Can Latin American Political Culture Help Save Democracy?

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In early 2023, Latin American democracies are either stagnant or eroding, while some have devolved into full authoritarianism. According to Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2023), there are three major reasons for this democratic erosion: coercive actors that remain from the authoritarian era, poor governance results, and hybrid states that fail to provide services and are often captured by powerful groups that do not wish to strengthen the rule of law or deepen democracy. These factors are indeed relevant and largely explain the underlying fault lines of the region's democracies. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2023, 157) also indicate that the three factors have "weakened citizens' commitment to democracy." This statement seems to suggest that in the earlier stages of the third wave of democratization, Latin American citizens had a stronger commitment to democracy. However, was that really the case?

Using survey data from the AmericasBarometer,[1] this article examines key components of the political culture of Latin American citizens and assesses the extent to which democratic political culture has taken hold in the region. Recent events in the Americas, such as the recurring support for authoritarian populists and citizens' storming of Congress and other government offices in the United States and Brazil, are reminders that not all citizens embrace democratic norms. Ultimately, the goal is to assess whether the current political culture of citizens can bolster or hinder democracy as it faces growing challenges in the postpandemic era.[2]

Different from the institutional and structural approaches, the political culture perspective examines the orientations (behavior, values, and attitudes) that citizens of any given country have toward the political system in which they live and the attitudes toward the role they play in the system (Denk, Christensen, and Bergh 2015). A twofold typology distinguishing between a democratic political culture from an authoritarian political culture is more common nowadays (Azpuru 2018) than the original threefold typology of Almond and Verba (1963), the pioneers of political culture research.[3]

Political Culture and Democracy

Robert Dahl (1998, 157), one of the most prominent political scientists of the 20th century, stated that the prospects for a stable democracy in a country are improved if its citizens and leaders strongly support democratic ideals,

[2] In this article I refer to democracy in general, not 'liberal democracy' because only three countries were considered liberal democracies in the region by the V-Dem 2023 Report (Papada et al 2023): Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay. Eleven countries were deemed as electoral democracies: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru. Five countries were considered electoral autocracies: El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela, while Cuba is classified as a closed autocracy. In its February 2023 report, the *Economist*'s 2023 Index of Democracy categorized three countries as full democracies (Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay), five as flawed democracies (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, and Panama), eight as hybrid regimes (Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru), and four as authoritarian regimes (Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela).

[3] In their 1963 study, Almond and Verba identified three types of political culture: parochial, subject, and participant.

values, and practices: "The most reliable support comes when these beliefs and predispositions are embedded in the country's culture and are transmitted, in large part, from one generation to the next. In other words, the country possesses a democratic political culture." He recounts that during severe and prolonged crises, the chances increase that democracy will be overturned by an authoritarian leader who promises to end the crisis and ends up dismantling the institutions of democracy (156); using examples from the 20th century, Dahl indicates that countries where democratic political culture prevailed were able to weather those crises and avoid the breakdown of democracy.

The argument that political culture alone can explain democratic development in any country has been disputed, and there is still an ongoing debate as to whether a democratic political culture precedes democracy or develops after the institutionalization of democracy (Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Przeworski, Cheibub and Limongi 2004). Nonetheless, the importance of a democratic political culture in old and in new democracies has been demonstrated by a wide range of scholars (e.g., Booth and Seligson 2009; Booth and Bayer Richard 2015; Claassen 2020; Dalton 2004; Diamond 1993; Inglehart and García-Pardo 1988; Inglehart 2003; Norris 2011; Pye 1991; Rose and Mishler 1996; Rose 1997; Seligson 2002; Welzel 2007).

Before examining relevant components of political culture in Latin American countries, it is important to make some clarifications. First, while the percentages vary from country to country, ideally a large percentage of the voting-age population in any country should have a democratic political culture. Second, democratic political culture goes far beyond voting in elections, or for what party people vote (any democracy needs at least one strong opposition party). Third, democratic political

culture is not related to ideology: citizens on any side of the ideological spectrum can have a democratic political culture or an authoritarian political culture. Finally, political culture is not automatic: political culture is acquired through the political socialization process, which begins within the family but is mostly learned throughout the different levels of schooling and lifelong interactions with other individuals or social groupings. Creating a democratic political culture is particularly difficult in countries with a long history of authoritarian rule, such as those in Latin America.

As indicated earlier, political culture can be broadly divided into two categories: democratic and authoritarian. There are four dimensions through which the contrast between both types of political culture can be clearly observed: adhesion to democracy and its principles, integration into the political process, knowledge of the political system, and respect for other citizens' rights. Table 1 shows the details for each of those dimensions.

The Dimensions of Political Culture in Latin America

Survey data can help assess how citizens of specific countries fit the dimensions displayed in Table 1. For the assessment of political culture in Latin America, this article uses one of the main regional surveys, the AmericasBarometer, which is part of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), based at Vanderbilt University. The AmericasBarometer surveys have been conducted every two years throughout Latin America since 2004.[4]

Adhesion to the Democratic Regime

Supporting democracy as a broad concept—as opposed to supporting authoritarianism—is an essential feature of individuals with a democratic

[4] The survey is also administered in the United States, Canada, and several Caribbean countries. But this article includes only 17 Latin American countries in the analysis. Venezuela and Haiti are not part of the analysis because data for those countries is not available in recent years. Neither the AmericasBarometer nor the other major regional survey, the Latinobarómetro, include Cuba because of the limitations of conducting a reliable survey under an authoritarian regime. The AmericasBarometer is a scientifically rigorous comparative survey. More information on the AmericasBarometer and its methodology can be found at the website "About the AmericasBarometer," https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/about-americasbarometer.php.

Table 1. Democratic vs. Authoritarian Political Culture

CITIZENS WITH A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL CULTURE	CITIZENS WITH AN AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL CULTURE
Adhesion to a democratic regime ➤ Give legitimacy to the principles and practices of democracy. ➤ Give legitimacy to democratic institutions and leaders.	**Inclination or sympathy towards authoritarian practices and leaders** ➤ Show support for regimes or leaders that violate democratic rules. ➤ Contempt for democratic institutions.
Integration in political processes ➤ Have interest in active participation to try to influence the decision-making process. ➤ Show behavior linked to democratic rules. ➤ Channel discrepancies with the elected authorities through democratic methods.	**Disaffection or low interest in political processes** ➤ Show little interest in participating in political processes. ➤ Disregard for the rules of democracy. ➤ Channel discrepancies with the incumbent authorities through undemocratic methods (which can include violence or intimidation).
Knowledge of the political system ➤ Citizens are aware of their political rights but also of their political obligations. ➤ Understand the functioning of the democratic regime.	**Little or weak knowledge about the political system** ➤ Low awareness of the rights and obligations of a citizen in a democracy. ➤ Little understanding of how the political system functions.
Respect towards the rights and beliefs of other citizens ➤ Show tolerance towards other people or groups that may have political ideas that are different. ➤ Consider the political rights of other citizens even if they disagree with them.	**Priority to self-rights, without taking other citizens into account** ➤ Intolerance towards other people or groups with different ideas. ➤ No consideration about the political rights of other fellow citizens.

political culture. Based on David Easton's (1965 and 1975) theory, it is now commonly acknowledged that there are at least three levels of support for the political system: the more diffuse (abstract) level, which refers to the support (or legitimacy) of democracy as an idea, which is contrasted with the more specific support for democratic institutions and the even more specific support for incumbent authorities.
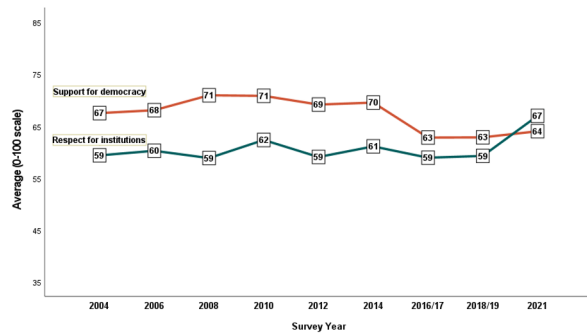
The standard question asked in surveys around the world to measure diffuse support for democracy has been dubbed the Churchillian question: "Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?" Figure 1 shows the results for Latin America between 2004 and 2021. In that figure and others here, respondents' answers have been recoded to a 0–100 scale for better understanding of the results. As observed in Figure 1, average support for democracy in the region was 64 points in 2021, having decreased 7 points since 2014; however, the drop is not as steep as it is sometimes portrayed in the media. In the breakdown by country, there is wide variation in the levels of support for democracy as a diffuse concept: Uruguay scores much higher than other countries (average of 77 points), whereas Honduras, Peru, and Paraguay score

under 55 points. But overall, the average support for democracy is still over the midpoint of the scale (the Appendix contains a table with the breakdown of results by country in 2021, for this and other measures used in this article).

Figure 1 also includes the results of a question that asks about the diffuse respect for political institutions: "To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)?" It is noteworthy that respect for political institutions was lower than the support for democracy between 2004 and 2014, but the gap narrowed in 2016, and respect for political institutions actually slightly surpassed the support for democracy in 2021 (67 points versus 64 points).

It is important to note that the assessment of political culture does not include satisfaction with democracy, which is a measure often highlighted by the media. Satisfaction with democracy is not a good measure because it is closely linked to presidential approval. In fact, there is a strong, positive correlation between satisfaction with democracy and support for populist presidents in Latin America in recent years, for example, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and Nayib Bukele among others (Azpuru forthcoming).
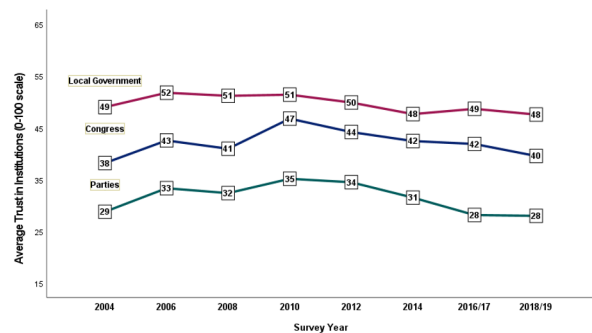
Figure 1. Diffuse Support for Democracy in Latin America, 2004–2021

AmericasBarometer data. Cases weighted by country.

Figure 2. Support for the Institutions of Representative Democracy in Latin America, 2004–2019

AmericasBarometer data. Cases weighted by country

The next level of support for the political system is more specific and refers to the actual institutions that sustain representative democracy. In political science it is common to measure the legitimacy of institutions by assessing the levels of trust that citizens have in them. Figure 2 shows the trust in three fundamental institutions of representative democracy: Congress, political parties, and respondent's local government.[5] The allotted space for this article limits the possibility of doing an in-depth analysis, but three takeaways are worth mentioning: (1) over the years, the local government obtains higher levels of trust than Congress and parties; (2) there was a slight decline in the trust in all three institutions after 2010; and (3) there was an 8-point gap between local government and Congress in 2019, but a 12-point gap between Congress and political parties. Examining specific results for the countries of the region (see Appendix) shows that in 2019, Peru had the lowest confidence in Congress, with 21 points, followed by Panama with 28. Colombia, Honduras, Paraguay, and Chile scored in the 30-point range. Most countries scored in the 40-point range, and Mexico in the 50-point range.

Whereas a democratic political culture does not necessarily require high levels of trust in institutions, it is worrisome for any democratic regime if its institutions fail to generate trust in the population. In contrast, there are some questions in the survey that clearly indicate a propensity to hold authoritarian values (a.k.a. an authoritarian political culture). One of those questions asks respondents the following: "Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress and govern without it?" This question gives the respondent two options, yes or no. A positive answer denotes support for unchecked presidential power and goes against the one of the main principles of democracy.

Figure 3 shows the results of this question in Latin America. Average support for unchecked presidential power increased 15 points between 2012 and 2021. Although average support was still fairly low, with 30 out of 100 points, it is still a worrisome outcome for democracy in the region. To contrast this result, Figure 3 also includes the trust in elections, an important feature in any democracy; it can be observed that trust in elections has decreased slightly since 2012 (4 points), but the gap with support for unchecked presidential power became narrower in 2021. The specific-country analysis shows variation

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[5] The question asks, "To what extent do you trust (institution)?" In 2021, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the AmericasBarometer was conducted on the phone instead of face-to-face. For that reason, a shorter questionnaire was employed, and several regular questions were not asked, including those referring to trust in institutions. Therefore, the results are available only up to the 2018/2019 survey.

in levels of support for unchecked presidential power (table in Appendix): citizens in El Salvador showed high levels of support for unchecked presidential power in 2021 (51 points), followed by Peru (44 points). At the other extreme, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay scored below 20 points. This suggests that citizens in El Salvador and Peru are more likely to have pockets of authoritarian political culture vis-à-vis other countries in the region.

Figure 3. Support for Unchecked Presidential Power (and Contrast with Trust in Elections), 2012–2021

AmericasBarometer data. Cases weighted by country.
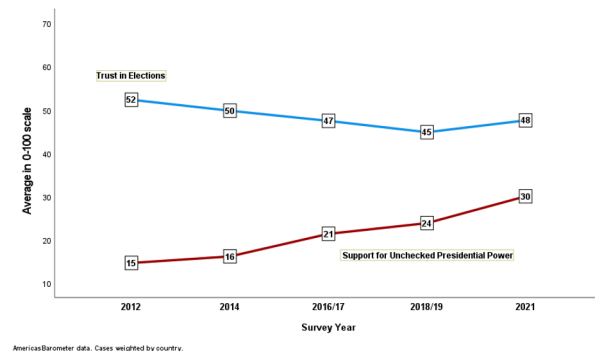
Another noteworthy finding is that the armed forces have been and continue to be, the institution that generates the highest levels of trust among Latin Americans. In the 2019 survey, average trust in the army was 58 points on the 0–100 scale, higher than any institution of representative democracy. In some countries, average trust in the armed forces was much higher: 71 points in Ecuador and in the 60-point range in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Brazil. Overall, trust in the army did not fall below 50 points in any country of the region. Although the army is not an institution of representative democracy and is less subject to criticism because it is not often in the news, the history of repressive military governments in the region during the 20th century makes this a concerning result.

Integration into Political Processes

Voting in an election is the typical way to assess whether a citizen is integrated into the political process, but as noted earlier, a democratic political culture is much more than voting. Surveys ask if a citizen has voted in an election, but the results vary from country to country, often influenced by other factors, such as whether voting is compulsory. In the 2019 AmericasBarometer survey, 73 percent of respondents in the Latin American region indicated that they voted in the previous presidential election in their respective country, but there is variation: over 80 percent of respondents said yes in five countries, while only 58 percent in Chile and 52 percent in Nicaragua answered positively.

Beyond voting, scholars have also used level of interest in politics to measure integration into the political process (Denk, Christensen, and Bergh 2015). In the AmericasBarometer survey, citizens are asked, "How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?" Another way to gauge on the integration into the political process is to ask whether respondents identify with a political party. Last, participating in peaceful protests is a political right and a way to show integration into the political process. Figure 4 shows the percentage of Latin Americans who between 2010 and 2019 (these questions were not included in 2021) reported having a lot or some interest in politics, that they feel affinity for a political party, and that they participated in a protest.

Interest in politics and affinity for a political party went hand in hand in the region between 2010 and 2014; between 31 percent and 36 percent of citizens in the region reported interest in politics and affinity for a political party. Starting in 2016, however, although the levels of political interest remained stable, affinity for political parties declined 10 points. By 2019, only 25 percent of Latin Americans indicated that they identified with a particular political party. There are differences between countries (see Appendix): citizens in Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Argentina expressed much higher levels of interest in politics (in the 40 percent range); at the other extreme, less than 25 percent of Guatemalans and Nicaraguans revealed interest. In terms of affinity for political parties, only Uruguayans passed the 40 percent mark (48 percent), and in contrast, in Peru and Guatemala fewer than

11 percent reported that they identified with a party. For participation in protests, regionally it has been stable but low, although it increased 2 percent in 2017 and 2019, reaching 10 percent.

Figure 4. Measures of Integration into the Political Process, 2010–2019

AmericasBarometer data. Cases weighted by country.
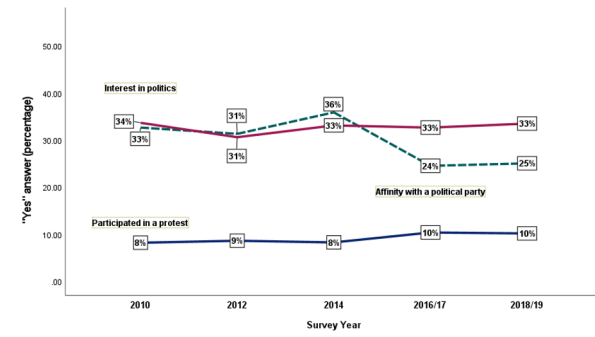
Knowledge of the Political System

There are few comparative questions that gauge citizens' knowledge of their political system because issues tend to be country specific. However, there is a more general question that surveys use to measure citizens' perception of their role in the political system (internal efficacy). More specifically, "You feel that you understand the most important political issues of this country. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?" Figure 5 shows the results from the AmericasBarometer survey in Latin America between 2008 and 2019 (question was not asked in 2021). There has been a notable increase in citizens' perception that they understand the main political issues in the region. While in 2008 around 39 percent of respondents reported that they felt they understood the issues, around 46 percent indicated this in 2019. In this question, there is not great variation between countries in the region; in most countries, over 40 percent of citizens reported that they felt they understood the issues. Only citizens in two countries scored under 40 percent (Guatemala and Paraguay).

Figure 5. Internal Efficacy in Latin America, 2008–2019

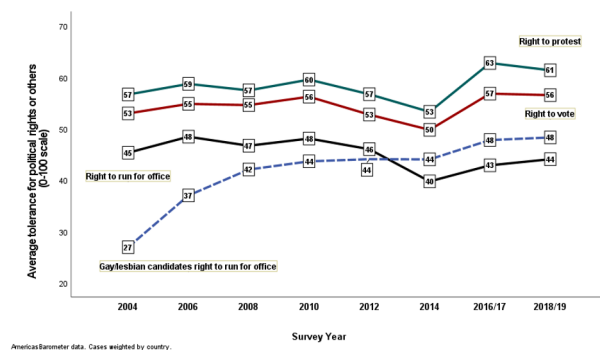AmericasBarometer data. Cases weighted by country.
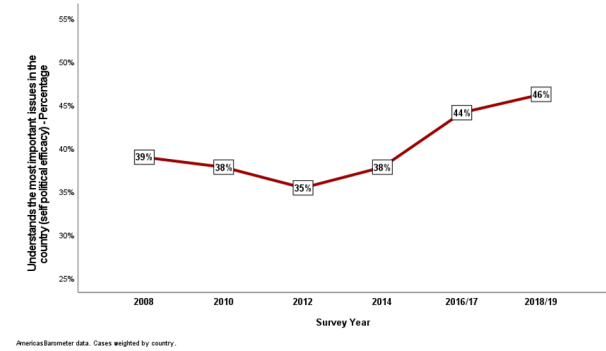
Respect toward the Rights of Others

The final dimension that can help measure the political culture of Latin American citizens is the tolerance they show toward the political rights of other citizens, especially those whom they disagree with. The AmericasBarometer includes a series of questions that ask the following: "There are people who only say bad things about (this country) form of government, not just the current (incumbent) government but the system of government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's: right to vote? conducting peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views? and running for office?" Figure 6 shows the results for that question between 2004 and 2019. Figure 6 also includes the results of a more specific question: "And now, changing the topic and thinking of "homosexuals", how strongly do you approve or disapprove of "such people" being permitted to run for public office?"

There is limited space to analyze in detail the results of Figure 6, but there are three major takeaways. First, Latin Americans are more open to agree with the right to protest than with the right to vote or run for office. Second, average tolerance toward others' participation in protests and voting remained fairly stable between 2004 and 2014 but increased in 2016 and 2019; on the contrary, tolerance for the right to run for office decreased after 2014 and recovered slightly by 2019. Third, it is notable that citizens are more willing to tolerate the right to vote than the right to run for office.

In terms of tolerance for the participation of gay or lesbian individuals as candidates, there is a clear positive trend in the region; acceptance climbed from 27 points (on the 0–100 scale) in 2004 to 48 points in 2019. Nonetheless, there are stark differences between countries: most Central American countries, Dominican Republic, and Paraguay have much lower tolerance toward the political rights of gay and lesbian candidates (they score in the 30-point range, while most countries score in the 50 or 60-point range. Uruguay has the highest score, with 74 points).

**Figure 6. Respect for the Rights of Others in Latin America, 2004–2019**

AmericasBarometer data. Cases weighted by country.

What Explains the Differences in Political Culture in Latin America?

A series of regression analyses on the different dimensions presented here show that in 2019, several variables were associated with variation in the type of political culture that citizens of Latin America display. Among the sociodemographic variables that help explain those differences, education stands out, as observed in Figure 7. Consistently, more education is correlated with higher diffuse support for democracy, higher perception of internal efficacy, higher tolerance for others, and higher integration in the political system.

Moreover, citizens with more education are also less likely to support unchecked presidential power: 30 percent of Latin Americans with no education agree with the statement that the president can close Congress when there is a crisis, 25 percent of those with full or some primary education or secondary education agree with that statement, but only 20 percent of those with full or some college or technical education agree. The differences between groups are statistically significant.[6]

Figure 7. Education and Political Culture in Latin America, 2019
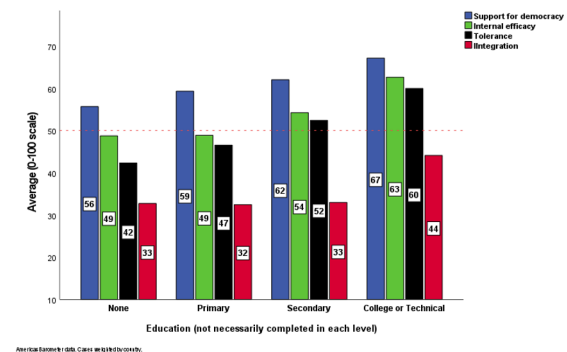
AmericasBarometer data. Cases weighted by country.

Conclusion: Can Political Culture in Latin America Save Democracy?

This article has shown that political culture in Latin America is a mixed bag, with some positive and some negative features. On the positive side, there is a higher percentage of citizens who indicate that they understand the main issues in their country (internal efficacy). Another positive finding is that the support for the political rights of some minorities has continuously and substantially increased since 2004, when the question on gay and lesbian candidates was originally asked.

Other features of political culture evaluated in this article are neutral (neither positive nor negative). In some of them there has not been much change over the years, or the downward

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6   For information on the methodology used, please contact the author. Other variables were included in the multiple regression model. Gender was not associated to any of the dimensions of political culture, but other sociodemographic variables and variables such as perception of the national economy or perception of corruption among public officials also turned out to be correlated in some cases.

trend is marked but not steep. The support for democracy as a diffuse concept has been on the decline in recent years, but the downward trend has stabilized since 2017.[7] With respect to levels of trust in the institutions of representative democracy, the integration in political processes (interest in politics or participation in protests), and the tolerance for the rights of others, the results have remained on the lower end of the 0–100 scale across time, and in some cases there has been some decline, but it has not been steep.

However, some of the findings discussed here are concerning. The increase in support for unchecked presidential power alongside the decline of trust in political parties and the decrease in the percentage of citizens who identify with specific parties are major red flags for the future of representative democracy that also open the door for populists who, using democratic means, end up undermining democracy.

It is important to note that, aside from the regional analysis, the overall results are particularly concerning in some countries where there are more negative than positive trends in the development of political culture. In other words, from the political culture perspective, democracy is at higher risk in some countries, even if it that is not the case regionally.

Finally, a silver lining from the analysis is that education can help strengthen democratic political culture and thus benefit democracy. Beyond increasing access to general education in the region, it is important to revisit specific programs of democratic education in the different countries of Latin America, so that when crises arrive, citizens seek solutions within the democratic framework rather than falling prey to the hypnotism of populists or the false claims of authoritarian leaders.

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[7] Using the same Churchillian question, the reports published by the AmericasBarometer (Lupu et al) in 2021 and by Latinobarómetro in 2020, coincide in their assessment of the decline in support for democracy in the region in recent years, but LAPOP shows stabilization since 2016. This is because both surveys use a different measuring scale to arrive at conclusions, and therefore their results on the percentage of citizens who support democracy are not the same. It is also noteworthy that, here, I use average support rather than percentages to arrive to conclusions about the Churchillian measure of support for democracy. In addition to the Churchillian question, Latinobarómetro uses another question to assess support for democracy.

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Appendix

Dimensions of Political Culture in Latin America by Country (2019-2021)

Country	Adhesion to Democratic Regime							Integration in Political Process			Knowledge of Political System	Respect for Rights of Others			
	Support for democracy	Respect for institutions	Trust in congress *	Trust in political parties *	Trust in local govern. *	Trust in elections	Executive justified to close congress	Interest in politics *	Affinity with a political party *	Particip. in protests *	Internal efficacy *	Right to vote *	Right to protest *	Right to run for office *	Right of gay / lesbian to run for office*
	(Average 0-100 scale)							*(Percentage)*				*(Average 0-100 scale)*			
Mexico	63.12	67.51	52.65	33.17	51.71	47.32	32.15	36.78	19.77	7.11	47.76	56.88	61.03	40.21	59.34
Guatemala	56.47	68.89	40.00	26.83	47.46	39.94	37.95	24.86	10.26	10.29	38.60	54.09	58.13	43.73	34.09
El Salvador	69.21	80.26	41.27	28.80	59.28	64.18	50.76	32.40	36.09	3.45	54.23	55.63	60.78	43.28	37.87
Honduras	52.98	61.88	34.56	24.84	54.77	28.34	26.46	24.68	27.08	8.06	42.04	56.29	62.27	44.85	35.76
Nicaragua	63.66	60.95	43.00	33.30	47.84	45.67	30.95	28.01	27.03	11.46	50.49	56.97	63.23	43.46	40.84
Costa Rica	68.07	76.82	41.36	27.77	54.79	56.73	32.16	42.52	19.93	10.21	54.17	62.17	66.87	43.96	55.63
Panama	60.78	69.20	28.32	22.38	36.09	48.84	32.15	29.94	31.56	9.20	50.00	54.22	61.80	42.66	31.68
Colombia	56.76	63.32	37.45	27.54	43.25	31.83	34.17	33.78	26.06	11.14	45.28	50.68	57.66	41.65	49.17
Ecuador	62.99	71.36	43.73	32.35	47.44	48.25	33.64	31.70	22.89	7.66	46.49	54.53	61.63	41.24	45.24
Bolivia	59.75	66.45	46.24	27.71	44.14	48.32	33.69	34.19	18.74	16.67	41.36	50.76	56.41	43.08	41.70
Peru	54.66	60.44	20.87	21.20	39.75	42.88	44.62	29.16	10.79	14.28	44.63	54.74	61.47	41.80	42.63
Paraguay	54.89	54.41	39.75	31.95	50.44	36.04	37.42	35.49	35.42	36.90	48.94	56.00	61.27	47.11	32.56
Chile	65.84	60.62	33.45	23.58	51.83	56.72	18.21	28.91	10.72	9.71	48.94	59.81	62.51	44.94	66.61
Uruguay	76.74	79.25	48.81	35.13	52.14	78.18	10.70	46.65	47.75	11.01	51.29	60.54	62.33	46.68	73.98
Brazil	65.53	57.05	39.39	22.85	41.36	37.93	25.39	28.19	23.37	10.62	40.48	60.02	61.84	47.38	66.32
Argentina	68.65	68.39	41.96	27.52	45.95	50.90	16.24	43.71	22.96	13.69	46.57	57.52	57.33	41.95	67.23
Dominican Republic	62.97	71.57	40.96	28.37	44.20	44.92	28.32	35.28	36.22	8.07	n/a	57.39	62.27	46.39	34.88
Regional Mean	*63.59*	*67.02*	*39.58*	*27.95*	*47.77*	*47.58*	*30.01*	*33.45*	*24.96*	*10.12*	*46.19*	*56.32*	*61.07*	*43.77*	*48.06*

*2019 AmericasBarometer survey. Other results are from the 2021 survey. //