



# DEMOCRATIC DECAY IN MEXICO AND LATIN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

## LA DECADENCIA DEMOCRÁTICA EN MÉXICO Y AMÉRICA LATINA

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### Abstract

*This article analyzes patterns of political regimes in Latin America in the 21st century, with some attention to Mexico. It documents a handful of cases democratic decline including Mexico in the last two decades, a large number of cases of democratic stagnation, and an absence of democratic deepening. Three factors have contributed to democratic stagnation and erosion: powerful actors that block democratic deepening; poor governing results that fuel dissatisfaction and pave the way for authoritarian populists; and "hybrid states" that violate citizens' rights, fail to provide security and quality public services, and are captured by powerful interests.*

**Keywords:** *Democratic Stagnation; Democratic Erosion; Hybrid States; Illiberalism; Level of Democracy.*

### Resumen

Este artículo analiza los patrones que han presentado los regímenes políticos en América Latina en este siglo, con especial atención en México. Documenta casos de decadencia democrática (México, entre otros), un gran número de casos de estancamiento democrático y ausencia de profundización democrática. Tres factores dan cuenta del estancamiento democrático: actores poderosos que impiden la profundización democrática, malos resultados de gobierno que alimentan la insatisfacción y allanan el camino para la emergencia de líderes populistas autoritarios, y "Estados híbridos" que violan los derechos de los ciudadanos, no brindan seguridad y servicios públicos de calidad y son capturados por intereses poderosos.

**Palabras clave:** Estancamiento Democrático; Erosión Democrática; Estados Híbridos; Iliberalismo; Nivel de Democracia.

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From 1990 until the early 2010s, the big challenge for democracy in Latin America was its mediocre quality in most countries. The region had only one consolidated fully authoritarian regime, Cuba. With few exceptions, democratic breakdowns seemed to be a thing of the past. Democracy eroded sharply in Venezuela after 1999, but between 1985 and 2010, it deepened in Brazil, by far the region's most populous country. The low quality of democracy in most countries was a concern, but the region was still living through its most democratic period ever. Of course, the region was highly heterogeneous in political regimes. It had only three or four democracies that reached a high level according to the V-Dem project (Costa Rica, Chile, Uruguay, and in some years Brazil), but authoritarian regimes were the exception.

Unfortunately, in recent years, this situation has eroded, contributing to the global decline of democracy. For the region as a whole, democracy is in worse shape than it has been since the late 1980s. Democratic stagnation with great deficits in the quality of democracy is the modal pattern, but the cases of marked change since 2002 point in a negative direction. Venezuela and Nicaragua now have full-blown, highly repressive authoritarian regimes, joining Cuba in this category. Democracy has eroded in Brazil and in Mexico, the region's two largest countries, and El Salvador has devolved to a competitive authoritarian regime under President Nayib Bukele (2019-present). No country in the region has experienced net meaningful democratic deepening since the Peruvian restoration of democracy in 2001, although Ecuador, in the aftermath of Lenín Moreno's 2017 presidential victory, recovered its mediocre level of democracy of the decades (1980-2006) before the presidency of Rafael Correa (2007-17).

In this article, we have three goals. First, we document this tendency toward regional democratic decline in the last two decades while also noting that the modal pattern is stagnation. Six countries including Mexico have experienced breakdowns or erosions during this time, and there have been no clear cases of democratic deepening to offset these declines. The combination of many cases of stagnation, several cases of erosion and breakdown, and no cases of marked deepening generates a regional pattern of decline.

Second, we conceptualize a phenomenon that we call democratic stagnation. These are democracies and semi-democracies that have important and persistent democratic deficits, and that over extended time have been unable to become more solid liberal democracies. In recent years, many scholars have written about executive takeovers and backsliding—a deeply important topic. Far fewer have written about an equally important topic: the inability of the vast majority of countries in the third wave to develop higher-quality democracies and the accompanying stagnation of the level of democracy, with major deficits.<sup>2</sup> Before it became a case of erosion, Mexico exemplified democratic stagnation.

Third, we argue that three factors have contributed to the great difficulty in deepening democracy and the widespread pattern of stagnations. First, powerful actors often including organized crime, the police, and groups that were part of the ruling coalition under antecedent authoritarian regimes block democratic deepening. These actors thwart the development of some of the defining features of high-level democracy: the even protection of rights for all citizens; a movement toward freer and fairer elections; an improvement in mechanisms that check executive power; and state policies bringing armed actors under civilian control. Second, poor governing results in most Latin American countries have fueled dissatisfaction with democracy, paving the way for authoritarian populists who win support by railing against a failed establishment. AMLO in Mexico, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Bukele in El Salvador are recent examples. Third, what we call “hybrid states” violate citizen rights, fail to provide citizen security and quality public services, and are partially captured by powerful state actors, politicians, and private interests that do not want to build more effective states based on the rule of law. Hybrid states combine some sectors of bureaucratic efficiency and innovation with others of corruption, patrimonialism, inefficiency, and authoritarianism. These three factors have generated decreasing citizen commitment to democracy in Mexico and many other countries. Resulting from these three factors, periods of democratic stagnation often serve as the prelude for backsliding.

<sup>2</sup> An exception is Mazzuca and Munck (2020).

## Regional Patterns

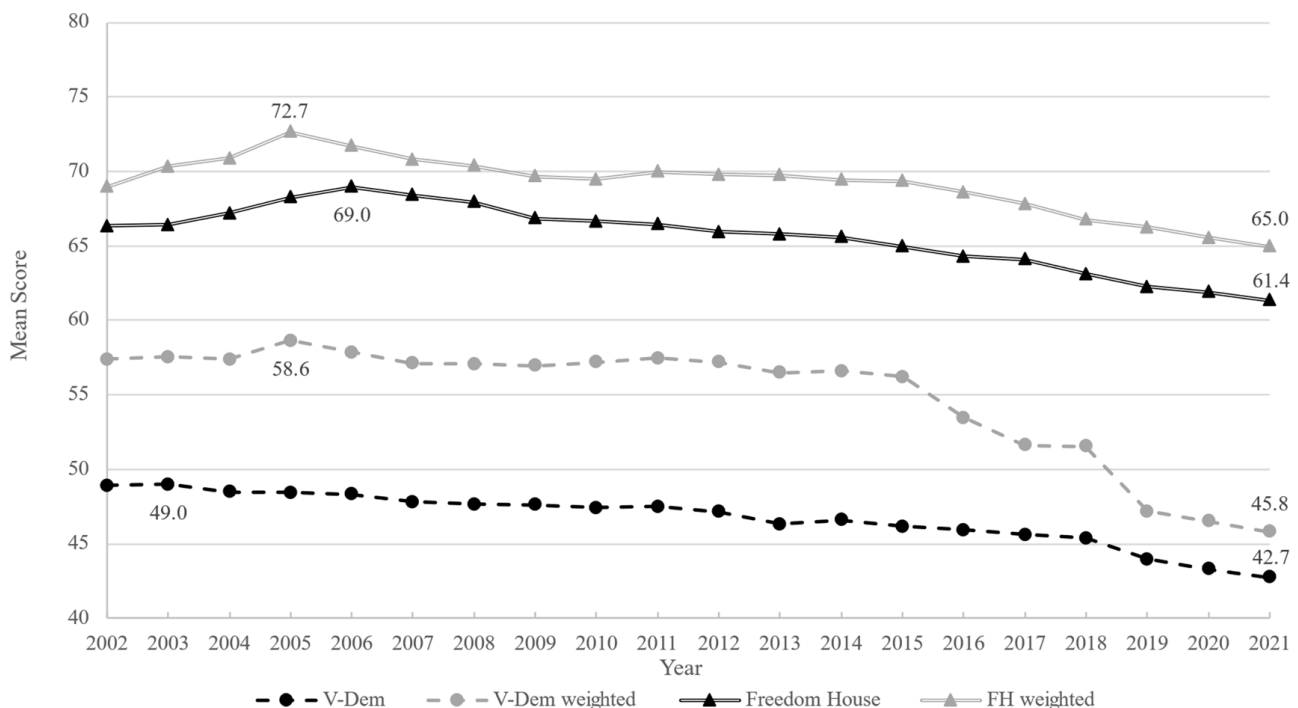
We use V-Dem Liberal Democracy scores and (secondarily) Freedom House scores to chart levels of democracy and processes of deepening, stagnation, erosion, and breakdown. They are a useful and widely employed short-cut for judging levels of democracy. The 67 questions that V-Dem uses for its Liberal Democracy index and the 25 questions that Freedom House uses for its 0 to 100 score tap the most important characteristics of liberal democracy.

Figure 1 shows V-Dem's average Liberal Democracy score for the twenty Latin American countries (rescaled in Figure 1 from 0 to 100) and Freedom House's average score on its 0 to 100 scale for 2002 (the first year it used that scale)<sup>3</sup> to 2021. On both scales, a higher score

shows a higher level of democracy. Figure 1 also shows the same information weighted by country population. Both of these leading measures show a worrisome if modest decline, starting in 2007 according to Freedom House and in 2004 according to V-Dem (in the unweighted data). Because the cases of erosion include the two largest countries, Brazil and Mexico, which together have more than half of the region's population, the decline is steeper using the weighted scores. The decline has been gradual, but it is cumulatively meaningful, from 59 in 2005 to 46 in 2021 in the weighted V-Dem scale, with declines of 6 to 8 points from the high score to the 2021 score on the other three indicators.

<sup>3</sup> This is why we use 2002 as the baseline for comparison with the current situation.

**Figure 1**  
**Latin American Trends in V-Dem Liberal Democracy and Freedom House scores**

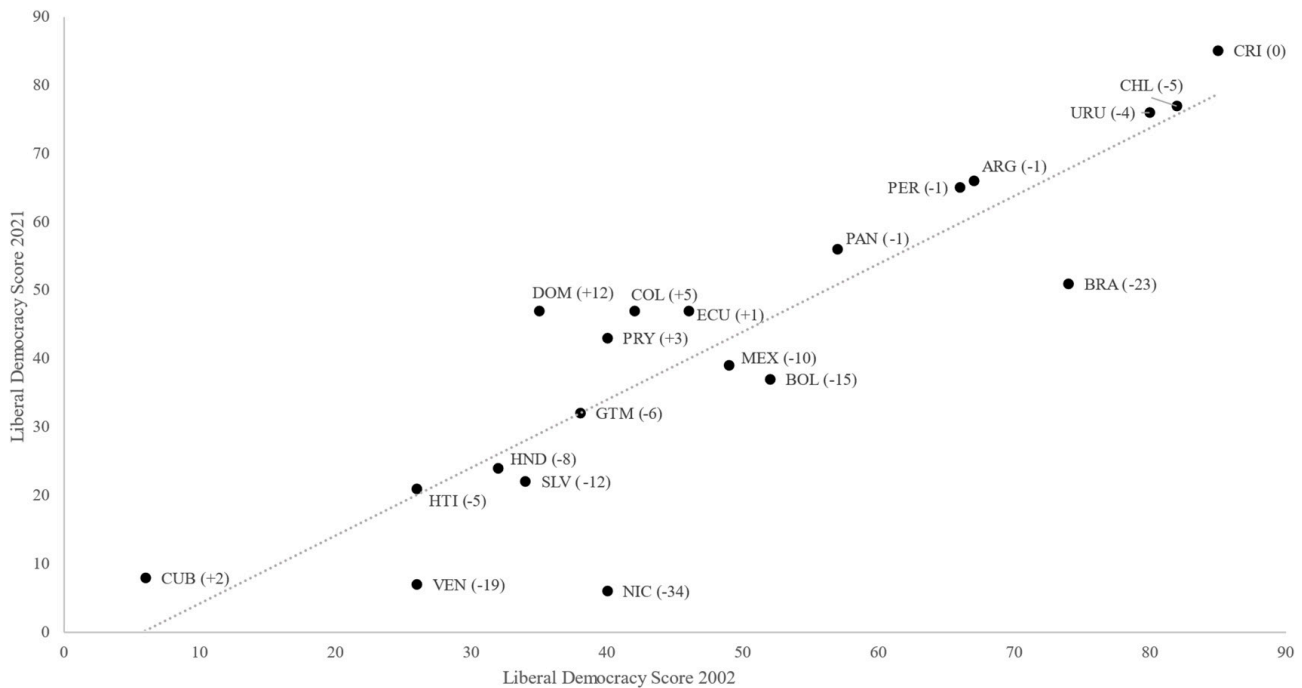


Sources: Prepared by the authors based on data from Coppedge *et al.* (2022) and Freedom House (2022). Population data from World Development Indicators (2022).

Note: Data labels show the highest and the 2021 data for each series.

These averages obscure great cross-country differences in both the level of democracy and change over the last two decades. Figure 2 shows V-Dem's 2021 Liberal Democracy scores (reindexed from 0 to 100) for the 20 Latin American countries on the vertical axis and the 2002 score on the horizontal axis, with the difference between the two score in parentheses.

**Figure 2**  
**V-Dem Liberal Democracy Scores, 2021 versus 2002**



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from Michael Coppedge *et al.* (2022).

Figure 2 shows the prevalence of cases of net (i.e., simply comparing 2021 with 2002) democratic stagnation and erosion and the almost complete absence of cases of democratic deepening. Six countries have eroded substantially (at least ten points on this scale). One (the Dominican Republic) improved by 12.5 points, and thirteen have shown little net change (less than 10 points). Freedom House shows very similar patterns, with the same number (six) of cases of decline of at least 10 points since 2002; only one case of deepening, Argentina; and the same number of cases (13) of little net change since 2002.

Latin America continues to have great diversity in political regimes. The region today has five categories of regimes (2021 V-Dem Liberal Democracy scores in parentheses):<sup>4</sup>

4 A cut point of 0.70 on V-Dem's Liberal Democracy index is a reasonable dividing line between fairly high-quality and medium-quality democracies. A cut point of 0.50 on this in-

1. High-level liberal democracies: Costa Rica (85), Chile (77), and Uruguay (76)

2. Mid-level democracies: Argentina (66), Peru (65), Panama (56), and Brazil (51). Recent events make Peru's democracy more precarious, whereas the inauguration of Lula da Silva in Brazil augurs well for rebuilding democracy.

3. Low-level democracies and semi-democracies: the Dominican Republic (47), Colombia (47), Ecuador (47), Paraguay (43), Mexico (39), Bolivia (37), Guatemala (32), and Honduras (24). All have huge democratic deficits. In Colombia, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, criminal organizations or militias either effectively rule or completely undermine democracy in many poor areas by killing and intimidating

dex is a reasonable dividing line between medium-quality democracies and low-level democracies or semi-democracies. Following V-Dem scholars, a score of at least 0.50 on the *Electoral* Democracy index can demarcate the boundary between semi-democracies and competitive authoritarian regimes.

opposition politicians, journalists, and human rights and opposition activists. They also bribe and intimidate judges, police officers, and military officers if they are involved in policing. Voting is neither free nor fair, and the protection of rights has severe problems. These extensive zones have subnational authoritarian regimes.

4. Competitive authoritarian regimes: El Salvador (22). These are regimes “in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents” (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

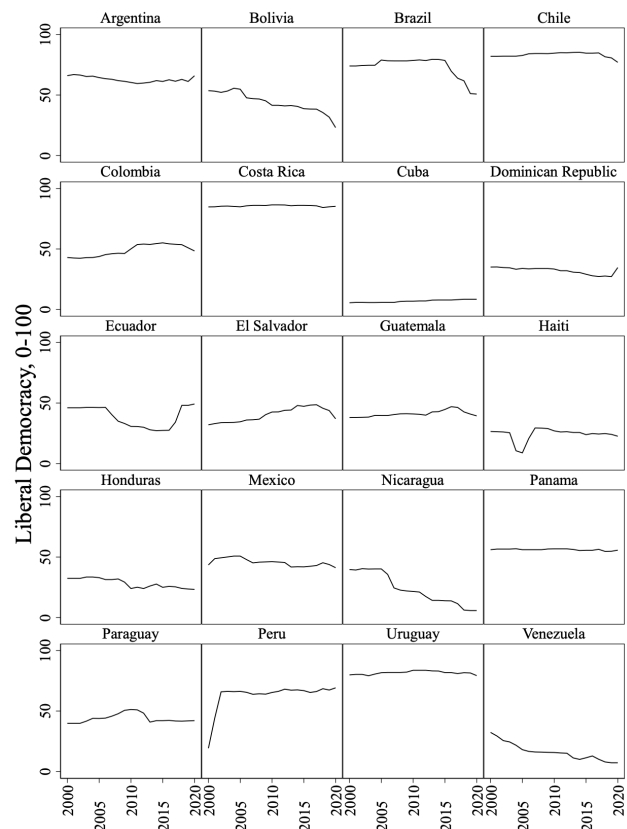
5. Closed authoritarian regimes: Haiti (21), Cuba (8), Venezuela (7), and Nicaragua (6). Haiti is close to a failed state; ilarge, dominate.

## Democratic Stagnations

Democracy is a political regime that has five characteristics: 1) free and fair elections for the legislature and executive; 2) nearly universal suffrage in today’s world; 3) a broad set of political and civil rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to organize, freedom against unjustified state violence, etc. 4) mechanisms of accountability that can check executive power; and 5) civilian control over the military and other armed actors. Democratic deepening is a process of enhancing at least one of these five defining characteristics of democracy—for example, making the exercise of rights more even—such that the overall level of democracy improves.

Figure 3 shows the individual trajectory of each of the 20 countries in V-Dem’s index of liberal democracy from 2000 to 2020. One characteristic of Latin American political regimes in this century is the prevalence of many semi-democracies and low- to mid-level democracies coupled with the almost complete absence of cases of deepening. Twelve countries in the region today are mid-level, low-level democracies, or semi-democracies. This is the modal pattern.

**Figure 3**  
**Trends in Liberal Democracy,**  
**20 Latin American Countries, 2000-2020**



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from Michael Coppedge *et al.* (2022).

Most of these cases can be called democratic stagnations, which entails three characteristics. First, it implies limited change in the level of democracy over a sustained period. Second, as we use the term, the regime has substantial democratic deficits. According to V-Dem, Sweden’s very high Liberal Democracy score has barely budged since 1971, but this is not an example of what we mean by democratic stagnation. Third, the regime must be a semi-democracy (perhaps experiencing periods of competitive authoritarianism), or a low- or mid-level democracy. Full blown authoritarian regimes can liberalize and become less authoritarian, but it does not make conceptual sense to discuss *democratic* stagnation of closed authoritarian regimes.

Stagnations deserve more attention both because of how prevalent they are and because they are usually the prelude to executive take-overs of democracy. Stagnation is a common

pattern in Latin America and in the third wave of democratization as a whole (Mainwaring and Bizzarro, 2020). Six Latin American cases, Argentina, Peru, Panama, Colombia, Paraguay, and Guatemala meet stringent operational criteria for democratic stagnations.<sup>5</sup> The Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Mexico also come close to meeting these stringent criteria. Bolivia and Honduras are not far from this pattern: they experienced breakdowns in 2019 and 2009, respectively. They recently re-established semi-democratic regimes in 2020 and 2022, respectively, whose level of democracy is close to what it was before the breakdowns. These regimes are not moving toward consolidation.

Democratic stagnation has occurred despite alternations in power involving very different partisan programs. In Mexico, the right (PAN, 2000-12), center-right (PRI, 2012-18), and center-left (MORENA, 2018-present) have all governed since the transition to democracy. Unlike some poor countries that had transitions to democracy during the third wave, Mexico is clearly wealthy enough to have built a solid democracy; its per capita GDP is far higher than the level that early democratizing countries enjoyed at the time of democratization.<sup>6</sup> Yet none of the four governments since the transition in 2000 has succeeded in pushing an agenda of democratic deepening.

Stagnation is not inevitable; effective policies can strengthen the democratic forces and roll back the forces that want to limit democratization, and social movements can generate pressures to deepen democracy. But the obstacles are difficult to overcome, and the record shows relatively few clear-cut success cases of building robust democracies in Latin America and in the third wave more generally.

### Thin Transitions, Powerful Old and New Authoritarian Actors

One factor that helps account for stagnations is the power of actors that limit deepening. The

great wave of democratization that began in Latin America in 1978 and ended around 2001 was wide, encompassing every country in the region except Cuba. This wave has been vastly more durable than previous ones in the region, but it was also thin. Powerful actors that previously supported authoritarian rule limited democratic deepening—for example, subnational authoritarian actors that remain powerful, police forces that are unreformed, or authoritarian successor parties.

To take the example of Mexico, a transition to democracy occurred at the national level in 2000, when the opposition, spearhead by Vicente Fox of the conservative PAN (National Action Party), won the presidency. Many scholars and practitioners were optimistic that Mexico could break from the past. But Mexico's process of democratization was negotiated between opposition parties and the PRI, which had governed at the national level from 1929 until 2000. The PRI remained in power in most states; until 2016, it always governed at least half of Mexico's 32 states, and in nine of the 32, the PRI *a/ways* governed until at least 2016 (Flores-Macías, 2018). In most states, it continued to govern in an authoritarian manner; the old authoritarian PRI shaped Mexico's democracy more than democracy transformed the old PRI. Most PRI-governed states remained subnational authoritarian regimes despite national level democracy (Gibson, 2012). Worse, the subnational authoritarian regimes have deeply influenced national level politics. The PRI returned to the presidency in 2012 and governed at the national level again until 2018. PRI collusion with organized crime reached new heights during this period. The PRI imposed limits to democratization at every stage. It remained a major force in the National Congress, sometimes limiting democratizing reforms, and it remains a major pillar of the labor movement, which has often inhibited democratization.

The political DNA of the current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-present), known as AMLO, comes from the same authoritarian stock. AMLO's early political career was in the PRI. He and other center-left leaders split from the PRI in 1989 to form a new party, the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). Some PRD leaders largely left behind the PRI's authori-

<sup>5</sup> The criteria are that 1) the 2021 V-Dem Liberal Democracy score is within 10 points of the 2002 score; 2) the gap between the highest score and the lowest during the 2002-21 period is less than 15 points; 3) the regime did not break down or turn into a clearly authoritarian regime; and 4) the 2021 V-Dem Liberal Democracy score is below 70.

<sup>6</sup> On the greater propensity of more economically developed countries to sustain democracy, see Knutsen and Dahlum (2022).



tarian style, but many including AMLO did not. As Mayor of Mexico City (2000-05), AMLO refused to accept some unfavorable judicial rulings, and his administration was rocked by a high-profile corruption scandal. He narrowly lost the presidential bid in 2006 and decisively lost in 2012, and both times, he dubiously claimed that he was the victim of electoral fraud. The impact on Mexicans' confidence in elections was deleterious. As president, he has had an illiberal governing style, railing against democratic checks and balances and deriding his opponents as self-interested obstacles to the public good (Sánchez Talanquer, 2020; Sánchez Talanquer and Greene, 2021; Petersen and Somuano, 2021). His proposal to elect members of the Instituto Nacional Electoral on partisan lines runs the risk of weakening judicial independence. Mexico's V-Dem liberal democracy score under AMLO has fallen from 0.468 to 0.368, the eighth steepest decline of any of the 122 democratically elected Latin American presidents since 1978.

In most states, the police, judiciary, and state-level electoral authority remained largely unreformed. These are key actors in democratic deepening and rollbacks. One of the shortcomings of democracy in Mexico and in most of Latin America has been a great unevenness of citizen rights, with large-scale problems of police violations of the rights of the poor (Brinks, 2008; González, 2020). A failure to reform the police in the context of increasing violence by organized crime led to growing police violence and corruption. A similar problem occurs in Brazil, where the police committed a staggering 6416 homicides in 2020, 79% of whom were Black (Reuters, 2021);<sup>7</sup> the comparable number for the UK in 2020 was five police homicides. In countries including Mexico in which the military has assumed a major role in combatting organized crime, the military, too, has become a major violator of rights (Flores-Macías and Zarkin, 2021; Viana, 2021).

Mexico is not an isolated exception. In every country in the region, some of the forces that supported authoritarian rule have remained powerful political actors. In many countries, authoritarian successor parties —parties established by high-level leaders of the previous

authoritarian regime but that function under semi-democratic or democratic regimes— have remained strong electoral contenders, often regaining the presidency. Since 2000, authoritarian successor parties have ruled in Bolivia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and Paraguay. As James Loxton (2018) has argued, the electoral success of authoritarian successor parties is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it gives these forces a seat at the table, making it less likely that they will support attempts to overthrow the regime. On the other, it gives them the capacity to thwart democratizing reforms.

The problem in Latin America is not limited to erstwhile authoritarian actors. In addition, new authoritarian actors or new actors that attempt to block further democratization have emerged. The most important have been electorally successful new illiberal parties and leaders on both the left (Venezuela from 1998 on, Bolivia from 2005 on, Ecuador from 2006 on), and the right (Brazil from 2018 on), and an amorphous center (El Salvador since 2019), and increasingly powerful transnational criminal organizations. In some countries including Brazil, Evangelical churches have also been key parts of the coalition that favors democratic rollbacks. We discuss illiberal presidents and parties later.

Transnational criminal organizations are not new actors in Latin America, but their political power has expanded greatly in the last few decades, coinciding roughly with democratization. In Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Colombia, they have had a devastating impact on democracy at the local level, often with deep consequences for politics at the national level. In many places, criminal organizations limit or destroy the possibility of free and fair elections by coercing candidates and voters. They undermine the democratic rule of law, and they systematically violate citizens' rights. Their counterpart has been right-wing militias that sometimes emerged to fight criminal organizations (or in Colombia, to fight left-wing guerrillas) but that usually also act as competing criminal organizations. The right-wing militias have crippled democracy as much as the traditional criminal organizations. In many countries, criminal organizations and right-wing militias are no longer content to pay off and corrupt the police,

<sup>7</sup> Data in the article is from the Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security.

prosecutors, and judges; they now run for political office to directly control public policy (Trejo and Ley, 2020: 252-278).

Even before AMLO became president, Mexico's regime showed a modest deterioration over the last two decades because of the growing penetration of criminal organizations in politics; a sharp escalation in violence directed against social movement leaders, politicians and political candidates, and journalists; and the deterioration of the protection of citizen rights, especially in areas in which criminal violence and state repression are rampant. This deterioration was very uneven. Municipalities and neighborhoods with a high presence of criminal organizations and a large number of extrajudicial state and paramilitary organizations have de facto subnational authoritarian regimes. Increasingly, criminal organizations have ruled some neighborhoods, municipalities, and even states (Trejo and Ley, 2020; Schedler, 2014).

The net effect of the powerful actors that are either authoritarian or that want to limit democratic deepening is that democratization gets stuck at low to medium levels. Except during the Trump administration, international support for democracy and sanctions against authoritarian regimes helped limit the number of coups. But international actors are better positioned to prevent outright coups than they are to help deepen democracies.

Thinking about the set of actors that hold back or attempt to reverse democratization poses useful questions for building a strategy of deepening—something that has not been much on the radar screen of democratic governments or of scholars. How can democrats nudge along some of these actors? How can they contain others and perhaps relegate them to political irrelevance? With occasional exceptions here and there, democratic governments have not built conscious overall strategies for deepening democracy.

### Poor Governance Records

A second factor that has conspired against building deeper democracies and has made some countries vulnerable to erosions at the hands of illiberal presidents has been generally disappointing governance records. The governance records vary greatly across countries, but the median performance in most areas of central concern to citizens has been mediocre or worse. Mexico is a clear example.

Table 1 shows Latin American countries' average growth rates since 1997, the Gini index of income inequality, the homicide rate, and the Worldwide Governance Indicator for control of corruption in the most recent year. On these highly important indicators, the variance across the twenty Latin American countries is huge, but the median country fares poorly.

**Table 1**  
**Indicators of Governance in Latin America**

	<b>Annual per capita GDP growth (%)</b>	<b>Homicide Rate</b>	<b>GINI Index</b>	<b>Control of Corruption Index (2020)</b>	<b>Rule of Law Index (World Rank)</b>
Argentina	0.4	5.3	42.3	-0.12	56 <sup>th</sup>
Bolivia	1.8	7.0	43.6	-0.76	129 <sup>th</sup>
Brazil	1.0	22.5	48.9	-0.34	77 <sup>th</sup>
Chile	2.4	4.8	44.9	1.15	32 <sup>nd</sup>
Colombia	1.8	22.6	54.2	-0.18	86 <sup>th</sup>
Costa Rica	2.6	11.2	49.3	0.78	31 <sup>st</sup>
Cuba	2.9	5.0	-	-0.13	n.d.



**Continue Table 1**

	<b>Annual per capita GDP growth (%)</b>	<b>Homicide Rate</b>	<b>GINI Index</b>	<b>Control of Corruption Index (2020)</b>	<b>Rule of Law Index (World Rank)</b>
Dominican Republic	3.5	8.9	39.6	-0.68	94 <sup>th</sup>
Ecuador	0.8	7.8	47.3	-0.54	92 <sup>nd</sup>
El Salvador	1.4	37.2	38.8	-0.59	95 <sup>th</sup>
Guatemala	1.5	17.5	48.3	-1.10	109 <sup>th</sup>
Haiti	-0.1	6.7	41.1	-1.32	132 <sup>nd</sup>
Honduras	1.4	36.3	48.2	-0.86	126 <sup>th</sup>
Mexico	0.5	28.4	45.4	-0.85	113 <sup>th</sup>
Nicaragua	2.0	7.9	46.2	-1.25	131 <sup>st</sup>
Panama	3.2	11.6	49.8	-0.51	71 <sup>st</sup>
Paraguay	1.3	6.7	43.5	-0.87	96 <sup>th</sup>
Peru	2.8	7.7	43.8	-0.49	87 <sup>th</sup>
Uruguay	1.8	9.7	40.2	1.42	25 <sup>th</sup>
Venezuela	-	49.9	44.8	-1.56	139 <sup>th</sup>

Notes: GDP per capita growth measured in constant 2015 US dollars for 1997-2021. For Cuba, growth is calculated for 1997-2020 because the WDI did not show data for 2021.

Homicide rate reports the number of intentional homicides per 100,000 people in 2020 for most countries. For Bolivia, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, data are from 2019; for Haiti and Peru, from 2018; Venezuela, from 2017; Cuba, from 2016.

Gini index data are from 2020 for most countries; for El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama, data are from 2019; Guatemala and Nicaragua, from 2014; Haiti, from 2012; Venezuela, from 2006.

Sources: Prepared by the authors based on data from World Bank (2022).

Most economies have grown at a sluggish rate over the last generation; the record of the three largest economies, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, is dismal. Latin America is perhaps the world's most violent and its most unequal region. Public security has been a huge problem in many countries. In 2022, El Salvador (1<sup>st</sup>), Honduras (4<sup>th</sup>), Venezuela (6<sup>th</sup>), Mexico (13<sup>th</sup>), Brazil (16<sup>th</sup>), Colombia (18<sup>th</sup>), and Guatemala (19<sup>th</sup>) had among the 20 highest homicide rates in the world (Statista, 2022a). Measured by the homicide rate, the nine most dangerous cities in the world and twelve of the most dangerous thirteen are in Latin America (Statista, 2022b). As is widely known, Mexico's homicide rate jumped sharply after President Calderón declared war against the cartels and militarized the fight against them. The staggering death toll because of killings by criminal organizations, state agents, and paramilitary groups in Mexico since 2007 far exceeds the number of killings and dis-

appearances by even the worst of the southern cone dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Sadly, in several other countries, too, democratization coincided with sharp increases in crime.

With a growing number of exceptions, the social science literatures on criminal organizations and democracy have generally not been well integrated, but Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Colombia, and Guatemala, among other cases in Latin America, have shown that this is a profound theoretical gap: where criminal organizations rule, often with complicity from some state agents, there is no democracy. Quite to the contrary, barbaric forms of subnational authoritarianism prevail. Likewise, where massive state repression attempts to combat criminal organizations, democracy at the local or state level fails. In part because of the massive viola-

<sup>8</sup> The Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda estimates that 93,000 people were disappeared between 1964 and 2021. Cited in Calderón *et al.* (2021: 10).

tions of rights and crushing of democracy exerted by criminal organizations, state agents, and paramilitary groups, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, among other countries in the region, have an extremely differentiated patchwork of subnational political regimes, ranging from quite democratic in some places (mainly some middle class and wealthy zones of cities and states with better public security) to brutal authoritarianism in others. High social inequalities and traditional gaps in citizenship, with poor Black Brazilians and poor indigenous Mexicans enjoying far fewer de facto democratic rights, buttress these deep inequalities in the exercise of citizenship.

Only three Latin American countries rank among the world's top fifty in the World Rule of Law Index: Uruguay (25<sup>th</sup>), Costa Rica (31<sup>st</sup>), and Chile (32<sup>nd</sup>), and only one other, Argentina (56<sup>th</sup>), is in the top 70 (World Justice Project, 2021). For a country with its level of development, Mexico fares abysmally, ranking 113<sup>th</sup>. High-profile corruption scandals have plagued most Latin American democracies and semi-democracies. The Worldwide Governance Indicator for control of corruption is based on a wide range of expert and citizen surveys. Scores are in standard deviations above or below the world mean in a given year. Seventeen of the twenty countries, all but Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica, have worse-than-average scores. Again, Mexico has a dismal score for a country at its level of development, 0.85 standard deviations below the world mean in 2020. High profile corruption scandals have frequently delegitimated establishment parties and created space for illiberal populists who claim that they will sweep away the entrenched rogues. President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-2022) is an example. The leftist Workers' Party (PT), which governed from 2003 to 2016, became tarnished after the Car Wash corruption scandal and after its poor economic management led to a bruising recession starting in 2014. The party suffered large setbacks in the 2016 municipal elections and a large loss in the number of party identifiers. But the conservative establishment was also deeply embroiled in corruption, and after it impeached leftist President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and took the reins of power, it was not able to fix the economic crisis or conceal its own corruption. In the 2018 presidential election, voters turned against both

of these establishment options and elected Bolsonaro, whose extremist views and tiny party made him a quasi-outsider despite his 27 years as a member of congress. Often, as in Bolsonaro's case, these illiberal populists quickly get ensnared in their own corruption scandals.

The end of the great commodity boom around 2012 and Covid-19 added new problems to the already difficult governance agenda facing the region. The years of the commodity boom, roughly 2003 to 2012, were good for most Latin American countries. Many economies grew at robust rates, poverty dropped significantly in many countries, and several countries reduced long-standing seemingly intractable inequalities. As a generalization, the period since around 2012 has reversed or halted those salutary trends. The last three years, marked by the Covid pandemic, have witnessed declines in production and employment, major setbacks in education, and increases in poverty and inequality. The year 2020 showed the greatest ever recorded economic contraction in the region in 120 years of data.<sup>9</sup>

For a few decades, Latin American democracies and semi-democracies showed surprising resilience in the face of generally mediocre governance records. However, citizens eventually tired of poor governing performance and sought something different. Poor governance records were important factors in the electoral victories of the authoritarian presidents who presided over executive takeovers in Venezuela in 1998 and Nicaragua in 2006, and the erosions in Brazil, Mexico, and Ecuador (2007-17). Likewise, the democratic erosion in El Salvador since 2019 is difficult to imagine without the mediocre or worse governance results it experienced for a long time, under both right-wing and left-wing governments.

### Hybrid States, Stagnant Democracies

Hybrid states combine pockets of efficiency and democracy-respecting behavior with other, usually much larger pockets of inefficiency and authoritarian behavior. For example, the Brazilian state is good at providing security in most wealthy parts of the city of São Paulo, but poor

<sup>9</sup> For copious documentation, see CEPAL (2022). The data on the economic contraction is on p. 18.

at providing security in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Its provision of public education at the primary and secondary levels is deficient in most of the country, especially most poor areas, but sectors of the state bureaucracy have designed, championed, and implemented salutary reforms at the national level (Rich, 2019; Taylor, 2020). Hybrid states are very deficient at some of what they should do, but they also exhibit areas of competence and solidity. States do a lot of things in modern societies. They are charged with providing internal security and protecting country borders. They provide education and infrastructure, health care and housing in many societies, and safety nets (pensions, unemployment insurance, etc.). In democracies, the judicial system is charged with upholding citizen rights, and the judiciary and other state agencies are primarily responsible for what Guillermo O'Donnell called horizontal accountability (1994). Unfortunately, most Latin American states are deficient at most of these tasks.

Three decades ago, O'Donnell (1993) called attention to great territorial heterogeneity in how states function in most of Latin America: efficiently and relatively democratically in what he called "blue zones," almost always middle class and wealthy areas; and inefficiently and in authoritarian fashion in "brown zones," usually poor areas. Since O'Donnell wrote these pioneering works, most Latin American states have changed significantly in some ways but without shedding their hybrid character. Most Latin American states have gotten substantially larger, and social spending grew considerably in many countries. Between 1990 and 2020, taxes as a share of GDP increased by 40%, from 15.6% to 21.9% of GDP for Latin America and the Caribbean (OECD *et al.*, 2022: 22). Some state agencies in some countries have pioneered important innovations including conditional cash transfers and participatory budgeting, but many remain quagmires of inefficiency and corruption, often captured by politicians, state officials, and powerful private interests (Taylor, 2020; Geddes, 1994).<sup>10</sup> In countries with the highest penetration of organized crime, some state agencies including often the police and sectors of the judiciary collude with criminal groups.

Low state quality in most of Latin America has conspired against democratic deepening. With weak police and judicial investigative capacity and often collusion between police and non-democratic actors, crime and corruption rarely get punished, generating citizen responses that range from fury to political apathy and cynicism. Increased social spending has generally not produced commensurate improvement in human well-being. Under democracy, far more Latin Americans go to school, but the quality of public education generally remains poor. Even countries with good public health systems (e.g., Brazil) were not up to the task of managing the brutal Covid-19 pandemic. All of this has helped discredit establishment parties and open the way for populist outsiders.

As is true of governance records, average state quality varies greatly across Latin American countries. States in Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay generally function well, as is suggested by the low homicide rates and good scores for the Worldwide Governance Indicator for Control of Corruption and the World Rule of Law Index in Table 1 above. However, there is a considerable gap between these three countries and the rest.

## The Illiberal Wave

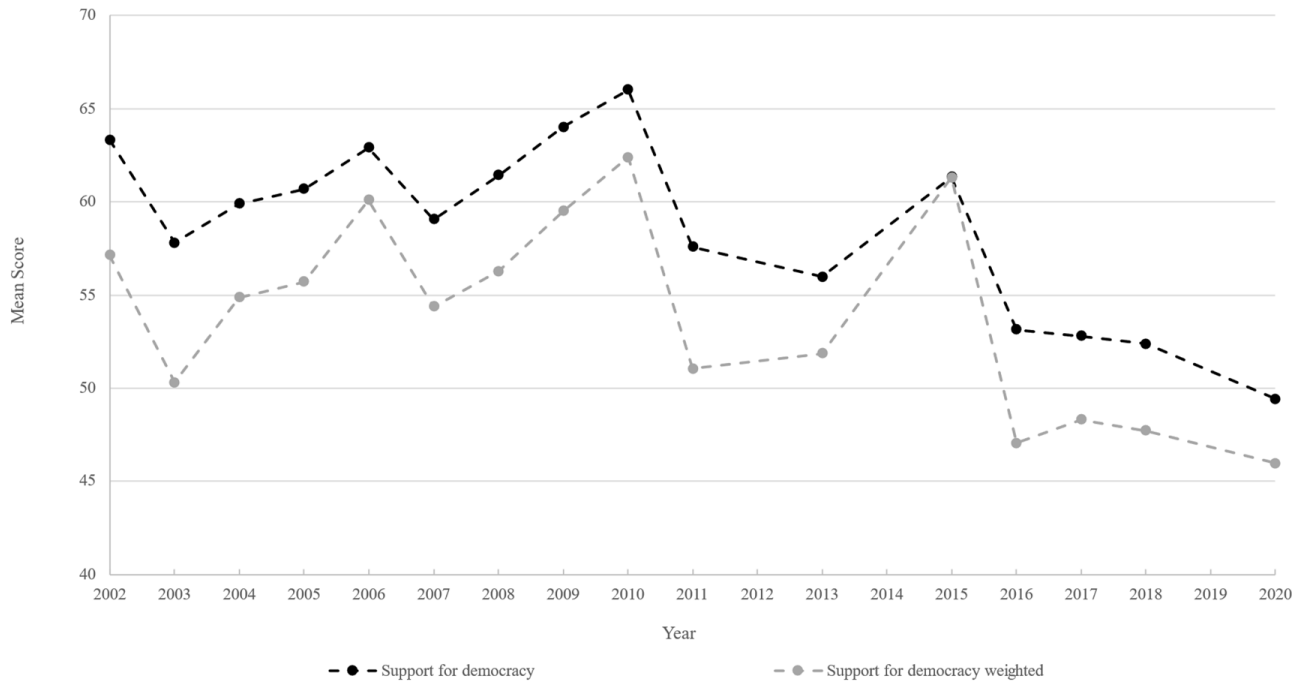
The combination of powerful establishment actors and criminal networks that oppose democratic deepening, poor governance records in most of Latin America, and hybrid states has prevented democratic deepening in most of Latin America. It has also contributed to a decreasing citizen commitment to democracy, as Figure 4 documents. The trend bears a resemblance to the regime trends in Figure 1.

The regional averages presented in Figure 4 hide considerable fluctuation within countries, documented in Figure 5. Such fluctuations are important because democratic breakdowns via executive takeovers and deep erosions of democracy require one more ingredient: illiberal presidents who purposefully undermine democracy. Absent illiberal presidents, democracy in the region has not deepened, but nor has it sharply eroded.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For similarities in Africa, see Metz McDonnell (2020).

<sup>11</sup> Brazilian democracy initiated a trend towards erosion in the absence of an illiberal president, mainly as a result of the

**Figure 4**  
**Citizen Support for Democracy in Latin America, 2002-2020 (Latinobarómetro)**



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from Latinobarómetro (2022).

Note: Percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement “Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government,” for 18 Latin American countries. Latinobarómetro data on support for democracy does not include Cuba and Haiti, and there is no data for the Dominican Republic in 2002 and 2003.

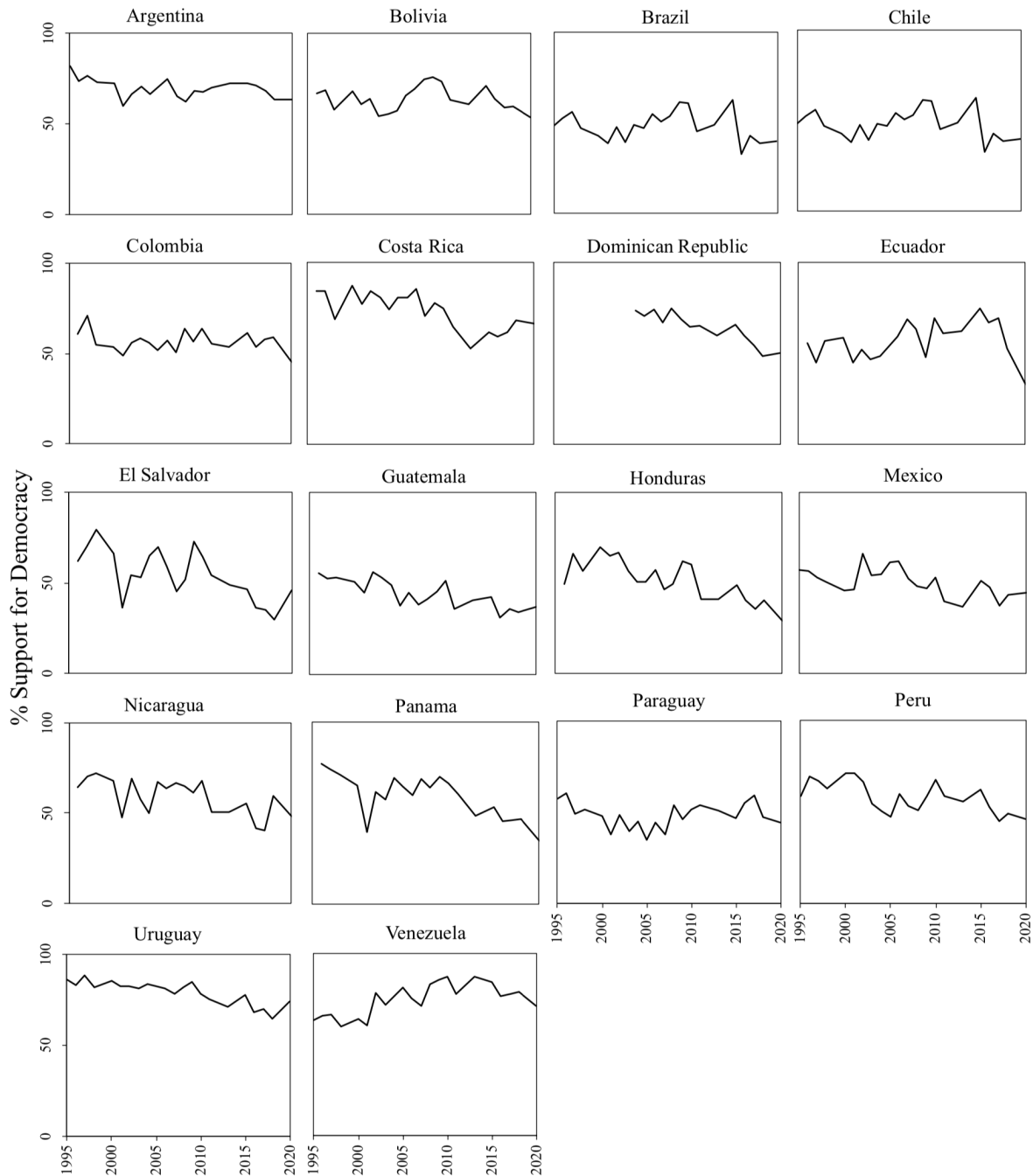
questionable impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, but what initially appeared to be a short-lived trend accelerated with the election of President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. We are hopeful that President Lula will help restore democracy in Brazil, but Bolsonarismo remains a very powerful force.

As noted in Figure 5, most Latin American semi-democracies and democracies avoided democratic breakdowns and erosions in the 1980s and 1990s, the first two decades of the third wave. Over time, however, Latin American voters tired of political systems that failed to give them what they needed and wanted. In large numbers, they turned against the establishment parties and in many countries voted for populists who promised to govern for the people and against the establishment. Hugo Chávez’s election in Venezuela in 1998 marked the beginning of the left turn in Latin American politics. The left tide included some presidents who fought to deepen democracy (e.g., Ricardo Lagos in Chile, 2000-06, and in some ways Lula da Silva in Brazil, 2003-10), but it also included illiberal populists who led a new wave of democratic erosions and breakdowns, including

Chávez in Venezuela, Correa in Ecuador, Morales in Bolivia, and Ortega in Nicaragua. The left tide crested when the commodity boom ended, but anti-establishment sentiment did not disappear; quite to the contrary, as economic growth and social progress slowed, the populist temptation flourished. Most party systems in the region continue to be marked by high electoral volatility, high distrust, and low partisanship, optimal conditions for the demise of establishment parties and the rise of populists.

The election of the authoritarian right-winger, Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil, and of center-left populist López Obrador in Mexico, both in 2018, reinvigorated the populist wave. They were preceded by the right-wing populist Jimmy Morales in Guatemala (2016-20) and followed by Nayib Bukele in El Salvador in 2019, who rapidly captured the courts after his party’s landslide vic-

**Figure 5**  
**Citizen Support for Democracy in 18 Latin American Countries, 1995-2020 (Latinobarómetro)**



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from Latinobarómetro (2022).

Note: Percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government." There is no data for the Dominican Republic before 2002.

tory in the congressional elections of 2021, and by leftist Pedro Castillo in Peru in 2021. The anti-establishment sentiment and widespread citizen frustration with their governments led to explosive social protests in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colom-

bia, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela, and elsewhere in the last few years. Now, with leftist presidents in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru, and Lula's presidential victory in Brazil in October 2022, another left turn is well

under way, but with governing conditions far more difficult than during the commodity boom.

Whereas the international political environment of the second half of the 1980s through around 2010 was largely supportive of democracy in Latin America, that is less true today. The huge expansion of China's trade and investment in Latin America gives authoritarian leaders an alternative to developed Western countries that might impose democracy, human rights, environmental, or labor standards. The US is less solidly committed to supporting democracy in Latin America than it was in the past. The illiberal right in the US, including former President Trump, Steve Bannon, and Tucker Carlson, enthusiastically embraced Bolsonaro and gave him an example of how to attempt to overturn an electoral defeat. The Trump administration prioritized blocking immigration from Central America and Mexico over bolstering democracy, and the contemporary Republican Party is unlikely to reverse that priority. The parlous state of most Latin American economies today adds to the difficulties of building deeper democracies, though it also adds to the difficulty of consolidating authoritarian regimes.

## Conclusion

Although Latin America is still living in a more democratic time than it did before the third wave began in 1978, these are darker times for democracy than the region has seen since around 1990. The modal pattern in the region is stagnation with deep democratic deficits, but since the turn of the century, almost all of the cases of marked change in the level of democracy have involved erosion or breakdown. Democracy has eroded in Brazil, Mexico, and Bolivia. El Salvador has devolved into a competitive authoritarian regime, and Venezuela and Nicaragua have become full-blown, highly repressive authoritarian regimes.

Three factors have contributed to the widespread pattern of democratic stagnations and have increased the incidence of erosion and collapse. First, erstwhile authoritarian actors that want to limit democratization remain powerful and block deepening, and relatively new authoritarian actors, most importantly organized crime and right-wing militia groups, often radically undermine democratic rights. Second, in many

countries, mediocre governing performance in economic growth, inequality, public security, corruption control, and other salient issues have fueled citizen dissatisfaction, paving the way for recurrent waves of illiberal presidents who attack democracy, sometimes successfully. Third, the inefficient, authoritarian, and often corrupt agencies within hybrid states have directly limited democratic deepening and have also fueled discontent with democracy. All three of these problems are highly visible in Mexico. In turn, these three factors have triggered decreasing citizen commitment to democracy in many countries including Mexico.

Democratic stagnation facilitates the rise of illiberal presidents who rail against the system. Again, López Obrador in Mexico is an illustrative example—but far from the only one; Bolsonaro in Brazil and Bukele in El Salvador are also examples. These illiberal presidents sometimes succeed in dismantling democracy, and they sometimes fail. When they fail, the political regime has reverted to the semi-democracies and low- to mid-level democracies that have been the modal pattern. Charting ways to overcome these hurdles and build better democracies is one of the great challenges for the region today.

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