Latin American Democratic Resilience and Political Polarization in Comparative Perspective

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Presented at the American Political Science Association, Los Angeles, September 1, 2023

Abstract

Us vs Them political polarization in Latin America has been rising since 2000 in keeping with global trends, but faster than world averages since 2015. Comparative research shows that not only are political divisions growing around the world but also that, once a society becomes divided into mutually antagonistic political camps (i.e. pernicious polarization), democratic erosion is likely to ensue. The article examines dynamics of political polarization and its consequences for democracy in the region in light of global trends. A new concept and framework of democratic resilience argues that the degree of agreement in four critical arenas influences a democracy's capacity to withstand, adapt or recover from external stressors and polarizing agents, without succumbing to pernicious polarization and democratic decay. These arenas are the boundaries of community membership, the concept of democracy, the terms of the social contract, and levels of inequality, which themselves become the fault lines of polarization when agreement on them is absent or weak.

Introduction

Us vs Them political polarization in Latin America has been rising since 2000 in keeping with global trends, but faster than world averages since 2015. Comparative research shows that not only are political divisions growing around the world but also that, once a society becomes divided into mutually antagonistic political camps (i.e. pernicious polarization), democratic erosion is likely to ensue (Somer, McCoy, Luke 2022). Yet the deepening polarization to autocratization path is not the only path that countries can take. This paper addresses Latin America in comparative perspective to determine whether the dynamics of political polarization in Latin America follow or diverge from global trends. It posits a framework of democratic resilience as agreement in four crucial arenas to be able to withstand or adapt to stressors without succumbing to pernicious polarization or losing its democratic qualities.[1]

Following my previous coauthored work, I define political polarization as a process of simplifying politics, leading toward a division of society into two mutually antagonistic camps (Somer & McCoy, 2018). This simplification takes binary forms such as the frame of "people vs. elites", or "illiberal vs. liberal," and may combine with other values such as nationalist versus cosmopolitan, religious vs. secular, or urban vs. rural. Political polarization needs a political expression, whether that is a partisan or ideological identity or an attachment to (or rejection of) a particular leader or movement. Thus, it may be expressed as Liberal vs Conservative party identity, but could also be an identity with or rejection of an idea or person, such as pro- or anti-Chavista or Peronist or Fujimorista.[2]

[1] The broader framework on democratic resilience and fault lines of polarization is elaborated in a book manuscript in progress with Murat Somer, *Depolarizing Politics: Preventing and Overcoming Pernicious Polarization*.

[2] As the Introduction to this volume and authors such as Samuels and Zucco (2018) and Carlos Melendez (2022) describe, the affective dimension of polarization may not include a strong political bond with a group, but only a negative sentiment in opposition to a party, leader, or even the entire political class or "establishment".

This conceptualization of polarization is a process-oriented one rather than a spatial one measuring attitudinal distance between ideological or issue preferences among citizens or political parties, or measuring the degree of dislike of political opponents (affective polarization), as discussed in the Introduction to this volume. My conceptualization includes an important identity component as well as emotional responses of hostility and perceptions of threat, but also includes the grouping of ideological or issue preferences within political camps.[3] Thus, identities and issue positions become increasingly "bundled" as reinforcing interests into separate political camps.

I am particularly concerned with pernicious polarization – the extreme end of that progressive simplification of politics into two binary camps with negative consequences for democracy. Under severe polarization, mutual distrust and antipathy lead to a break-down of communication and an unwillingness to compromise. Eventually each side sees the others as an existential threat that needs to be vanquished and prevented from holding power. There is thus a two-way relationship between democracy and polarization: extreme polarization can *produce* democratic crises, government dysfunction and paralysis, and erosion in the quality of liberal democracy. But a democratic crisis and erosion can also be the *source* of polarization over who and what is threatening the democracy, and, sometimes, even over the concept of democracy itself. In fact, it often produces a feedback loop: Polarizing conflicts lead people to hold zero-sum perceptions and perceive mutual existential threats from the other camp to their way of life or to the nation. These perceptions in turn incentivize democracy-eroding practices by incumbents as well as opponents. Disagreements may manifest in polarization over democracy itself (either its desired nature, or perceptions of the Other's threat to democracy) and further intensify polarization *and* backsliding.

[3] For further elaboration of this approach see (McCoy, 2023; McCoy et al., 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019).

This article seeks to explore the nature and consequences of political polarization in 21st century Latin America in a framework of democratic resilience. It draws on a variety of data sources to illustrate potential vehicles for more precise assessments in the future, given the limited data availability at present to place Latin America in comparative perspective. Part I assesses the extent of political polarization in Latin America over time using data from the Varieties of Democracy Institute. Part 2 then proposes a framework and definition of democratic resilience to explain a country's vulnerability to and ability to respond to challenges of democratic governance without succumbing to pernicious polarization and democratic decay. It posits that absence or weakening of agreement on one or more of the four arenas of resilience makes a country vulnerable to stressors and polarizing agents, during which those arenas are then transformed into fault lines of polarization. Part 3 discusses the fault lines of polarization in Latin America and the particular vulnerability of polarization over formative rifts. Part 4 examines illustrative survey data to examine voter polarization in each of the four fault lines. Part 5 analyzes the consequences for democracy and identifies four patterns of polarization and democratic erosion or stability in the region.

Political Polarization in Latin America and the World

There is not a single measurement for my macro-level process-oriented conceptualization, but for comparing countries here I will first turn to V-Dem's political polarization measure, which asks experts to rank the degree of hostility between political camps in a society. A second variable, "polarization of society," measures the extent to which differences in opinions on major political issues result in major clashes of views and polarization in the society. Thus, the Political Polarization variable includes affect – hostility and antipathy between political groups, and the "extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions. Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces." The Polarization of Society variable seeks to assess divisions in opinions on major issues facing society, and thus is

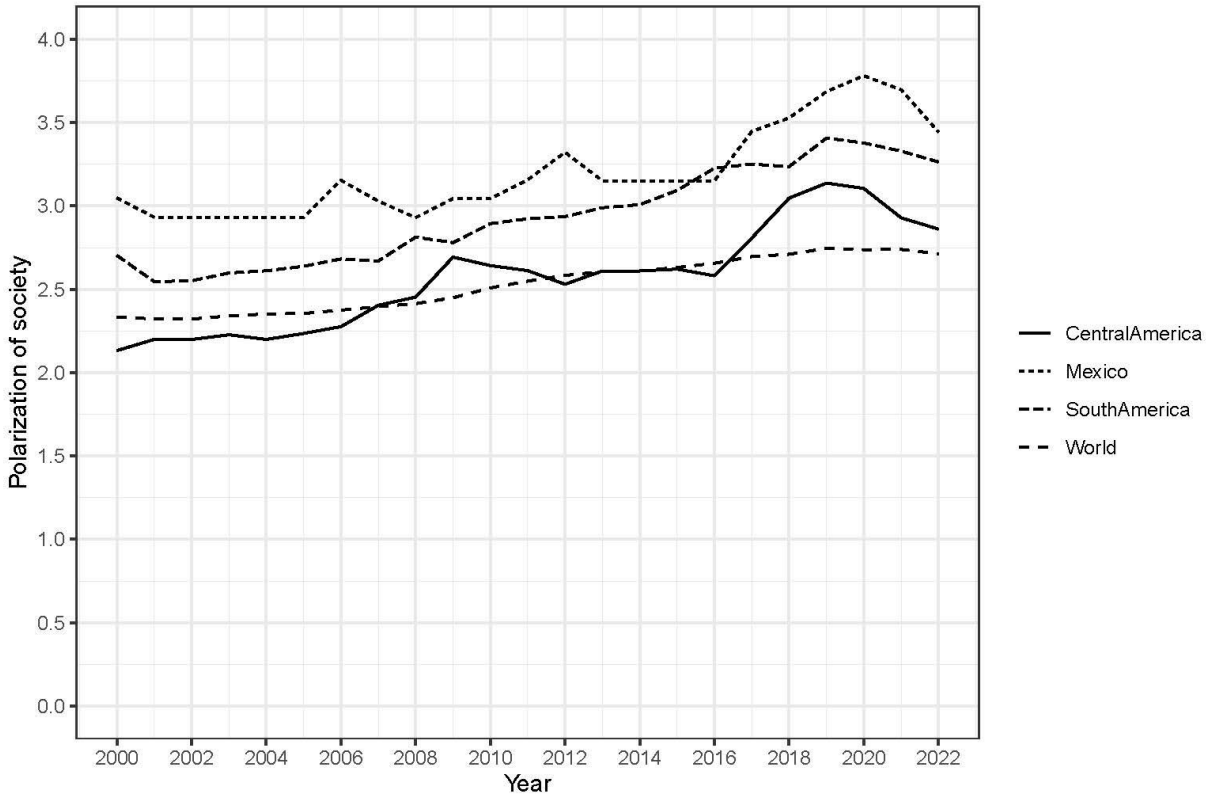
closer to "idea" or issue polarization. We will refer to this variable as Issue Polarization in the discussion below. These variables attempt to capture in some sense the notions of affective and ideological polarization as described in the Introduction to this volume, but they take a macro-level view, assessing the system as whole – elites and masses, and the extent of divisions into incompatible blocks, rather than the spatial unidimensional measures of polarization as distance on policy preferences or antipathy measured at the individual level with direct survey questions.[4]

Latin American polarization measured by these two variables, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, is generally above world averages and very high in the last decade. For Polarization of Society (Figure 1) – the more issue-based variable available only since 2000 – we see South America and Mexico consistently above world averages and Central America surpassing world averages only in 2017. Dramatic changes in expert perceptions of this indicator have occurred recently in Mexico and Central America as they rose steeply and then fell somewhat after 2020. The decline came under very different circumstances: in Mexico during the administration of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), whose popularity continues high despite controversy, in Honduras after the election of Xiamora Castro ending a controversial Hernandez presidency and representing a successful transfer of power to a leftist government, and in Nicaragua where severe repression is stifling expression of dissent.

[4] V-Dem uses expert opinion, rather than public opinion surveys or other types of "objective" measures. As such, it has drawbacks of potential evaluator bias and retrospective reevaluations. Nevertheless, the methodology attempts to correct these biases in several ways explained here (XXXXX). And it is the only globally comparative measure over time of the concept I wish to measure (back to 1900), allowing for comparison across time and space. I use these measures as an approximation, and complement with historical qualitative analysis and additional datasources.

Figure 1. Polarization of Society (issue-based) by Subregions and World, 2000-2022

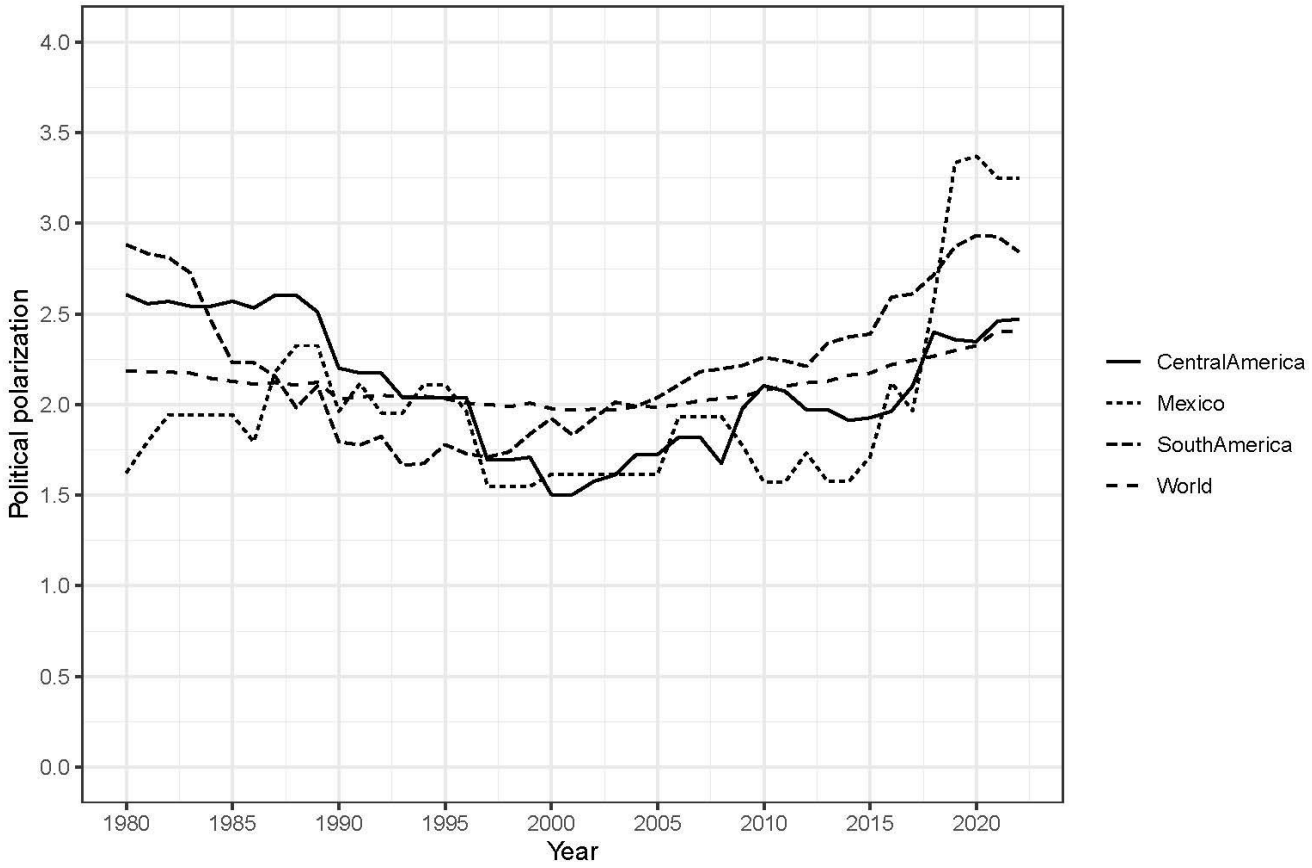
Source: Varieties of Democracy database, V13.



On the other hand, Figure 2 depicts the more identity-based variable of Political Polarization, indicating an Us vs Them antipathy and extension into social relations. It rose quickly in Mexico during the Lopez Obrador presidency in Mexico, and in South America increased fairly consistent throughout the 21st century, while Central America roughly followed world averages.

Figure 2. Political Polarization(identity-based) by Subregions and the World, 2000-2022

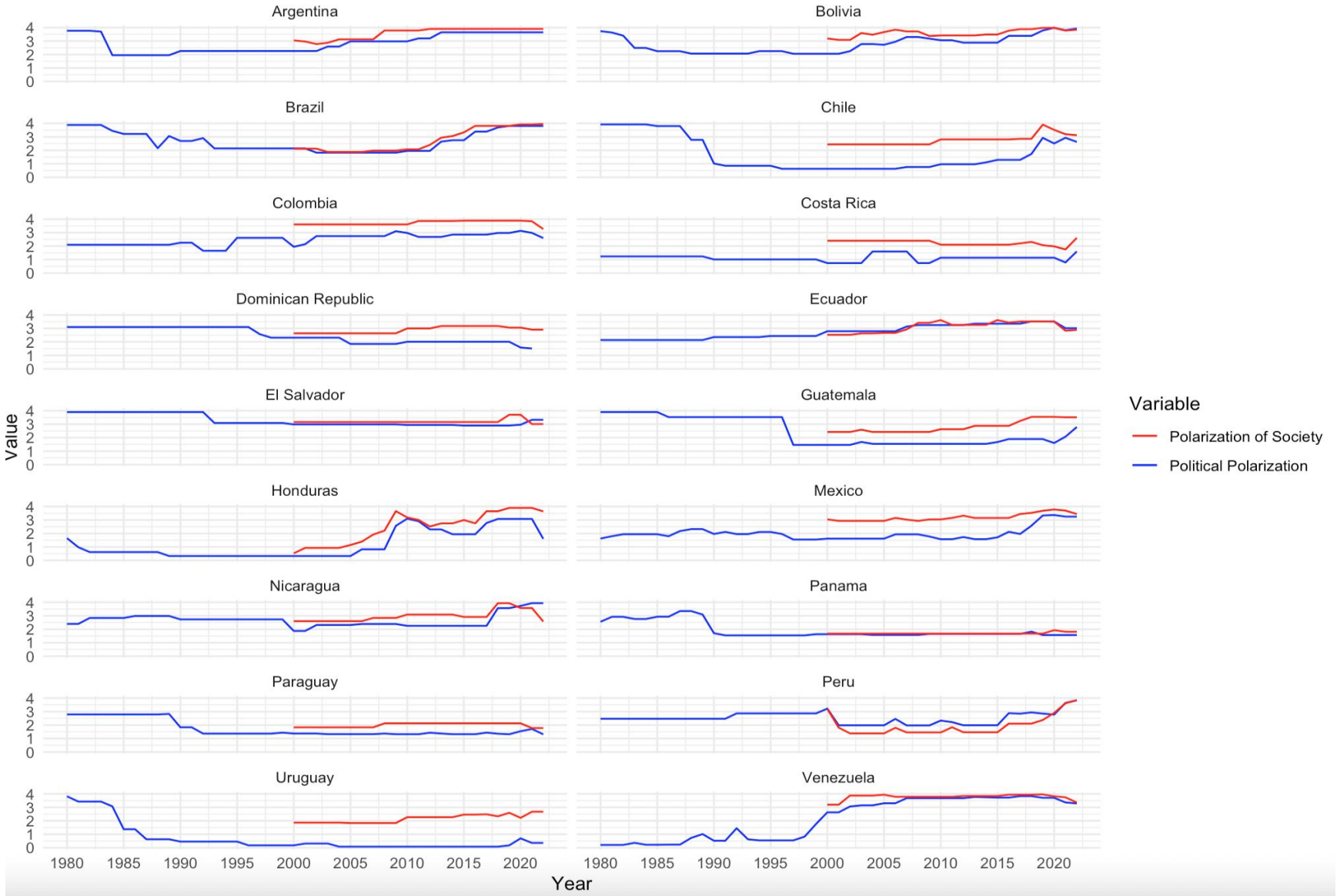
Source: Varieties of Democracy database, V13.



The individual country graphs in Figure 3 show which countries account for the steepest rises in polarization in recent years. Looking over time, we find a pattern that political polarization generally declined following the Third Wave transitions to democracy in the 1980s, or peace accords in Central America in the 1990s. This fits with a global study from 1900-2020 which found that severe polarization fell primarily after major systemic interruptions – war, democratic transitions, or independence struggles (McCoy et al., 2022). But in Latin America, only three exceptional countries were able to sustain low to moderate (below 2) levels of political polarization over time – Costa Rica, Panama and Uruguay. The majority of countries rose to severe levels (near or above 3 out of 4) by 2016, if not before, on both measures.

Why might this be? What are the drivers of polarization in Latin America, compared with other regions, and how do they interact with the quality of democracy? The next sections explore these questions.

Figure 3. Country Identity Polarization (political polarization variable) and Issue Polarization (polarization of society variable), 1980-2022
Source: Varieties of Democracy Database V13



Explaining the Rise and Resistance to Political Polarization through the Prism of Democratic Resilience

Functioning democracies are able to draw on their reserves of democratic resilience to prevent pernicious polarization. Democratic resilience is the ability to "prevent or react to external and internal challenges, stresses, and assaults" without sacrificing democratic qualities (Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). Merkel and Lührmann posit three potential reactions for resilient regimes to internal and external challenges and stressors: "to withstand without (major) change, to adapt through internal changes, and to recover from initial damage or disorder without losing the democratic character of its regime and its constitutive core institutions, organizations, and processes." Maintaining the same level of democratic quality does not mean that democracies do not change at all; instead what should *not* change is the commitment to democratic principles of freedom, political equality, popular sovereignty and checks and balances.

Democracies across the globe face similar stressors creating challenges of democratic governance, yet some seem to succumb to a dynamic of pernicious polarization and democratic backsliding while others are able to withstand, adapt or quickly recover, i.e. they demonstrate resilience. We thus need to better understand what makes some democracies more resilient and able to manage polarization than others.

The contemporary challenges to democratic governance include:

- The concurrence of contemporary global and domestic structural stressors, such as the existential threat of climate change, the movement of people within and between countries, changing demographics of birthrates and racial/ethnic make-ups of a society, the steep rise of income and wealth inequality in many countries, and rapid technological change, including ICTs and automation, and now AI.

- The very success of democracy producing new demands and changing societies: new and previously marginalized groups mobilize with rising expectations and demands that can generate backlash and polarization if democratic mechanisms of inclusion are weak.
- Institutional developments such as weakening political parties that in the past mediated between opposing social classes and interest groups, and the rise of alternative informational and deliberative spaces such as social media.
- Proximate catalysts such as pandemic health threats; economic and financial crises; security threats; and corruption scandals.

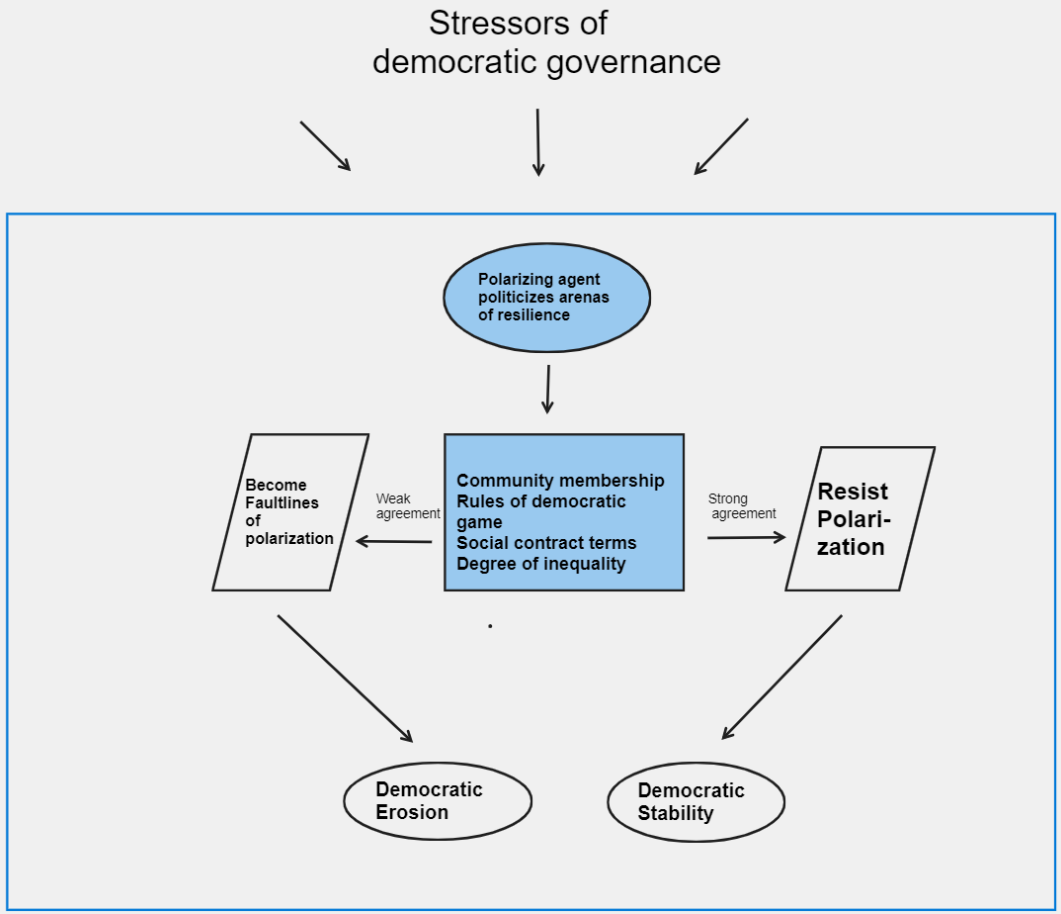
This paper argues that greater consensus among both political elites and citizens in four arenas will make a democratic society more resilient and able to address democratic governance challenges as they arise without falling prey to the kind of divisions (dynamics of pernicious polarization) that harm democracy. In contrast, when that consensus is weak from the beginning (a formative rift), or weakens over time as a society and conditions change, then the democracy is less able to address democratic governance challenges and becomes susceptible to pernicious polarization. Polarizing agents emerge to successfully politicize one or more of these disagreements and the arenas of resilience become themselves the fault lines of polarization.

The four arenas of democratic resilience most critical to understanding the dynamics of pernicious polarization today and the potential for preventing and overcoming it are:

1. Boundaries of community membership
2. Concept of democracy and thus the rules of the political game
3. Terms of the social contract
4. Acceptable levels of income and wealth inequality

Figure 4 depicts this dynamic process.

Figure 4. Dynamic Model of Democratic Resilience and Management of Polarization



Contemporary democracies thus commonly face one or more of these four fault lines of polarization.

(I) *Inclusion, Belonging and Identity*: Many countries experience divisions today over the boundaries of community membership and who should be a rightful citizen, or, for that matter, who is a more authentic or first-class citizen. These divisions may stem from the recurrence of historical unresolved debates about citizenship (formative rifts) or new debates about immigration that may be brought to the public's attention by a polarizing leader. Either may give rise to alienation and fears of exclusion and lost status among previously privileged groups. Likewise, societies may be divided over founding myths and national identities, they may lack a shared national story. Thus, polarization often forms on the basis of the systemic exclusion of certain groups and on the absence or weakening of shared national identities, stories or narratives that fray social cohesion -- the sense of belonging and social connection. Debates over minority rights and immigration, religious versus secular national identities, how the nation was founded and by whom, and how to narrate a country's history in general have become polarizing forces.

(II) *Majoritarian vs Liberal conceptions of democracy:* Polarization is occurring over the very concept of democracy, with competing views of the balance between a majoritarian aspect of democracy privileging popular sovereignty and the will of the majority, and liberal aspects of democracy emphasizing the protection of the rights of political minorities and the diffusion of power through checks and balances. Polarization grows in contexts of democratic backsliding, when an incumbent leader or party concentrates power and weakens checks and balances while promoting its democratic credentials in terms of its representation of the popular will. Thus, disagreement over the procedural rules of the game has become a polarizing issue even in established democracies, where confidence

in elections has wavered or one party has used the rules to entrench itself as a governing majority. Perceptions become polarized over whether democracy is improving or deteriorating, and who poses a threat to democracy.

(III) *Competing Visions of the Social contract*: the concept of social contract underlies the collective of citizens as a people, the "body politic." The social contract involves the implicitly or explicitly agreed social understandings regarding why and how citizens depend on each other and the state, not only in the present but also the future. This includes collective interests, rights, privileges and responsibilities. Polarization arises over competing fundamental beliefs about the nature and content of this social contract and alleged breaches of it. Belief polarization may occur over such questions as what it means to enjoy equal and secure opportunities for advancement of different social classes and even different generations. Value conflicts may arise over the relative prioritization of individual versus collective interests, communitarianism versus cosmopolitanism, security versus freedom, religious versus secular views of the state, or the importance of adherence to community norms and authority.

(IV) *Inequality of wealth and income:* Polarization arises over the causes and possible solutions of the contemporary problems of capitalist market economies, in particular the growing wealth and income inequalities in these societies and their implications for life chances. These inequalities, especially when exacerbated by social immobility, give rise to widespread public discontent, anxiety and precarity. While these inequalities are well-documented and felt, there is widespread disagreement over their sources and even less consensus on solutions. Public resentments, however, are easily exploited by polarizing leaders such as populist autocrats. In return, mainstream political parties struggle to devise programs to address these grievances or to build the political coalitions necessary to accomplish

them. Even more difficult, resentments do not necessarily draw on inequality per se, but rather may be driven by perceptions of un-deservingness or unfairness in this distribution. Often, they are not even directed toward the economic elite. That is, some groups (immigrants, ethnic groups, women, individuals deviating from dominant sexual or religious norms, urban versus rural lifestyles, etc) may be viewed as gaining unfair or undeserved advantages from government policies.

Can we predict when or where these fault lines will emerge? This model argues that the fault lines will arise in the arenas of resilience with weak agreements from one of two conditions: first, when they represent formative rifts – unresolved historical debates, and thus lack of consensus during the formation of nation-states, or, sometimes during fundamental re-formations of states such as during transitions from authoritarianism (Somer & McCoy, 2019); and second, when the agreements weaken over time from ongoing democratic governance challenges and changing conditions. Perniciously polarizing figures are more likely to emerge and gain traction among a substantial sector of the society in these two conditions of weaker democratic resilience. That is, where social bonds are frayed, institutions and commitments to democratic norms are weak, and disagreements on community boundaries, rules of the game, social contract or acceptable levels of inequality emerge or were never resolved from the founding.

Some facilitating conditions can further increase or weaken resilience and susceptibility to polarization, such as the design of political institutions and especially whether electoral systems are majoritarian or proportional, degree of consensus-seeking political culture, political party anchoring and organizational strength, and the degree of inequality in the distribution of resources (Bernaerts et al., 2022; Hahm et al., 2023; Horne et al., 2022; McCarty et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2020). But one factor commonly thought to be a prerequisite for political polarization is not a necessary condition: underlying social cleavages do not necessarily predict pernicious political polarization. That is, underlying social cleavages are often present, but are not always the basis of polarization. Neither is their existence sufficient to predict when polarization occurs (McCoy & Somer,

2019). Ethnic and religious cleavages provide an example: Zimbabwe with its identifiable ethnic cleavage has not consistently expressed political interests around those cleavages, and did not consistently experience political polarization (LeBas & Munemo, 2019). Poland, Hungary, and the Philippines, on the other hand, with more homogenous populations in terms of language, religion, and ethnicity, nevertheless experienced episodes of deep polarization (Tworzecki, 2019; Arugay & Slater, 2019; Vegetti, 2019). Rather it is when these cleavages become politicized that they deepen polarization.

Thus, it is agency - the conscious choices of political actors – that is most likely to exacerbate polarization in conditions of weak democratic resilience. These polarizing agents politicize and activate underlying cleavages, especially formative rifts, or they build on and sometimes exaggerate more conjunctural grievances arising from challenges of democratic governance. They use perniciously polarizing strategies of demonization, division and blame to simplify politics and create Us vs Them mutually distrustful camps. The polarized societies are then less able to adapt to the stressors of democratic governance and resist the pernicious consequences of polarization described earlier, and democracy begins to decay.

Democratic Resilience in Latin America

In Latin America, agreement on two of the arenas of democratic resilience has historically been absent or weak and constitute formative rifts – boundaries of community membership reflecting systemic exclusion of Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples, and the social hierarchies based on historically unequal access to land, income, and wealth. Agreement on the rules of the democratic game and the terms of the social contract, on the other hand, appeared stronger in the Third Wave of democratic transitions and in some cases is weakening more recently.

Fault lines of identity and inequality: Socioeconomic and sociocultural formative rifts

While many polarized countries around the world experience formative rifts around community boundaries, Latin America stands out in comparative perspective on its deep-rooted inequality. A recent report by the Andean Development Corporation (CAF) on inherited inequality in Latin America demonstrates this long-standing rift affects democratic resilience today, and how it interacts with formative rifts over racial and ethnic inclusion (De La Mata et al., 2022). Despite some improvement in the 21st century, the region still exhibits the most unequal income distribution in the world (Graph 1.3, p. 28.) and persistently so since 1985. Its wealth distribution GINI (average for 2010-2019) is also the highest in world (graph 1.5, p. 30). Most of Latin America, with the exception of Argentina, Peru and Uruguay, appears in the top quintile of income GINI distributions globally (Graph 1.1, p. 26) and the GINI ratios are higher than predicted by their per capita GDP (Graph1.2, p. 27). For wealth GINI, Brazil, along with the United States, is in the top quintile (a whopping 83 to 91 score; Graph 1.4, p. 29).

The intergenerational impact of this deep inequality in income and wealth results in Latin America having the largest income immobility in the world, according to the CAF report. Social policies attempting to overcome this problem through improvements in education, for example, have made it possible for younger generations to surpass their parents' educational levels. Yet, the gaps in education, and especially how that translates to skilled jobs, between children of rich and poor families remain. "Only one in ten children of non-college-educated parents obtain a college degree by 24 or 25 years of age. That fraction is almost 50% for children with a parent who graduated from college…..Even if younger generations' academic achievements have improved with respect to their parents', labor market opportunities have not. The children of parents employed in high-skilled jobs are almost six times more likely to land such jobs than are the children of parents employed in low-skilled occupations" (Arreaza 2023). The wealth gap exacerbates the problem of social immobility even further, such that family background determines life prospects more than individual effort and merit. The social immobility arising from inherited inequality differentially effects racial and ethnic

groups as well in Latin America. Afro-descendents and indigenous experience lower mobility than mestizos, who in turn experience lower mobility than whites (Executive Summary, p. 11).

The CAF argues that social immobility has important implications for democracy and political stability as well: "In addition, the high intergenerational persistence resulting from inequality of opportunities can corrode people's trust in each other and in institutions. Not only does this undermine the possibilities of providing public goods, but it also weakens the tolerance and mutual respect that constitute the bedrock of life in a democracy" (Executive Summary, p. 3). Survey research in Latin America also has found that personal experiences with upward social mobility improves democratic attitudes while downward mobility harms them (Houle & Miller, 2019).

Social Contract Fault Line

Similar to other polarized democracies globally, challenges of democratic governance in the region are weakening agreement in the other two arenas of resilience – terms of the social contract and agreement on the concept of democracy. The particular challenges are identified in political risk regional surveys conducted in 2021-23 by the Centro Estudios Internacionales at the Universidad Católica de Chile (Sahd et al., 2023). Organized crime, with the associated perceptions of personal insecurity, corruption and impunity, rose to be the number one risk in 2023, while democratic erosion and social protests over well-being remained in the top four. The survey identified complex governability as the third risk in 2023, referring to the incapacity of governments to meet citizen expectations in the context of political fragmentation, lack of agreements, decelerating economic growth and high public indebtedness. Political polarization and disinformation was in the seventh place. Additional risks include migratory crisis, food insecurity, lack of competitiveness, cyber-attacks and weakness of regional integration.

The growth of organized crime and insecurity as the top concern in an increasing number of countries in the 2020's produces competing visions of the social contract over individual versus collective rights and interests (Winter, 2023). Willingness to trade individual civil liberty protections for collective security provided by strong men is evident not only in the huge popularity of El Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's approach to controlling gangs through mass arrests and mass trials (paralleling the popularity of Filipino former president Rodrigo Duterte's controversial use of extra-judicial measures against drug gangs), but also in the growing attention to the Bukele model in governments ranging from the conservative Lasso government in Ecuador to the progressive Castro government in Honduras and Boric government in Chile.

The terms of the social contract are also foci for the social explosions demanding not only to revisit social-economic policies sustaining inequality, but also to address the very models and concepts of solidarity versus individual effort, collective versus individual responsibility. Belief polarization gives rise to value conflicts over the relative prioritization of collective versus individual interests, rights, privileges and responsibilities. Major protests erupted in 2018-2019 in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua and Venezuela, larger than 100,000 people and lasting more than a month (Protest Tracker, CEIP). Initially protesting austerity measures, social inequalities, or proposed social and educational policy reforms, the protests grew and morphed into a larger demand for constitutional change in Chile (changing the social contract), or demand for human rights protections following harsh repression of protestors in Nicaragua, Venezuela and Colombia.

The Chilean months-long mobilization had significant political impact: it led to an agreement with the Pinera government to conduct a referendum for a constitutional assembly, and to the election of former student leader Gabriel Boric as president in a polarized election against far-right candidate Jose Antonio Kast in 2021. The first attempt to write a new constitution, led by independents and progressives, was decisively defeated in a popular referendum, not only due to disagreement over the economic model and solidarity, but also in part over a formative rift over

community membership: the proposed constitution contained provisions for Chile to become a plurinational state, incorporating more than one nation within the nation, and giving rights of autonomy to indigenous groups. (Becerra Valdivia, 2022).

Concept of democracy fault line

Agreement on the political rules of the game and concept of democracy has also frayed. Weakened political parties, political fragmentation and instability, and corruption have generated alienation from the political establishments in countries from Chile to Brazil to Peru to Guatemala in the last decade, with different political consequences. These divides reflect a sort of social polarization without formal political representation. Anti-establishment sentiment may arise from poor government performance or lack of responsiveness to socio-economic grievances as a result of policy convergence and consensus among center-right and center-left parties on a neoliberal market model, a pattern also seen in Europe (Berman & Kundnani, 2021). This was the case in Chile as the Concertación reduced poverty, but for the most part kept in place the Pinochet-era privatization of education, pensions and its labor policies for fear of backlash and instability. A new generation grew alienated from politics and led protests in the education sector and beyond throughout the 2010s, culminating in the demand for a new constitution (Luna, 2021; Madariaga & Kaltwasser, 2020).

Alternatively, anti-establishment sentiment may arise from elite collusion, corruption, and impunity, as occurred in Brazil in the mid-2010s (Mignozzetti & Spektor, 2019; Stuenkel, 2021). In this case, a divide over Lula's Partido do Trabalhaldores gave way to broad anti-establishment sentiment, which in turn fueled the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro and a pro- and anti-Bolsonarista divide. In the 2022 elections, Lula and his allies attempted to form a regime cleavage of democracy vs. authoritarianism, but it is unclear how strong that cleavage will be.

Another form of elite collusion appears to be playing out in Peru and Guatemala in 2023, creating massive social polarization without political representation or poles. In Peru, an ongoing struggle between Congress and reformist presidents resulted in a rapid change of presidents and eventually the high-stakes conflict between leftist president Pedro Castillo (eventually ousted) and the conservative-dominated Congress in 2023. After his vice-president (from the same party) replaced him, she allied with the conservatives in Congress to defy protestors demanding early elections and constitutional change. The conflict expanded to reflect the formative rift between the urban elite in Lima and the poorer, more indigenous and mestizo interior of the country. In Guatemala, an elite-party cartel disqualified candidates for the 2023 presidential election who threatened their impunity, and then when a dark horse candidate from the grass-roots civic emerged in second place, government authorities attempted to interfere in the run-off.

Prior rejections of the political establishment provided the opportunity for populist leaders to come to power in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia and eventually begin to concentrate power. Polarization and problems of democratic governance became intertwined as failures of political establishments to respond to political, economic and cultural grievances were exploited by polarizing leaders. These leaders mobilized dissatisfied citizens, winning popular support while further deepening democratic crisis and partisan divides over their challenges to the existing democratic norms and institutions. In a feedback loop, democratic backsliding itself produced polarization over the preferred concept of democracy – participatory versus representative, majoritarian versus liberal, as well as over perceptions about whether democracy is improving or deteriorating in a given country and who is the bigger threat to democracy.

Latin America has experienced major mobilizations for democracy and rule of law in the 2010s, making democracy a focus of issue polarization, even when not necessarily represented as partisan polarization. These mobilizations include major protests in Brazil against corruption, racism, and for indigenous land rights; in Mexico against President Lopez Obrador's 2022 attempted gutting of the national election authority; Bolivia's

contested election and ouster of President Evo Morales in 2019, and subsequent actions and counter-actions of the interim government and next elected MAS government; and Peru's contentious 2021 election, threatened impeachment of President Castillo and his attempted auto-golpe, and ongoing protests against the interim government and Congress in 2023; and in Guatemala against 2023 election interference.

Identifying Fault Lines of Voter Polarization

Thus far, we have relied on expert judgments to assess polarization. Individual survey data can provide a more direct measure of elite or mass polarization, and has been used in comparative studies to measure affective polarization as well as the more conventional ideological or issue polarization described in the Introduction in this volume. Unfortunately, neither has been studied extensively in Latin America, and the region has not been included in most comparative studies. Nevertheless, attention is growing and a few recent multi-country studies begin to give us an idea how Latin America compares with the rest of the world.

Affective polarization is conventionally measured with feeling thermometers to assess voters' like and dislike of their own and other parties, party leaders or party supporters. One study including six Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay) finds that these Latin American countries' average level of affective polarization is in the middle range of all the countries in the CSES series of election studies 1996-2019. Although there is only one year of data for Uruguay and Argentina, we can see some patterns in the other countries: Peru has a U-shaped curve for affective polarization between 2001 and 2017 (high when Fujimori had just been ousted in 2001, and again in 2017; Brazil increases affective polarization between 2002 (Lula's first election) and 2018 (Bolsonaro's election); Mexico is up and down during its first years

of alternating parties in office, 2000-2016; and Chile has an inverted U between 1999 and 2017 (Orhan, 2022). Of these, Peru has the highest average and Brazil the lowest.

Another multi-country study examined ideological identity (i.e. a left-right identity unattached to specific issues) in two Latin American countries to find strong affective polarization between "leftists" and "rightists". The authors conclude that "the tendency of voters in multiparty systems to divide into two affective left-right blocs is not so much due to policy disagreements as it is a simple question of identity" (Comellas & Torcal, 2023). They find this is true for Chile, but less so in Argentina where the main line of affective polarization is pro and anti peronismo/justicialismo, rather than ideological identity (Carty & Torcal, 2023).

Mass issue polarization is another approach to identifying fault lines of polarization. The Americas Barometer asks a number of questions relevant to the four fault lines that can serve as relative indicators of division, though data is inconsistent across years and countries. I take four of these questions to illustrate an approach for future research: I measure the degree of mass polarization by multiplying the fraction of respondents answering either the low or high extreme on these questions to approximate the degree of polarization over these issues: Left-Right self-placement; support for same-sex marriage; support for democracy (democracy is the best form of government); and support for civil disobedience (in the form of roadblocks).

The degree of polarization on these issues in each country is represented in Figure 5 (with some countries having only spotty data). In most countries, an issue of identity and inclusion is the most polarizing issue: support for same-sex marriage. Uruguay has the highest polarization on this variable at .66; the actual distribution is 30% choosing on the disapproving extreme (1-3 on a 10-point scale) and 55% choosing on the high approving extreme (8-10). Thus 85% of respondents answer on the extremes. We multiply the percentages and normalize to 0-1, producing a

polarization score of .66. In contrast, a country with 40% of respondents answering on the extreme and evenly split would receive a polarization score of .16. We can roughly think of 0-0.2 as low, 0.2-0.4 as moderate and above 0.4 as high mass issue polarization using this approach.

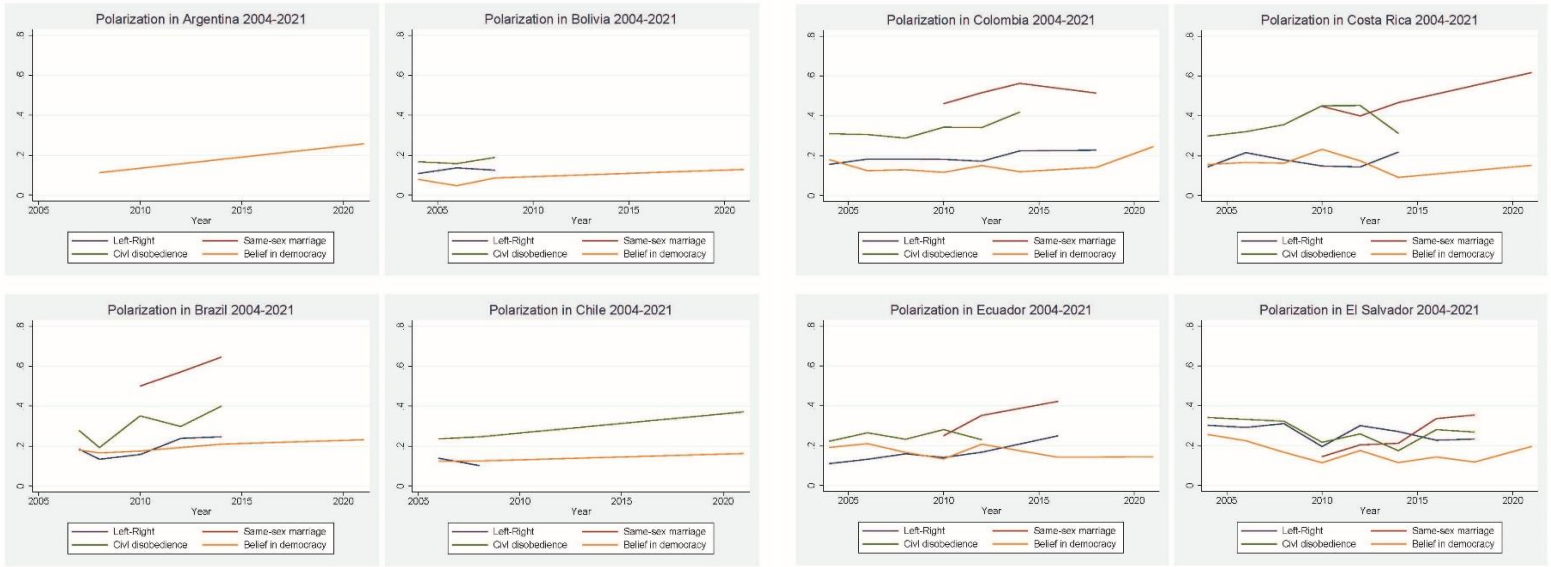
Like many countries around the world with right-wing populist leaders or growing right-wing populist parties, issues dealing with LGBTQ rights are becoming major polarizing themes as movements toward inclusion produce backlashes. In addition, countries with high income inequality and strong political influence of economic elites, as in the United States and Latin America, may be seeing a shift from the traditional class-based economic axis of polarization to a cultural identity axis to shift attention away from poor economic and social performance, or as plutocratic populists attempt to solve the "conservatives dilemma" and gain popular support for policies benefiting the wealthy by "distracting" the working class with cultural issues (Gibson, 2001; Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Murillo, 2022; Ziblatt, 2017).

The second highest polarizing issue among this group of issues appears to be support for civil disobedience involving roadblocks, a common tactic in some countries particularly with large indigenous populations (Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia). This issue reflects competing visions of the social contract, polarizing around the collective interest in keeping roads open for health and safety (e.g. food transport, emergency vehicles) versus the right to protest and express dissent. Though survey respondents in several countries are moderately or highly polarized on this issue, interestingly two of the countries where it has been a common tactic for decades – Bolivia and Ecuador – have low to moderate polarization on this issue.

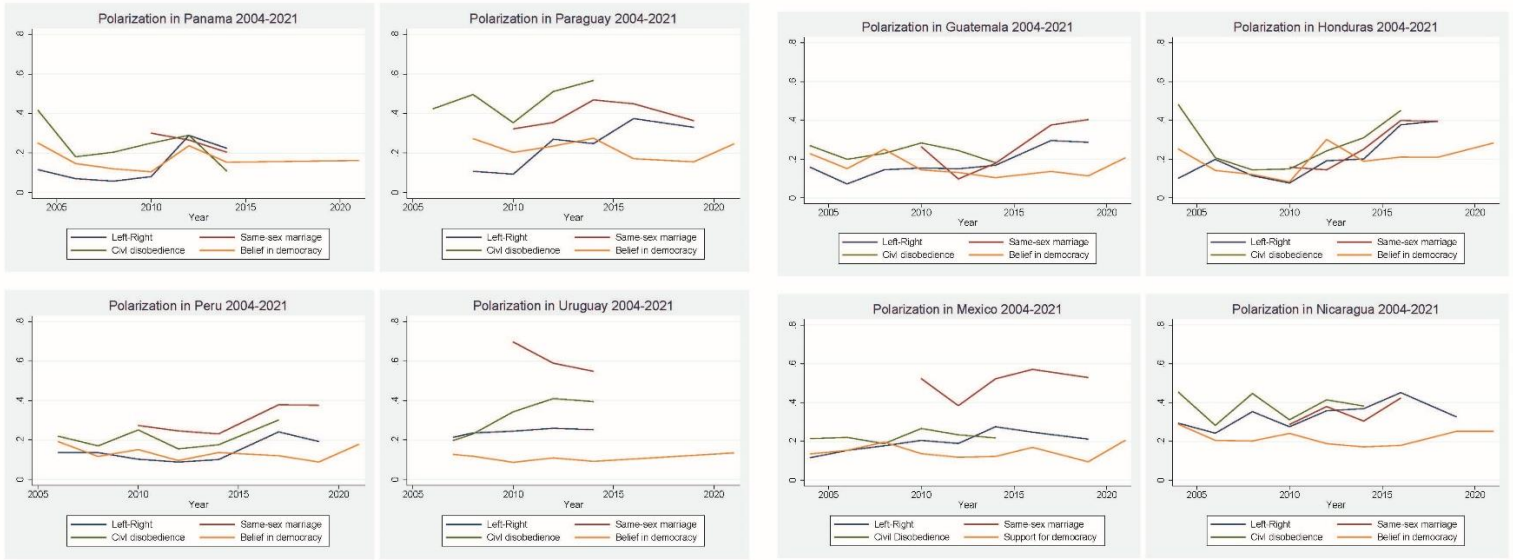
The left-right self-placement might be expected to reflect higher levels of polarization in a region with strong historic income and wealth inequality, as discussed above. Yet this issue varies tremendously by country and generally is in the moderate range of polarization. This may reflect the ambiguous concepts of "left" and "right" and its changing definition to include cultural as well as economic ideas, as the survey questions allow respondents to define the terms as they wish. Thus, it is impossible to know what this traditional dichotomy means to respondents today (Murillo, 2022).

On the other hand, the question asking about support for democracy as the best form of government might be expected to generate low polarization as most respondents would express moderate to strong support for democracy. Yet here we see in many countries a rise in polarization in this indicator in recent years, as democracy itself becomes a polarizing issue in an age of backsliding and populism, as discussed above.

Figure 5. Issue Polarization in Latin America, 2004-2021 (Americas Barometer)



https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2023-m75f3 **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5844-2504

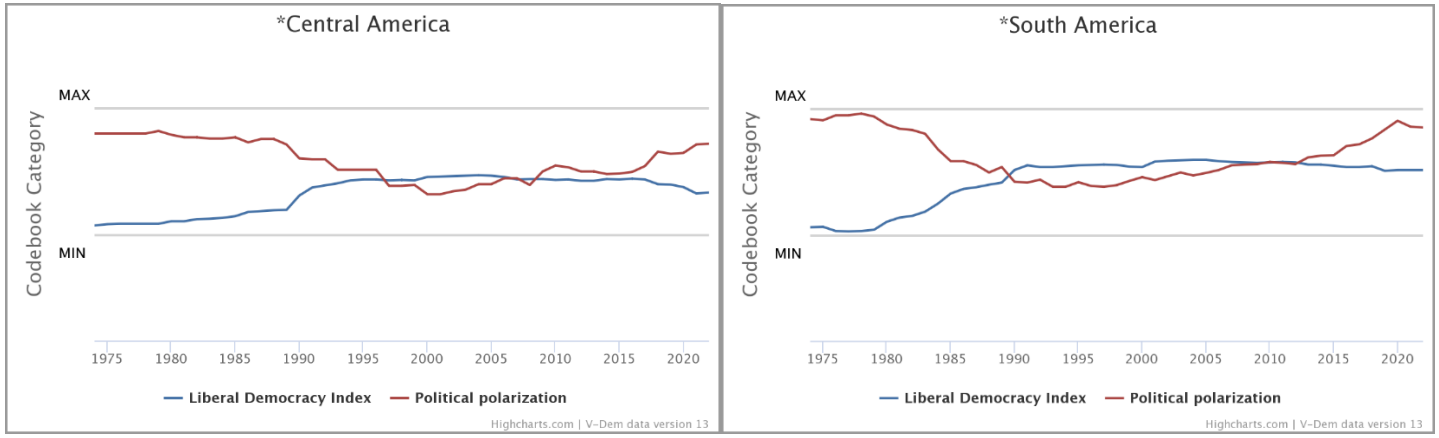


Consequences of Polarization for Democracy

The relationship between political polarization and democracy is complex, as polarization can be a cause or a consequence of democratic crisis and decline. One pattern appears evident, however, as shown in Figure 6: democratic transitions during the Third Wave transitions in the 1980s in South America and following the peace accords in in the 1990s in Central America were accompanied by meaningful depolarization from previously high levels. This follows the global pattern discussed above of depolarization following major systemic interruptions. In the 21st century, experiences begin to diverge into several patterns: i) aggrandizing populist executives generating a feedback loop between democratic erosion and rising polarization (Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela); ii) dissatisfaction with corrupt colluding elites or policy-converging mainstream parties producing general popular rejection of the political establishment and political instability, potentially until

an outsider strongman emerges (Guatemala, Peru, Brazil, Chile, Colombia); iii) division into blocs primarily centered on identity with and against a single party (Argentina and potentially Bolivia); and iv) democratic stability with low polarization (Costa Rica, Panama, Uruguay).

Figure 6. Liberal Democracy and Political Polarization, 1975-2022 (Varieties of Democracy, V13)



Pattern 1 - Feedback loop of polarizing and aggrandizing populists

The first pattern represents the democratic crisis-polarization feedback loop of personally aggrandizing populist leaders and anti-populist counter-mobilization. A general popular rejection of mainstream parties and often their collapse due to perceived corruption, collusion and poor performance can provide the vacuum for populists to rise to power. Populists then use polarizing strategies in their use of Manichean rhetoric of the good people vs. the conniving elites, blame of an enemy (often the prior political elites) for the country's ills, and their common privileging of

majoritarian conceptions of democracy over liberal dimensions. When an anti-populist backlash occurs, high polarization results in a continuous feedback loop. In Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, movements led by Daniel Ortega, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa and the attempted counter-mobilizations against them produced strong polarization, at least until severe repression quashed any opposition in Nicaragua and Venezuela. In Bolivia, the feedback loop followed the election of Evo Morales in 2005 and conflicts over the attempt to write a new constitution in Bolivia. The fault lines of polarization reflected formative rifts over ethnic and territorial-based community boundaries and inequality (the rise to power of the Andean-based indigenous MAS party threatened the traditional elite based in the east). Morales' aggrandizement as he flouted term limits for a fourth term in office resulted in a controversial election and his forced exile in 2019. Likewise, in Ecuador, democratic crisis from unstable and unpopular governments in the early 2000s was followed by the election of Rafael Correa, a leftist populist who carried out constitutional reform but also a developmentalist economic policy controversial within his own movement. A Correista-anti-Correista polarization accompanied continuous democratic erosion. Facing a difficult economic environment and opposition from business, Correa eventually backed his former vice president Lenin Moreno to succeed him in 2017. Lenin surprised Correa by reversing many of the backsliding measures and helped to depolarize the country, at least temporarily.

Similarly aggrandizing leaders in Mexico and El Salvador are polarizing societies around the democracy fault line. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador generated massive social protests against his attacks on the national electoral commission (INE) in 2022, while Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele faced some backlash when he clashed with Congress and over his move towards bitcoin as legal tender. Nevertheless, both retain strong approval ratings and have been able to carry out many of their policies to weaken checks on their own power and to militarize their approach to controlling extreme violence.

Pattern 2 - Anti-establishment reaction to corruption, convergence and collusion

As described in the discussion of the democracy fault line, anti-establishment popular sentiment can arise against perceived unresponsiveness to socio-economic grievances (neoliberal policy convergence) or against elite collusion around corruption and impunity. The anti-establishment popular sentiment often lacks political expression and organization. A common result is the emergence of an anti-system autocratizer, such as Brazil's Bolsonaro or El Salvador's Bukele. But it may also result in polarized electoral choices around extremist parties or newly formed movements, as the mainstream center-right and center-left implodes. The polarized elections among the left and right ends of the party spectrum in Chile and Colombia in 2022 reflect this pattern. In Colombia, a decade-long polarization over the terms of the peace negotiation with the FARC had faded and anti-establishment frustration over unaddressed social inequality as well as resurgence of violence produced a polarized second-round election and the first-ever election of a leftist president. Both presidents have struggled to enact the far-reaching reforms needed to address the formative rifts of deep-seated socioeconomic and sociocultural inequalities. Without such reforms, the countries are likely to face continued polarization and potentially stagnating democracies.

In Brazil, a cross-ideological coalition formed around former President Lula da Silva to defeat Bolsonaro's reelection, arguing in part that the choice was one between democracy and authoritarianism. Whether Lula reverts to the Brazilian habit of coalition-building through corruption, and risks stimulating the public's ire again and a new populist autocrat, or is able to assert a dominant democracy-authoritarian cleavage is not yet clear.

Elite collusion and democratic erosion without partisan poles describes Guatemala and Peru. In Guatemala, elites collude to exclude reformers who threaten their impunity, but a potential to break that deadlock exists as of this writing if the second round election scheduled for August 2023 goes through with a civic reformer as one candidate. In Peru, the prior fujimorista – anti-fujimorista political polarization had by 2023 devolved

into elite collusion against a leaderless opposition along the fault lines of conceptions of democracy, and formative rifts of territorial, social and ethnic inequality.

Pattern 3 – Partisan blocs for and against a strong party identity (Argentina and possibly Bolivia)

Without clear formative rifts, Argentine political polarization has long centered around identity with or against the mythology of Peronism, with its constant reformulations over seventy years. In recent years, an opposing coalition has formed with some stability and with the possibility of alternating power particularly as Kirchnerismo weakens. Argentina's challenge is to find a solution to the long-term cycles of inflationary politics, but it thus far has shown democratic resilience to efforts to concentrate executive power. In Bolivia, the MAS – first social movement, then political party -- has been the anchor of partisan polarization for nearly two decades since it won power, but the party is now divided between the current president and the former president attempting to assert his power from the sidelines. The opposition is likewise disunited, but there may be forming a tripartite party system with a left, center and right. Bolivia's deep-seated territorial and ethnic inequalities weakened its resilience to the executive aggrandizement of both Morales and interim president Arnaez, but both were constrained in the end.

Pattern 4 - Strong democracies with sustained low polarization (Uruguay, Costa Rica and, to a lesser extent, Panama)

Costa Rica and Uruguay have maintained strong, stable liberal democracies since Costa Rica's second wave democratic transition in the 1950s, and Uruguay's third wave transition in 1985. Uruguay ended periods of violent partisan conflict and power-sharing with one party a permanent minority in the 19th century by transitioning to a progressive, democratic welfare state under the leadership of Jose Battle y Ordonez early in the 20th century. With some interruptions of military rule, the country experimented with collegial presidencies and maintained the welfare state with one of the lowest income gaps in the hemisphere. Costa Rica concluded a partisan civil war and enacted a new constitution in 1949 abolishing the

military, establishing independent institutions and protecting minority and women's rights. Alternating governments between programmatic parties the country has exhibited democratic resilience in managing external and internal stressors from regional war, financial crisis, and corruption and crime since then. Panama transitioned to its electoral democracy in 1991 after an international invasion removed General Manuel Noriega from power, and with the help of an international dialogue process established agreement on rules of the game.

These three countries have managed to maintain relatively strong agreement in the four arenas of democratic resilience. They have avoided the common formative rifts in the other countries either by resolving debates during transitions, particularly over the democratic rules of the game, social contract and inequality in Uruguay and Costa Rica. With small majority European populations, Costa Rica and Uruguay also avoided formative rifts over community membership. Panama's service economy and steady revenue base from the Panama Canal have also bolstered its democratic resilience in the arenas of social contract and inequality.

Conclusion

Latin American democracy has broken down completely in only two countries in the 21st century – Nicaragua and Venezuela. The other countries have demonstrated democratic resilience to varying degrees, and South America has remained above the world averages in the liberal democracy rankings, according to V-Dem measures. Yet, they demonstrate vulnerabilities and a pattern of underperformance that is likely to continue to weaken their capacity to withstand, adapt and recover from shocks and stressors.

Latin American countries reflect, to varying degree, all four of the fault lines identified here as the principle fault lines for political polarization in contemporary democracies globally. However, the deep-seated, persistent social hierarchies oriented around class, race, and place make Latin America stand out relative to other countries and regions. The region's deepest divides do not focus on religion as in many other countries, nor on

clearly delineated ethnolinguistic divides (with the exception of Bolivia, Peru and Guatemala). Instead, the stubborn income, wealth and land inequalities resulting in severe social immobility are reemerging as flashpoints expressed in anti-establishment social protests and votes. Weakening agreement in critical arenas of democratic resilience make countries vulnerable to external stressors and polarizing agents alike. Their ability to withstand, adapt, or recover from harm to their democracies will depend on the ability of each society to strengthen consensus on these four arenas.

Polarization around unresolved formative rifts over who is a rightful citizen (community membership) and the social relations that determine their life chances appears the most difficult to overcome. Elite resistance to addressing these rifts in some cases took the form of policy convergence making mainstream parties unresponsive to citizen grievances and demands beyond initial reductions in poverty in the interest of political and economic stability, such as in Venezuela during Punto Fijo, or Chile under the Concertación governments. But more commonly in the 21st century, patterns of elite collusion to maintain the social hierarchies and protect their impunity persist. Reaching consensus on reforms that may renew or reformulate agreements on the terms of the social contract, boundaries of community membership and acceptable levels of social inequality is a tall task.

Latin America retains to a large degree broad consensus on the democratic rules of the game, which provides the mechanisms for addressing this task. Yet it will take broad majorities able to gain and retain political power to enact such fundamental reforms, as Uruguay in the early 20th century and Costa Rica in the mid-20th century achieved. Those efforts came at the hands of a victorious party following partisan civil wars. Replicating such broad majorities in a democratic context today is impeded by the existing polarization. Large legislative majorities have been achieved in countries like Venezuela, Mexico and El Salvador in the 21st century, but they have been used to change the democratic rules of the game to concentrate power in the executive, subjecting the countries to the whims of an individual leader. Where political power has been more

closely divided, as in Colombia, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina, or more diffused, as in Peru, attempts at executive aggrandizement have been held in check more easily thus far, even while agreement on the other arenas of democratic resilience has remained weak. Political agency matters, and it will require social organizations to make proposals and, together with grass-roots mobilization, press political elites to adopt them, as well as courageous leaders willing to look beyond personal and partisan interests to the national interest and to build coalitions in favor of reform.

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