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Analysis of Trends in Democratic Norms and Attitudes:

Regional Summary Report

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Analysis of Trends in Democratic Norms and Attitudes: Regional Summary Report

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Introduction

This report presents the main findings, conclusions, and recommendations of NORC's Study of Trends in Democratic Attitudes. It builds on 12 country[1] case studies that describe democratic attitudes between 2012 and 2021 and examine the system-level, contextual factors that have contributed to changes in attitudes over time.

In a context of democratic backsliding, 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. In Latin America, however, democratic legitimacy is eroding. The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) reported that 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.

NORC's Study of Trends in Democratic Attitudes examined how democratic attitudes evolved from 2012 to 2021. The study sought to answer the following questions:

- Can the citizens of Latin American countries be classified into groups with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes?
- What are the most salient attitudinal, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of citizens in each group, and especially those groups that hold worrisome democratic attitudes?
- How have groups and democratic attitudes evolved from 2012 to 2021? What system-level, contextual factors have contributed to changing patterns of democratic attitudes?

To answer the first question, we used cluster analysis methods (described below) with data from LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys conducted between 2012 and 2021. The analysis revealed four main findings:

- Institutionalists, who express the most consistent support for democratic institutions and processes, make up the largest share of the population across the Latin America.
- The share of the population classified as Presidentialists, who oppose coups but support executive aggrandizement, grew significantly during the period under study.
- Exposure to crime and support for the incumbent president[2] are associated with belonging to less consistently pro-democracy clusters.

[1] Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru.
[2] Here, the term "incumbent" refers to the president currently in power.

- Socio-economic factors and other attitudinal variables do not consistently differentiate between the cluster families.

To explain these findings and other key points that emerge from the analysis in individual countries, NORC engaged country experts to develop case studies relating these quantitative findings to political and contextual factors in each country. While the case studies reveal a wide range of explanatory factors, we found four factors that were important across many of the cases explored in this study: 1) polarization, 2) corruption, 3) governance crises, and 4) economic crises. The report explains each of these factors and provides illustrative examples drawn from the case studies. Finally, we offer a set of conclusions and recommendations for future programming in the Latin America region.

This report is intended for those working in the democracy, human rights, and governance sectors. It should be of particular interest to those working on challenges to democracy, the rule of law, and transparency and accountability.

Research Approach

The study used cluster analysis to examine trends in democratic support in the Latin America region. Cluster analysis is a technique that groups citizens into "clusters" with distinct attitudinal profiles (see Box 1). We employed data from the last five AmericasBarometer surveys (2012, 2014, 2016-2017, 2018-2019 and 2021) and generated classifications based on five relevant attitudes measured in all survey waves:

- *Support for democracy:* The extent to which respondents agree with the statement 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 under certain circumstances.
- *Opposition to executive aggrandizement:* Whether respondents believe it would be justified for the president to close Congress or the Supreme Court and govern without them.
- *Tolerance of protest and regime critics:* The extent to which respondents support the right to protest and other political rights of individuals who criticize the regime.
- *Support for democratic inclusion:* The extent to which respondents support the political inclusion of "homosexuals."[3]

[3] The survey question uses the term "homosexuals" when referencing LGBTQ+ individuals. We use this term to maintain consistency with the survey instrument.

Box 1: Cluster Analysis

Cluster analysis entails analyzing a collection of heterogeneous objects and grouping them in smaller, relatively homogenous clusters according to two or more measurable attributes. The aim is to maximize similarity *within* each cluster while maximizing dissimilarity *between* clusters. That is, this technique divides a population into groups with similar attitudes or characteristics.

There are several variants of cluster analysis. NORC used Hierarchical Density-based Clustering (HDBScan), which identifies groups of objects that are closely packed together in space, leaving outliers unclassified. We chose this method because it does not forcibly group respondents who do not belong together. Moreover, cluster analysis allows respondents to speak for themselves, instead of the researchers predefining acceptable combinations of attitudes or setting arbitrary cut-offs for scores to classify respondents.

However, cluster analysis has limitations. Ideally, cluster analysis should use continuous variables that can be standardized to ensure comparability. The variables analyzed here are not continuous and do not share a common scale. Indeed, opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement are especially coarse measures that take only two possible values (support or opposition). These variables therefore contribute disproportionately to the cluster classifications. Finally, some of the survey questions we used are not pure measures of democratic attitudes. For example, questions tapping support for military coups ask respondents if they believe coups would be justified when there is a lot of crime or a lot of corruption. These items thus might reflect attitudes toward crime or corruption, rather than support for coups per se.

For each survey wave, the cluster analysis identified between three and six sizable groups.[4] To facilitate comparisons across time, we grouped the results into four families that share defining characteristics:

- *Institutionalists:* Individuals in this cluster family are characterized by full opposition to military coups and executive aggrandizement. They represent “ideal” democratic citizens compared to the other cluster families.
- *Military Interventionists:* Individuals in this cluster family express full opposition to executive aggrandizement but less-than-full opposition to military coups.
- *Presidentialists:* Individuals in this cluster family exhibit full opposition to military coups but less-than-full opposition to executive aggrandizement.
- *Authoritarians:* Individuals in this cluster family are characterized by less-than-full opposition to both military coups and executive aggrandizement.

NORC then identified the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics differentiating the citizens in each cluster from the rest of the population to answer the second

[4] In all countries and years, a small share of respondents was not classified into any cluster. These unclustered individuals were dissimilar from each other and from those included in other clusters.

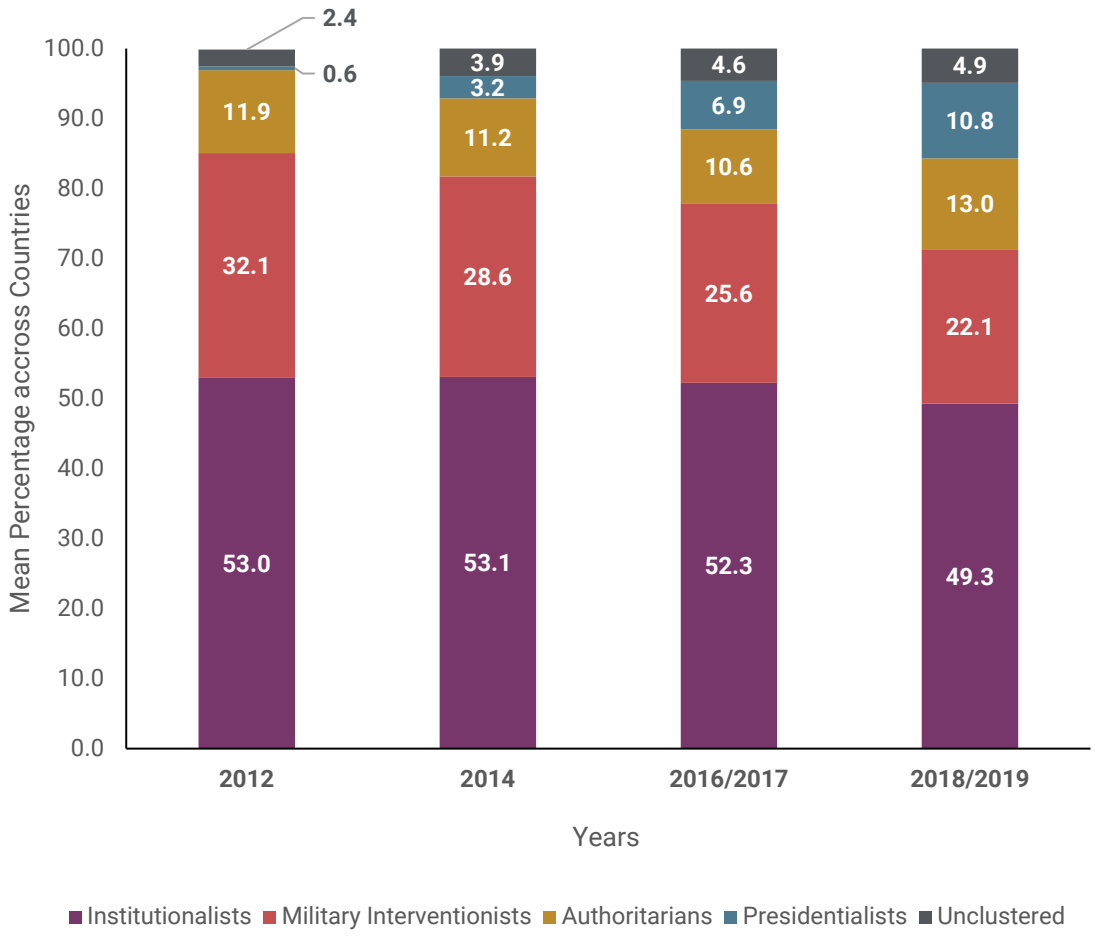
question. To answer the third research question, NORC worked with country experts to make sense of the cluster analysis results and examine the relationship between democratic attitudes and political, economic, and social developments over time.

Main Findings From the Country Case Studies

Finding 1: Institutionalists Make Up the Largest Cluster Family

Figure 1 presents the average distribution of these clusters, aggregated across countries, for each survey year. We note that there is substantial variation across countries that underlies these averages; country reports detail these country-specific trends. Still, some region-wide trends are worth noting. In most countries and years, the Institutionalist cluster family makes up the largest share of respondents. However, this group rarely constitutes a majority (that is, more than 50 percent) of the public. Military Interventionists, who oppose executive aggrandizement but do not oppose military coups, make up the next largest group in most cases. This cluster usually accounts for about one-fifth to one-third of the population. The share of citizens in the remaining cluster families varies more widely across countries and over time.

Figure 1: Evolution of Cluster Families, 2012-2018/19



Finding 2: The Number of Presidentialists Is Increasing

In most countries, the share of Institutionalists and Military Interventionists has declined over time. At the same time, Presidentialists, who oppose military coups but support moves by the President to shutter Congress or the Courts, have emerged as a small but growing group in many of the countries analyzed here. The size of the Authoritarian cluster varies widely across countries but remained relatively stable over time in most countries.

Finding 3: Crime Exposure and Presidential Approval Are Associated With Authoritarian and Presidentialist Clusters

In addition to examining these trends in cluster size, NORC also analyzed the attitudinal, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of each cluster in each country and year. Specifically, we assessed whether respondents' gender, age, wealth, years of education, or

their levels of presidential approval, political efficacy, victimization by corruption or crime, or political engagement predicted their placement into different clusters. For the most part, these characteristics did not consistently predict how citizens were clustered across countries and survey waves. However, we do note two patterns. First, consistent with research that links crime victimization to increased support for hardline anti-crime policies that violate civil and human rights,[5] in many countries and years, crime victims were more commonly classified as Authoritarians. Second, consistent with research showing that many citizens will justify anti-democracy actions that benefit their preferred political team,[6] Presidentialists expressed higher average levels of presidential approval in many countries and years.[7]

Finding 4: The Cluster Families Are Not Correlated With Stated Support for Democracy

We find no meaningful differences in the remaining variables we used to define clusters. For example, we expected that survey respondents' support for democracy would be an important factor in defining clusters. However, Institutionalists, Military Interventionists, Presidentialists, and Authoritarians all express similar levels of support for democracy in the data. On its face, this finding may seem contradictory: supporting the extralegal removal of democratically elected leaders—the attitude that differentiates citizens across categories in our analysis—is to support the breaking of the democratic order. However, the word "democracy" is not defined in the survey question, and past research shows that "democracy" means different things to different people. For example, while some citizens understand the concept of democracy as the guarantee of certain rights and liberties, others define democracy by the rules that govern the selection of leaders. Still others focus on the *outputs* of the political system—e.g., economic prosperity or security.[8] For some citizens, then, illegally removing elected officials from office is consistent with their understanding of democracy in some circumstances.

[5] Visconti, Giancarlo. "Policy preferences after crime victimization: panel and survey evidence from Latin America." *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2020): 1481-1495.

[6] For example, Cohen, Mollie J., Amy Erica Smith, Mason W. Moseley, and Matthew L. Layton. "Winners' consent? Citizen commitment to democracy when illiberal candidates win elections." *American Journal of Political Science* (2022)., Graham, Matthew H., and Milan W. Svolik. "Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 392-409.

[7] Presidentialists express higher presidential approval in many years; however, membership in this category is probably dynamic. In other words, when the president changes, the Presidentialist cluster might also change to contain different individuals, who express high approval of the *new* leader. Due to the nature of the data, which is a repeated cross section over time rather than a panel survey, we cannot examine this possibility in depth.

[8] See, among others: Baviskar, Siddhartha, and Mary Fran T. Malone. "What democracy means to citizens—and why it matters." *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe/European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* (2004): 3-23.; Carrión, Julio F. "Illiberal democracy and normative democracy: How is democracy defined in the Americas?." *Challenges to democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean: evidence from the Americas Barometer. Nashville (TN): USAID, LAPOP* (2008).; Canache, Damarys. "Citizens' conceptualizations of democracy: Structural complexity, substantive content, and political significance." *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 9 (2012): 1132-1158.; König, Pascal D., Markus B. Siewert, and Kathrin Ackermann. "Conceptualizing and measuring citizens' preferences for democracy: taking stock of three decades of research in a fragmented field." *Comparative Political Studies* 55, no. 12 (2022): 2015-2049.

Qualitative Analysis

To better understand these trends in democratic attitudes, we asked country experts to examine the relationship between democratic attitudes and political, economic, and social developments over time. Their analyses highlight four key factors that help to explain trends in democratic attitudes throughout Latin America: polarization, corruption, governance crises, and economic crises.

Explanatory Factor 1: Polarization

Polarizing (often authoritarian[9]) leaders in several countries shape citizens' tolerance of interruptions to the democratic order. Support for the incumbent also shapes citizen support for, and satisfaction with, democracy more broadly: the more popular the incumbent, the higher average support for democracy. Where incumbents are polarizing, views of the incumbent shape support for executive aggrandizement and military coups. Those who support the incumbent approve of maneuvers to keep the leader in power (i.e., executive aggrandizement), while opposing actions that would remove the leader (i.e., military coups). This tendency leads to an increase in the share of Presidentialists in the population where polarizing figures have entered office. However, citizens who *oppose* polarizing leaders tend to express higher support for military coups, while opposing executive aggrandizement, resulting in an increase in the share of Military Interventionists. In some cases, these anti-democracy profiles emerge from the Authoritarian cluster, which shrinks when there is a polarizing incumbent. However, this is not always the case: in some countries, Military Interventionists and Presidentialists emerge at the cost of the Institutionalist cluster.

The case study of El Salvador highlights this tendency. For many years, politics in El Salvador was dominated by two major political parties, ARENA and FMLN. Due to high-level corruption scandals and economic mismanagement, the parties' popularity declined significantly over time. In 2019, Nayib Bukele, a populist, leftist political outsider, won the presidential election. Bukele has since engaged in a series of actions that have undermined political and civil liberties. However, Bukele continues to be extremely popular among many citizens in El Salvador. It is therefore unsurprising that a sizeable portion of the Salvadoran population was classified as Institutionalists in the 2019 AmericasBarometer survey, and again in 2021—the incumbent, authoritarian president has come to be associated with democracy. This also helps to explain the increase in the share of the population classified as Presidentialists after Bukele's election: Bukele supporters trust him to solve the most serious problems facing the country, even if that means bending the rules of the game and undermining the quality of democracy.

[9] We follow Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018)'s definition of authoritarian leaders: those who are weakly committed to the rules of democracy, do not accept the legitimacy of the opposition, tolerate the use of political violence, and are willing to violate their opponents' civil liberties.

Explanatory Factor 2: Corruption

A second factor that helps explain shifts in democratic public opinion in many Latin American countries is elite corruption. After explosive, cross-regional allegations of influence buying and rampant corruption became public in 2014,[10] political corruption emerged as an important issue across the region. Pervasive corruption by incumbents, high-salience scandals, and the resulting prosecutions have led many citizens to view politicians with suspicion. This suspicion can metastasize, undermining support for establishment politicians and leading voters to support anti-establishment, often authoritarian, outsider candidates. Pervasive corruption can also serve as evidence that the political system does not work as intended, which can undermine citizens' support for democracy.

The case study of Guatemala illustrates this dynamic. The International Commission Against Corruption (CICIG) was founded in 2007 and engaged in widely publicized anti-corruption activities until it was dissolved in 2019. In 2015, these anti-corruption efforts reached their peak: incumbent president Otto Pérez Molina was removed from office and faced corruption charges. In this context, citizen satisfaction with democracy—which had demonstrated its ability to remove poorly behaving incumbents from power—increased, even as trust in the political establishment, and the proportion of Guatemalans in the Institutionalist cluster, declined. In 2019, anti-establishment President Jimmy Morales shuttered the CICIG in an apparent effort to halt investigations into alleged corruption by his administration. Satisfaction with democracy declined following that decision, but confidence in the executive did not improve. After Morales' term ended, he was replaced by a second anti-establishment president, Alejandro Giammattei, who has also been investigated for alleged campaign finance violations. In brief, highly salient corruption scandals can create a vicious cycle. Corruption among political insiders can lead to distrust in establishment candidates and, eventually, the election of political outsiders.[11] If these inexperienced politicians take advantage of their newfound political power and engage in corruption, this can depress democratic public opinion further.

Explanatory Factor 3: Governance Crises

Governance crises are a third factor that negatively affected democratic public opinion in several Latin American countries. Partisan gridlock in some countries has made standard mechanisms of democratic politics—for example, good faith negotiations among legislators and compromise—impossible. The inability of elected officials to govern leads citizens to view democracy and its institutions as incapable of meeting their basic needs. This, in turn, increases support for authoritarian alternatives.

The case study of Peru exemplifies this tendency. Like other countries in the region, Peru has struggled with a slowing economy, growing insecurity, and endemic corruption since the early

[10] The Panama Papers and the Odebrecht/ Lava Jato scandal directly implicated leaders across the region and around the world in quid pro quo schemes exchanging policy concessions for kickbacks.

[11] "Outsiders" are politicians without political experience, who run on a new party platform. See, for example, Carreras, Miguel. "The rise of outsiders in Latin America, 1980–2010: An institutionalist perspective." *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 12 (2012): 1451-1482.

2010s. Aggravating these problems, Peru's divided government has been unable to govern effectively. Between 2018 and 2021, the country had five presidents, three of whom were impeached and removed by a Congress with rock-bottom approval. Support for and satisfaction with democracy in Peru were substantially lower than the average for the Latin America region during this period, and support for anti-democracy ruptures to the democratic order (e.g., through a self-coup) was substantially higher. The cluster analysis reveals that Peru is one of few countries in the region in which Institutionalists represent less than 40% of the public (and less than one-third of the public after 2014). Rather, Authoritarians, Military Interventionists, and Presidentialists make up the larger share of the Peruvian public from 2017 on. After this study was completed, incumbent president Castillo was removed from office following an attempted self-coup in 2022, and was replaced by Vice President Dina Boluarte. Her government has faced widespread protests calling for new elections and has responded with the disproportionate use of force. Congress has failed to schedule prompt elections and has failed to govern effectively on other issues. In brief, Peruvian political dysfunction led to anti-democracy shifts in public opinion; continued political dysfunction has further undermined citizens' faith in democracy.

Explanatory Factor 4: Economic Crises

Finally, in most countries we examined, economic booms were linked to improved citizen support for democracy, while economic crises undermined support. Past research has shown this pattern across world regions and over time. Poor economic performance, growing poverty, and persistent inequality undermine public faith that representative democracy can solve a country's most pressing issues. When the economy improves, so do citizens' lives and, in turn, their confidence in democracy as a system of government. With the end of the region-wide commodity boom in 2014, many Latin American countries experienced slowed growth. In the following years, economies across the region struggled and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, were plunged into acute crisis.

Economic inputs are a key background condition in most of the countries examined in the case studies. The importance of economic booms and busts is especially clear in the case of Brazil. In 2012, the Brazilian economy was strong, and the Institutionalist cluster was the largest category in the population. However, when commodity markets crashed in 2014, so too did Brazilian consumer confidence. The national GDP declined, and unemployment increased. Observing the state of their nation, many Brazilians appear to have questioned whether and how democracy had improved their material wellbeing. These doubts, in turn, undermined support for the political system, leading the Institutionalist cluster to shrink. Shortly after the commodity market fell, a series of high-salience corruption scandals swept across the nation, further undermining faith in the governing elite. This situation created a "perfect storm" for an anti-democracy candidate, like rightist authoritarian populist Jair Bolsonaro, to emerge. The election of Bolsonaro led to significant democratic decline in the following years, as his administration undermined key freedoms. While Brazil's languishing economy was not the proximate cause of Bolsonaro's election (or his actions once in office), the economy is an important background condition that, combined with other issues (e.g., corruption scandals), created circumstances in which anti-democracy tendencies can flourish.

Conclusions

Our central conclusions are both substantive and methodological. Substantively, the results indicate that stated support for democracy in many Latin American countries has become decoupled from opposition to anti-democracy actions, like military or self-coups. The term "democracy" means different things to different people, and the meaning that individuals ascribe to the term can change over time. These shifts in the meaning of democracy do not occur in a political vacuum. Savvy political leaders can manipulate the way the term "democracy" is used in public discourse, claiming to advance democracy while simultaneously undermining its basic tenets (i.e., free and fair elections, civil and human rights, checks and balances). It is therefore critically important to analyze stated support for democracy in conjunction with support for more specific, anti-democracy actions.

A second substantive finding of our analysis is that, in the 12 countries analyzed here, the roots of support for democracy are shallow. Citizens' support for the political regime is closely linked to the regime's performance in key areas. When the government fails to address unemployment or inequality, or when widespread corruption is revealed, citizens begin to view breaks with the rules that govern democracy as acceptable. Popular, polarizing incumbents are especially able to create conditions in which their supporters view anti-democracy actions as acceptable. From Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega to El Salvador's Nayib Bukele, to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Evo Morales in Bolivia, incumbents across the region have taken advantage of their broad popular support to undermine core civil and political rights, all in the name of democracy.

Methodologically, this study found that there are important challenges to using cluster analysis across time and national contexts. As a tool, cluster analysis is most useful for dividing populations into groups with shared characteristics (for example, in their attitudes toward democracy). For technical reasons, cluster analysis is most reliable when it uses measures with continuous scales. However, many surveys ask a smaller number of questions and use ordinal scales; while this can facilitate response by the public, it can introduce noise into the results of cluster analysis using survey data. Indeed, we found that the cluster analysis results were not informative on their own. Instead, understanding the results required analyzing trends in contextual factors within countries (e.g., economic trends, the pervasiveness of corruption scandals) and trends in individual survey items (e.g., presidential approval, satisfaction with democracy) by country experts.

This is not to suggest that cluster analysis has no value. Our results show that cross-time and cross-country variation in survey questions and political trajectories make it very complicated to confidently estimate models using these algorithms across time and space. Nonetheless, cluster analysis conducted at a single time point in a single country could be a useful tool for other purposes, potentially including identifying subgroups of the population whose opinions may be more or less malleable, to be targeted for behavioral campaigns.

Recommendations

Based on the quantitative cluster analysis and the qualitative country case studies, we offer four key recommendations to promote democratic resilience.

1. **Develop consistent and effective communication strategies around the word "democracy."** While the relative effectiveness of different strategies will likely depend on the country and the time, our findings clearly show that broad statements about "supporting," "saving," or "protecting" democracy, or about slowing its erosion, will likely be ineffective, since these same talking points are weaponized by incumbents who actively undermine democratic principles. Despite this, it is important to defend the concept of democracy against elite efforts to claim that erosion of its core institutions and processes are necessary in the name of advancing "democratic" goals.

2. There are potential, unintended consequences of anti-corruption campaigns, corruption probes, and high-salience corruption trials. To be sure, corruption is an important concern that causes waste and undermines the quality of governance. However, anti-corruption activities can, paradoxically, undermine citizens' faith in democracy itself. We recommend **further research to identify the types of messaging that can best decouple corruption by political actors from the political system in citizens' minds**. For example, an emphasis on *individuals* that are guilty of corruption, rather than *systems* that are fundamentally corrupt, may enable anti-corruption reforms while not undermining citizens' support for the political system. We also encourage reforms that increase accountability, rather than impunity, for public officials that engage in corruption.

3. **Future programming should address the information environment in fragile democracies.** In some countries, citizens have become disenchanted with traditional media sources. Trust in the media has declined in recent years across Latin America, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This has opened space for alternative news sources to disrupt the media landscape, sometimes improving transparency but often contributing instead to the increased prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, an important challenge to democracies everywhere. Whether false information originates and is spread by news organizations, political elites, or citizens themselves, its pervasive nature and rapid spread can contribute to polarization, enabling the emergence and electoral success of candidates with anti-democracy leanings, and the passage of legislation that undermines democratic freedoms. Donors should explore opportunities to expand their support for free and independent media, along with efforts to counter mis-, dis-, and malinformation (MDM) in the Latin America region.

4. In addition to these general recommendations, we recommend three specific activities to **increase citizen commitment to democracy**. A first, important step is to continue tracking democratic attitudes and values. It is not possible to understand the state of commitment to democracy, or trends in these commitments, without measuring these

attitudes regularly. Second, in making programming decisions, we recommend a focus on building commitment to the specific principles that underlie liberal democracy, like the freedom of speech, the right to vote, and a commitment to human rights. Building commitment to these core principles that is independent from the use of the word "democracy" has the potential to shore up citizen support for democratic principles, even when candidates and incumbents seek to undermine liberal democracy's core protections. Related, we recommend linking these principles to voting decisions, encouraging voters to consider core democratic liberties when making decisions about who to support in the voting booth. Finally, we recommend additional research into the best way to design and target messages to encourage the attitudes we have outlined above. Employing a cluster analysis approach like the one described here would be a useful way to identify targets for experimental interventions that aim to increase democratic public opinion among segments of society.

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