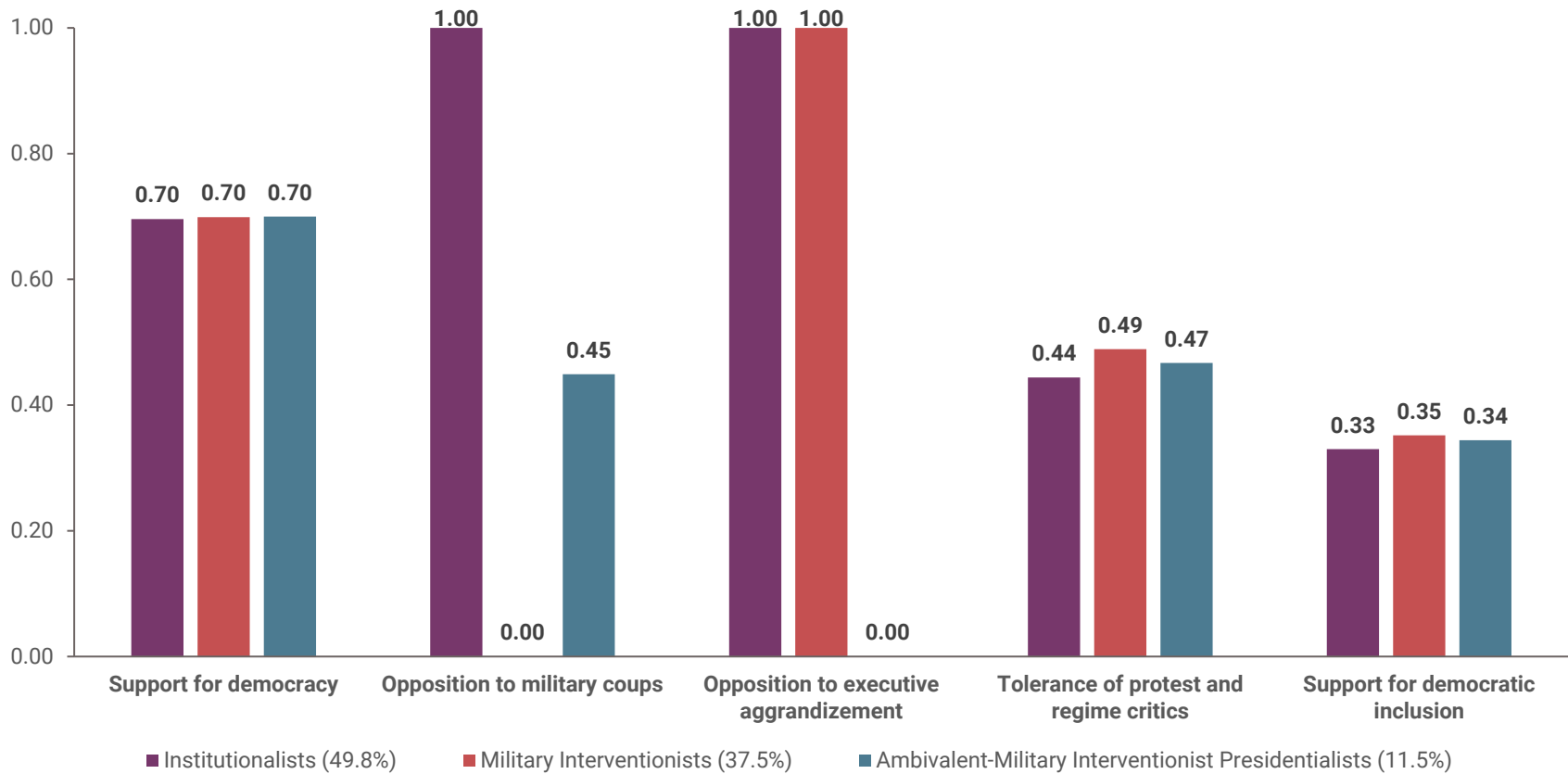


Figure A2.3: 2016 Cluster Results

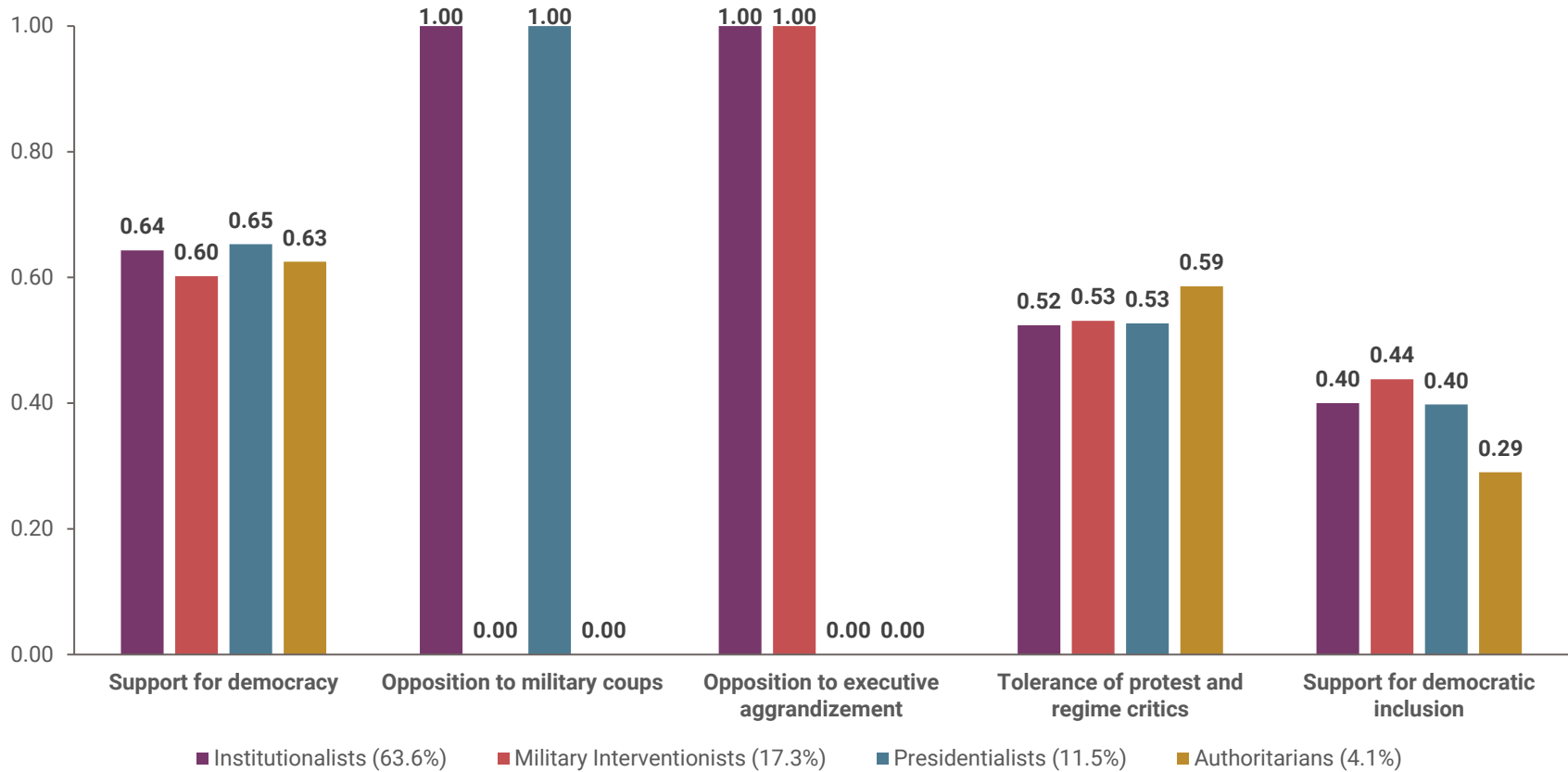


Figure A2.4: 2019 Cluster Results

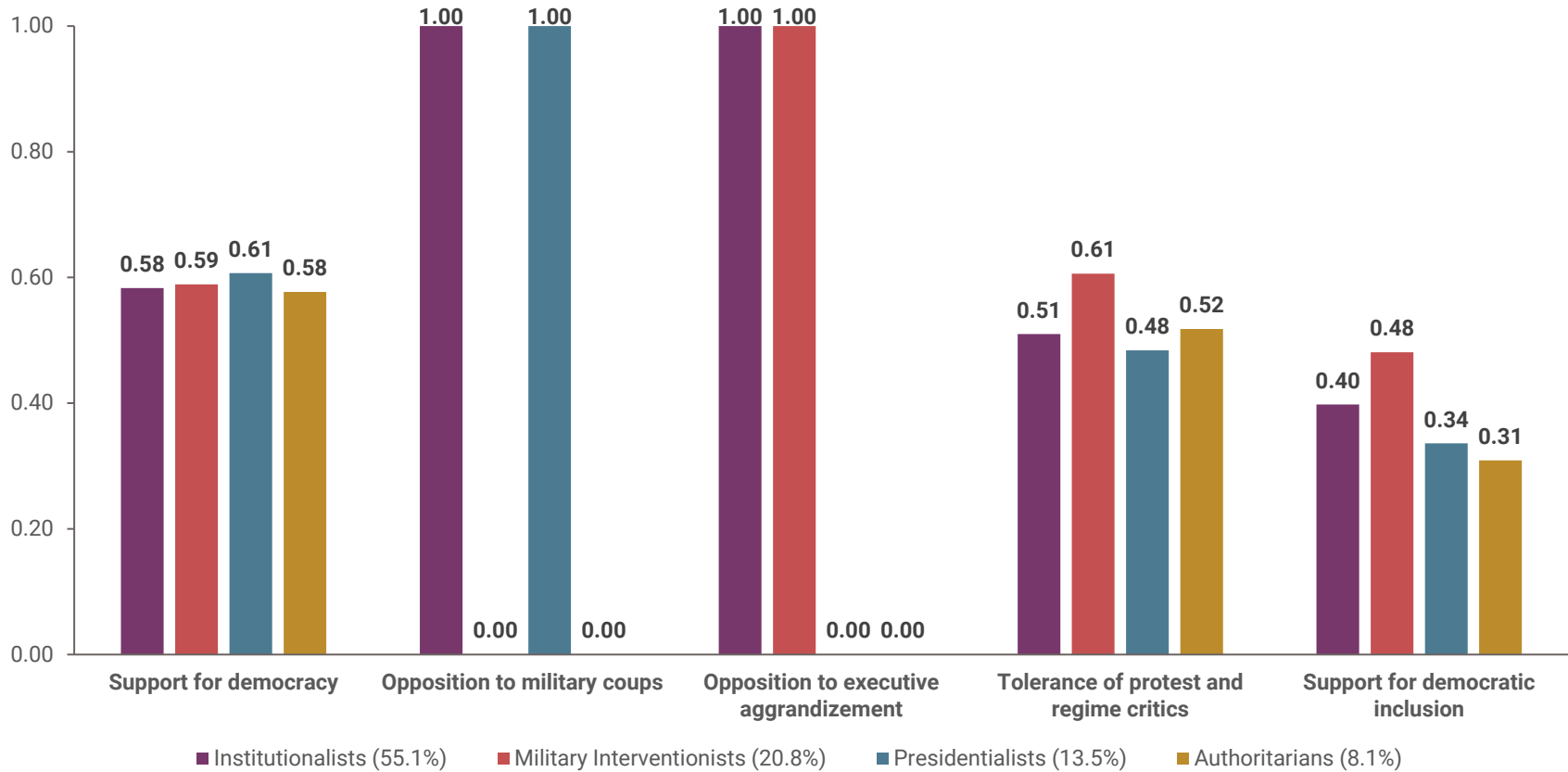


Figure A2.5: 2021 Cluster Results

