

Would-Be Authoritarians and the Pandemic in the Americas

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A half century ago, Guillermo O'Donnell identified a distinctive type of autocratic regime. He traced its roots to the economic impasse that Latin America's more advanced economies encountered in the course of import-substitution industrialization. This impasse gave rise to economic crises and social conflict and, eventually, to the militaries' seizure of power.

Thus were born bureaucratic-authoritarian (BA) regimes in the Southern Cone of South America (O'Donnell 1973). O'Donnell observed that BA regimes differed from other forms of military and autocratic rule familiar to Latin American societies. The BA regimes had more ambitious objectives. They sought to remake the societies over which they governed, deactivate the popular sectors, and win the confidence of business and international investors. They were as ambitious as they were nefarious.

The BA regimes contrasted with earlier military leaders who had stepped in for short spells, and with those who had remained in power for lengthier periods but without an ambitious social vision. BA leaders planned to stay in power for extended periods. They would return power to civilian politicians only when their states and societies were institutionally protected from the what the military rulers viewed as the perfidy of elected leaders. Compared to other forms of authoritarianism, O'Donnell wrote (1976, 54), "the [bureaucratic-authoritarian] state is more:

1. comprehensive, in the range of activities it controls or directly manages;
2. dynamic, in its rates of growth compared to those of society as a whole;
3. penetrating, through its subordination of various 'private' areas of civil society;
4. repressive, in the extension and efficacy of the coercion it applies;
5. bureaucratic, in the formalization and differentiation of its own structures; and
6. technocratic, in the growing weight of teams of *técnicos*, expert in the application of 'efficientist' techniques of formal rationality."

The BA regime's ambitiousness had implications for its organization. It required strong state capacity, which meant placing capable individuals in positions of leadership. Hence, O'Donnell wrote, "higher governmental positions are usually occupied by persons who come to them after successful careers in complex and highly bureaucratized organizations—the armed forces, the public bureaucracy, and large private firms" (O'Donnell 1978, 6).

Ten years after O'Donnell's death, we again find ourselves struggling—as scholars and as citizens—with the fragility of democracy and with rising authoritarianism. Yet the manifestation of autocracy, in the Americas and around the globe, seems almost the inverse of bureaucratic-authoritarianism. In the largest countries in the Americas, and not a few smaller ones, we now experience authoritarianism not as a blow

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from the military but as corrosion from within. More frequently than through coups, today's autocrats come to power through elections, and then chip away at the democracies that brought them to power. They are responsible for democratic backsliding, defined by Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2021, 1) as "the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader."

Whereas bureaucratic-authoritarians exalted technocrats, many would-be autocrats distrust them. Not policy expertise but loyalty is what would-be autocrats value. Whereas bureaucratic-authoritarianism was in most regards an ambitious, state-building effort, democratic erosion frequently involves the erosion not just of democracy but of the state itself. And whereas bureaucratic-authoritarianism was an ambitious, though nefarious, project, democratic erosion is often a tawdry grab for power.

The incentives at work on would-be autocrats contrast not just with those faced by BA officials but also with those of more conventional democratic leaders. To the extent that the latter anticipate being held to account by voters at the next election, they have incentives to evince competence and to maintain a professionalized bureaucracy. (Of course, many factors can interfere with these incentives.) The would-be autocrat, by contrast—typically operating in a highly polarized environment—often identifies a professionalized bureaucracy as a *deep state* bent on frustrating his goals. Many would-be autocrats are willing to trade expertise for loyalty. Still, most would-be autocrats will eventually face the electorate, which makes them more sensitive than full-on autocrats to short-term economic performance under their rule.

Backsliding elected leaders attempt to weaken institutions that would impose on them what O'Donnell called "horizontal" and "vertical accountability."¹ Their prime targets are therefore the press, the courts, legislatures, civil servants, and election administrators.

They also undertake what might be thought of as a *cultural* assault on democracy. For instance, they excuse their own attacks on democratic institutions by purveying the notion that all actors in the public sphere seek nothing more than their own advantage. They broadcast the idea that democracy-sustaining norms are quaint, for suckers. In short, the would-be autocrat may be a scoundrel but so is everyone else in public life.

Would-Be Autocrats in the Americas

The Western-hemisphere leaders whom scholars most frequently identify as would-be autocrats include Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Donald Trump (US), Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Álvaro Uribe (Colombia), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), Enrique Peña Nieto (Mexico), and, more recently, Nayib Bukele (El Salvador) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico).² These leaders have eroded democratic institutions by harassing or repressing the independent press (Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, the US), reducing judicial independence (Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, the US), repressing the opposition and reducing legislative oversight (Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela), weakening the civil service (Brazil, the US, Venezuela), and curtailing civil liberties and systemically reducing the freedom or fairness of elections (the US, Venezuela).³

¹ O'Donnell (1998) distinguished "horizontal accountability," the capacity of state actors to hold governments to account, from "vertical accountability," the capacity of voters to hold them to account.

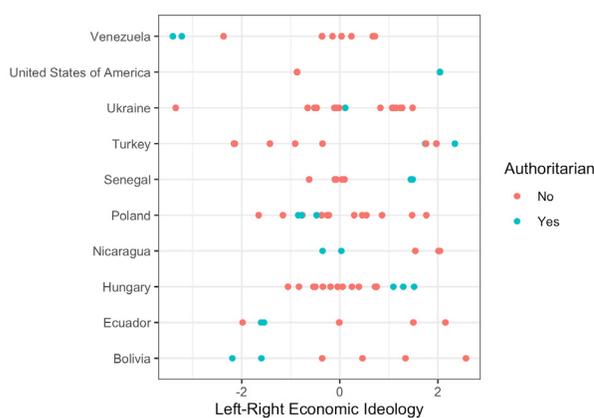
² The list draws on Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Laebens 2021; and Coppedge 2017.

³ The Democratic Erosion consortium maintains a detailed, and frequently updated, database of erosion events: <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/event-dataset/project-summary/>.

It should be clear from this list that would-be autocrats are ideologically diverse.⁴ For every Bolsonaro there is a Chávez; for every Bukele, a Correa.

This ideological heterogeneity is driven home by Figure 1. It shows the location, on a left-right dimension, of political parties in a set of countries from diverse world regions, countries commonly identified as having undertaken democratic backsliding. The parties' ideological placement is as assessed by expert coders for Varieties of Democracy.

Figure 1. Left-right economic ideology placement of democracy-eroding and non-democracy-eroding political parties, various countries.



Note: Data from Varieties of Democracy (2009–2019), www.v-dem.net/en/data/data/v-party-dataset/; dots represent the ideological placement of parties measured at different points in time. Note that the US parties are represented by one dot each because V-Dem experts did not identify movements of the parties over the 2009–2019 period. The following parties are included; parties listed in bold are coded as democracy-eroding ones. Venezuela: Justice First, A New Era, Democratic Action, Fatherland for All, Political Electoral Independent Organization Committee / Social Christian Party / Green Party, **United Socialist Party of Venezuela**, Democratic Unity Roundtable, Popular Will, Great Patriotic Pole (alliance); US, Democrats, **Republicans**; Ukraine: Communist Party of Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc, **Party of Regions**, independent, All Ukrainian Union "Fatherland", All Ukrainian Union "Freedom" / "Svoboda", People's Front, Radical Party of Oleh Lyashko, Self-Reliance Party, European Solidarity / Petro Poroshenko Bloc, Opposition Bloc, Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform, Servant of the People, Opposition Platform / For Life, Voice; Turkey: **Justice and Development Party**, Republican People's Party, Nationalist Movement [Action] Party, People's Democracy Party, Peoples' Democratic Party, Good Party, People's Alliance (alliance),

Nation Alliance (alliance); Senegal: **Senegalese Democratic Party**, Citizen Movement for National Reform, Alliance for the Republic-Yakaar, Bokk Gis Gis, Manko Taxawu Senegal (alliance); Poland: Democratic Left Alliance, Polish People's (Peasants') Party, Palikot's Movement, Civic Platform, **Law and Justice**, National Movement, Modern, Kukiz15, Spring, Left Together, The Left (alliance), Polish Coalition (alliance), Confederation Liberty and Independence (alliance); Nicaragua: Constitutionalist Liberal Party, **Sandinista National Liberation Front**, Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance, Independent Liberal Party; Hungary: Movement for a Better Hungary, Democratic Coalition, Hungarian Socialist Party, Christian Democratic People's Party, Politics Can Be Different, **Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance**, Together—Party for a New Era, Alliance of Hungarian Solidarity, Unity (alliance); Ecuador: Patriotic Society Party, Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement—New Country, Social Christian Party [Movement], Democratic People's Movement, **PAIS Alliance**, Advance Party, Grow, Creating Opportunities Movement, Multinational Union of the Left (alliance); Bolivia: National Unity Front, **Movement for Socialism**, Christian Democratic Party, Civic Community.

Some of the would-be autocrats are right-wingers. Looking beyond Latin America, the US Republican Party under Donald Trump, the Turkish AKP under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Senegalese Democratic Party under Abdoulaye Wade, and the Hungarian Fidesz under Viktor Orbán are all right-wing parties that came to power through democratic means and then eroded democratic institutions. Some would-be autocrats are left-wingers: the Venezuelan, Ecuadoran, and Bolivian processes of erosion were undertaken by leftist governments. Yet in the Americas, as mentioned, democratic erosion has not occurred exclusively under the left. Colombia's Partido Social de Unidad Nacional and, later, Centro Democrático, under Álvaro Uribe, combined a pro-business, pro-law-and-order policy orientation with the erosion of democracy, as does El Salvador's Nuevas Ideas under Nayib Bukele.

Though governments of the left and the right have undertaken attacks on democratic institutions, it is worth distinguishing those that did so with an ideological vision and those that were merely grasping for power. If we think of a dimension with pure ideologues at one end and pure power-seekers at the other, Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa fall closer to the first extreme, Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump closer to the second one.

⁴ Several prominent leaders whose actions and objectives overlap with those of would-be autocrats are right-wing populists. The right-wing element is their advocacy of low taxes, limited redistribution, and deregulation. Their right-wing populism resides in their energetic vilification, not of banks, corporations, or the wealthy but of immigrants, minorities, and other enemies of the true people. See Müller 2017; Çinar, Stokes, and Uribe 2020; and Przeworski 2019.

In their desire to construct a new social order, the ideologues are then more similar to rulers of the BA state (though their objectives and tactics are quite divergent, for example with regard to deactivating the popular sectors). The more ideological leaders among the would-be autocrats will eventually wish to construct strong state institutions to carry out their vision; their attacks on the deep state are a stage on the road to reconstructing a state capable of carrying out their vision. Or at least that is their aspiration.

Democracies and Autocracies (Established and Would-Be) in a Crisis: The Pandemic

Would-be autocrats' strategy of rule departs, then, both from that of officials in BA regimes and from that of more conventional democratic leaders. In contrast to the repressive state-building undertaken by BA officials, as mentioned, the would-be autocrats' project is initially one of state erosion. In contrast to democratic leaders who remain more fully bound by mechanisms of accountability, the would-be autocrats' calculation is that a mix of public acceptance, demagoguery, and institutional erosion will keep them in power. When faced with a crisis that threatens their populations, many would-be autocrats' instinct is not to strengthen state responses but to continue to surround themselves with loyalists, resist solutions proposed by deep-state experts, and identify others to blame when things turn out badly. Credit-taking and blame-diversion are normal parts of democratic politics, but they are taken to extremes by democratic backsliders.

These contrasts have come into sharp relief with the crisis of our century: the COVID-19 pandemic. No world region has suffered more than Latin America in the pandemic. Poverty and inequality have exposed Latin America's populations to terrible risks; poorly funded public health systems have been overwhelmed with need. These structural

and long-term factors could be partially mitigated by solid governmental responses to the crisis. I will suggest that democratic backsliders in the region were especially inadequate in their responses.

Of course, politics and policy are only part of the story of why some countries have fared better than others in the face of a global public health threat. Many factors contributed to the toll that the pandemic has inflicted in any given country.⁵ What's more, national successes and failures have varied over the course of the pandemic. Though a few countries (New Zealand, Singapore) evinced strong policy responses and good public health outcomes throughout, others started strong and later faced stiffer challenges (South Korea, Japan, Argentina), and yet others improved markedly over time (the UK, Israel).

A common expectation is that autocratic regimes have some built-in advantages in a public health crisis.⁶ Not unlike the Southern Cone BA regimes that O'Donnell analyzed, institutionalized and bureaucratized autocracies like China's are expected to easily impose restrictions and secure compliance from their citizens. Democracies may be both more hesitant to impose such measures, given the economic pain that they inflict on citizens, and less able to secure compliance, given the greater individual freedoms that democracy allows. In a cross-national survey undertaken during the pandemic, four times as many US respondents as Chinese said they would be unwilling to give up individual rights during a major crisis (Alsan et al. 2020).

The draconian Chinese lockdowns in the pandemic's early months seemed to confirm these expectations, though China's performance also exposed problems resulting from a lack of transparency in a society with no organized opposition and no free press.

⁵ These include the age structure and the prevalence of comorbidities of the population; the particular strains of the virus in circulation; and poverty rates, which influence, among other factors, the degree to which a population will be able to comply with mobility-reducing measures and still meet its nutritional needs.

⁶ See Greer et al. 2020. Another factor expected to influence the quality of public policy in the pandemic is the degree of federalism or centralization of a country. See Bennouna et al. 2021. Laebens and Öztürk 2021 explain that, even in centralized systems, the drive to offset responsibility and blame for response to the crisis can induce governments to decentralize, as did Turkey's AKP-Erdoğan government in 2020, though rather weakly and fleetingly.

When considering regime effects on pandemic responses, the variation in outcomes under democracy suggests that the autocracy-democracy contrast is too coarse-grained. Some democracies successfully limited mobility by using heavy doses of public information campaigns and compensation for citizens' financial hits. New Zealand became Exhibit A in the case that autocratic heavy-handedness was not a requirement for a successful response.

Exhibit A for the case of catastrophic incompetence was the Trump administration in the US. Between March 2020 and the end of Trump's term, the administration had basically no central plan for dealing with the pandemic, preferring instead to turn responsibility (and blame) over to state governments. The result was among the highest death rates in the world—as of this writing, cumulatively, 177 deaths per 100,000 residents. Brazil's response was very similar, and produced an even higher death toll: 200 deaths per 100,000 Brazilians.

Of the 3.2 million estimated Covid deaths that the world has endured as of May 2021, the two largest democracies in the Americas—the US and Brazil—have contributed more than one million, far surpassing the weight of the two countries' populations.⁷

Comparing the US with China—the latter a country with 0.35 deaths per 100,000—the economist Alex Cukierman finds that “at least two thirds of the huge difference in COVID-19 related deaths between the democratic US and authoritarian China since April 2020 is due to centralized,

strictly enforced, sanitary measures imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) along with pandemic denial by President Trump and absence of a centralized sanitary policy in the US” (Cukierman 2021, 2).⁸

Clearly, there was no single *democratic* national response to the pandemic.⁹ The US response under Trump and the Brazilian response under Bolsonaro were strikingly similar. But was there a single would-be autocratic one? That would be too simple. Consider two middle-income developing countries that have undergone considerable democratic backsliding—Turkey and India. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has spent the past decade undercutting Turkish democratic institutions: the independent press, the judiciary, public service, the universities. Yet, as Laebens and Öztürk (2021) show, the AKP government initially pursued strong lockdown measures and avoided the worst outcomes. These authors note that the government benefited from a universal health care system that it had earlier put in place as well as a network of hospitals, part of the AKP's construction-driven development strategy.¹⁰ The second and third waves were less successful, and the government's lack of transparency about the magnitude of infections and fatalities took a toll on its support.¹¹

A very similar story could be told of the Indian experience under the would-be autocrat, and right-wing populist, Narendra Modi. India fared relatively well in the first wave of the pandemic. But the BJP government adopted a hubristic posture in late 2020 and early 2021, when the public was not discouraged from attending large political rallies or taking part in crowded religious festivals.

⁷ The US and Brazilian responses were so similar that the following, from a report in the journal *Science* about Brazil, written in April 2021, could just as easily describe the US response under Trump: “the federal response has been a dangerous combination of inaction and wrongdoing, including the promotion of chloroquine as treatment despite a lack of evidence. Without a coordinated national strategy, local responses varied in form, intensity, duration, and start and end times, to some extent associated with political alignments. The country has seen very high attack rates and disproportionately higher burden among the most vulnerable, illuminating local inequalities. . . While the initial spread was determined by existing socioeconomic inequalities, the lack of a coordinated, effective, and equitable response likely fueled the widespread spatial propagation” (Castro et al. 2021, 1).

⁸ Cukierman 2021 shows that the apparently higher death rate across democracies disappears if one controls for the percentage of over-65-year-olds in the populations.

⁹ On the variation of COVID responses among democracies, see Cheibub, Hong, and Przeworski 2021.

¹⁰ Laebens and Öztürk (2021, 1) note that perceptions of a successful response in the first wave gave Erdoğan a boost in approval ratings, “despite the highly polarized environment of Turkish politics.”

¹¹ Estimates based on excess deaths over the average in earlier years put the cumulative number of deaths at 142,000, three times higher than official Turkish statistics. See @CucluYaman, May 22, 2021, <https://twitter.com/CucluYaman/status/1396032246834999301>.

India's second wave has been a nightmare: high rates of infection, an overwhelmed health system, and shortages of key resources. In many societies, inequality has exposed the poor to greater health risks through indirect routes, such as higher rates of morbidity or reduced ability to stay indoors because of the need to work or secure food. In the horrific Indian second wave, the effects have been quite direct: poor people die because they cannot compete with the better off in the black market for oxygen. The same was true in a number of Latin American countries, including Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Argentina.

As the economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo explain, Prime Minister Modi bears significant responsibility. Like other would-be autocrats in federal systems, his government left the response to the states, but did not provide funding for aggressive state-led policies. The first lockdown came too soon and came with too little forewarning; the reopening also came too soon. In the midst of the world's most dire crisis, in May 2021, Modi's government "still appears reluctant to embrace a national strategy." (Banerjee and Duflo 2021).

A lack of transparency about the dimensions of the crisis was common to the Covid responses of would-be autocrats in Turkey and India. The lack of transparency is endemic in backsliding democracies, in which the independent press is harassed or curtailed.

Would-Be Autocrats and Pandemic Response in the Americas

Though the performance of backsliding democracies in the pandemic, world-wide, has been mixed, in the Americas it has clearly fallen short. This is not unexpected. One reason is that would-be autocrats have to come to power in highly polarized societies. Once in office, they strategically deepened partisan and ideological divides.¹² Their tactical instinct is to turn the pandemic into an opportunity for demagoguery,

claiming that their side is for freedom, the other for shutting people away in their homes. These leaders become the worst enemies of the public's health.

The second reason we expect a weak response has to do with would-be autocrats' disdain for policy expertise. Unlike BA leaders, as described by O'Donnell, many would-be autocrats favor loyalty over experience and over competence in high-level ministerial positions. This includes in key posts like health and finance ministries. In April 2020, Jair Bolsonaro fired his health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who had urged Brazilians to follow social-distancing guidelines and praised state governors—whom the president belittled for their aggressive responses. Anthony Fauci, the top US infectious disease official, barely managed to hold onto his job and was sidelined by Trump. These autocratic presidents preferred to message their ways out of the crisis, rather than take on the challenge of managing it.

Statistics bear out our low expectations. At the moment the pandemic hit, several presidents whom scholars identify as would-be autocrats held power in the Americas. A systematic study by Adolfo Martinez-Valle (2021) includes two of these countries (Brazil under Bolsonaro and Mexico under López Obrador) and four others—Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru—led by more traditional democratic politicians. These latter countries faced distinct challenges: widespread poverty in Peru forced many residents to venture outside of their homes during lockdowns; a governmental crisis in Chile delayed the solid policy package that the government eventually put in place; and the age structure of Argentina, with relatively more people over the age of 65, produced higher mortality rates among those who fell ill. As I write, Colombian protesters, police, and military officers are clashing on the streets, complicating the public health scenario in that country.

But when researchers focus on the quality of the governments' responses, countries led by would-be autocrats fell especially short. Figure 2 tracks the Oxford Government Response Index from March

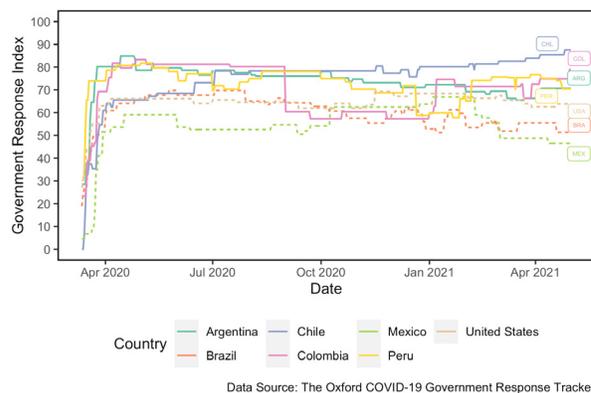
¹² Ideological or partisan polarization as a precursor to—and cause of—backsliding has been emphasized by many authors, in particular Milan Svolik (2020). See also the discussion in Haggard and Kaufman 2021.

2020 to April 2021.¹³ It follows the six countries studied by Martinez-Valle, plus the United States. Argentina, Colombia, and Peru maintained a strong policy response throughout. Chile’s policies improved but were less stringent than in the other three countries just mentioned. Brazil, Mexico, and the United States languished at low levels of policy effort.¹⁴ Despite the many challenges and tragic outcomes in their countries, Argentina, Colombia, and Peru implemented stringent policies earlier and maintained them for longer. Mexico and Brazil, which implemented policies later and with less stringency, had less success at reducing the mobility of their populations, costing lives (Martinez-Valle 2021, 34–35).

“did not deliver an effective communications campaign.” Worse, their presidents’ communications did more harm than good:

The presidents of Brazil and Mexico minimized the severity of the pandemic at its start. “You have to hug, it’s okay!” insisted López Obrador, the president of Mexico, at one of his press conferences. Even on March 22, 2020, he invited Mexicans to eat at restaurants and enjoy in public spaces. In March, Brazil’s president commented at a news conference: Obviously we have a moment of crisis, but it’s a small crisis. From my point of view, the issue of coronavirus is much more fantasy and is not so much the case as the great media spreads and propagates all over the world. (Martinez-Valle 2021, 35)

Figure 2. Oxford Government Response Index: Comparing seven countries, March 2020–May 2021



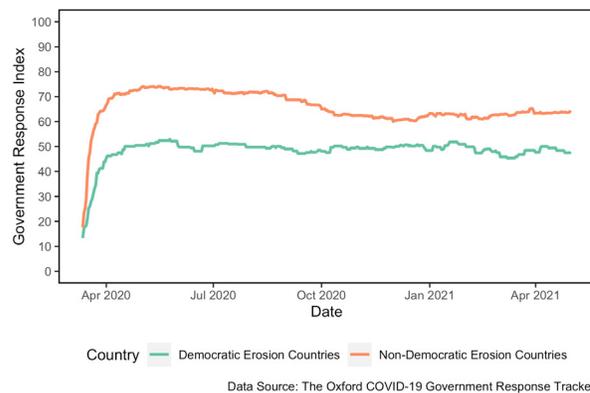
The pandemic response among the broader set of Latin American countries clarifies the picture of backsliding democracies falling short in the public health crisis. Figure 3 shows the average responses among countries often cited as backsliding democracies and the countries not typically so identified. The lower, green line is the average index of government pandemic responses in Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The upper, red line is the average index of responses in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.

Alongside the weak institutional response was a failure of these presidents to communicate to their populations the dangers of the virus and the need to abide by public health recommendations. Instead, they advocated bizarre treatments: hydroxychloroquine (Bolsonaro and Trump), beaming cleansing lights into the afflicted human body (with a bleach chaser—Trump), or folksy amulets like a four-leaf clover, US two-dollar bill, or prayer card (López Obrador) (Benounna et al. 2021, 15), Martinez-Valle notes that Brazil and Mexico, in contrast to Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru,

¹³ The Oxford index combines 13 measures of central governments’ policy responses during the pandemic, from school closures, to income support for those who cannot work, to the presence of public health information campaigns. See Hale et al. 2020.

¹⁴ Though US policies appear not to improve much with the transfer from the Trump to the Biden administrations, the data collectors explain that strong improvements were in fact registered in public health messaging and, eventually, in vaccine delivery.

Figure 3. Oxford Government Response Index: Average of democratic erosion countries vs. non-democratic erosion countries, March 2020–May 2021



Note: Democratic erosion countries include Brazil, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Non-democratic erosion countries include Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Columbia, Peru, Bolivia, and Dominican Republic.

The distinct reactions of autocratic, would-be autocratic, and democratic regimes to a global public health emergency tells us much about the advantages and vulnerabilities of each kind of regime. Full-blown autocracies can quickly impose big changes to their populations' daily patterns of life. But the lack of transparency and independent sources of information creates other difficulties, which ultimately may provoke stirrings of resistance from the population. Democracies are forced to show more deference to the public's resistance to painful measures. They can persuade and offer incentives for behavior that protects public health. They can expect much critical monitoring from the opposition and the press, which can also help them identify real problems as they arise.

Eroding democracies seem to distill the disadvantages facing the other kinds of regimes. They cannot force people to take up their campaigns; operating in polarized contexts, they have incentives to pander to people's fears and biases; and they often disparage and demean expertise. Large swaths of the world's population suffered a stroke of bad luck, then, when the pandemic coincided with assaults from within against their democracies.

Looking to O'Donnell for Insights into Twenty-First-Century Authoritarianism

Guillermo O'Donnell linked the emergence of bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes to a crisis of dependent capitalism: the failure of relatively advanced industrializing countries in South America to shift from the production of low-cost consumption goods to the production of consumer durables and to capital goods. Economic stagnation led to social conflict and political crisis and the emergence of a terrifying, but ambitious, kind of autocracy.

O'Donnell's narrative of economic roots of the BA regimes has been subjected to considerable critical scrutiny. Some noted that the BA states did not try to push the ISI project forward, but turned instead to a more orthodox, in some cases anti-industrial, set of policies. Others faulted him for excessive determinism, noting that some countries, especially Colombia, escaped the obstacles to vertically integrated ISI while avoiding military authoritarianism.¹⁵ Yet others questioned the generality of the sequence that O'Donnell observed and found that few countries beyond Argentina fell to dictatorship at relatively high levels of income and industrialization (Przeworski and Limongi 1997).

In our efforts to explain the recent autocratic threat, scholars have also searched for common economic causes. A populist backlash against neoliberalism and globalization, the trend toward heightened income inequality, the delayed effects of the Great Recession; all have been explored as possible structural causes of democratic backsliding (for a discussion, see Przeworski 2019).

As of yet we have little cross-national statistical evidence in favor of these structural accounts, though undoubtedly they are relevant in particular cases. For my taste, the genius of O'Donnell's analysis lay less in the origins story he told than in his insights into the nature and dynamics of harsh military dictatorships that were taking hold in South America. He grasped something very

¹⁵ These criticisms and others are laid out by contributors to Collier 1982. See in particular the chapters by José Serra and Albert Hirschman.

important, and not widely noticed, about these cruel regimes when he observed their ambitious goals of state building and societal transformation.

As we turn our analytical gaze to the threat of authoritarianism in our own day, perhaps we will look in vain for common structural or economic roots. We, too, may make more headway by exploring the logic and dynamics of these regimes. Since all elected governments push against the limits of democratic accountability to some degree, are the backsliders just different in that they do these things to an exaggerated extent, and with the cumulative effect of threatening the democratic regime?

The distinction between would-be autocrats who simply lust for personal power and those with societal ambitions may help explain some of the variation we detected in pandemic responses. That said, there is a list of leaders who pushed ruthlessly through democracy's constraints so that they could construct a different kind of society, only to end up gutting the state and exposing their populations to great harm.¹⁶

Returning to the legacy of Guillermo O'Donnell, he would urge us to ask the most important questions. What are the vulnerabilities of would-be autocrats? How do they fail? How do opposition politicians, judges, bureaucrats, civil-society leaders, election administrators, dissidents in their own parties, and voters stop democratic erosion? How do we reverse it?

Our great, departed, colleague had no illusions about democracy. He knew it to be uneven, to contain "brown areas" (O'Donnell 2004). He knew it too often fails to produce accountable government or the rule of law. But he would abhor the drift away from democracy undertaken by leaders in whom we have invested the highest authority and the greatest trust. He would want us to use our wits and efforts to strike back, for democracy.

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¹⁶ It includes, for instance, Hugo Chávez as well as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

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