

## **Democratic Fragilities in the Americas**

Michael Albertus  
University of Chicago

Guy Grossman  
University of Pennsylvania

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**Abstract:** We examine the nature of democratic fragilities in the Americas through survey experiments in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. Encouragingly, strong majorities of citizens recognize violations of democratic principles, laws, and norms. How incumbents justify anti-democratic actions also has little impact on how citizens view them. But there are minorities of 10-35% of people who support efforts to erode democracy. And partisanship matters: many individuals are seemingly “conditional democrats” who support anti-democratic actions if they voted in the incumbent. People are also reluctant to support impeachment for democratic violations, which would-be authoritarians can exploit.

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## INTRODUCTION

Democracy in many countries around the globe is facing its most serious challenge in decades. Elected leaders in countries such as Brazil, the Philippines, and the United States have publicly and prominently challenged many longstanding core tenets of liberal democracy including an active and engaged free press, and the independence of the justice system and the civil service more broadly. Politicians in countries as wide-ranging as Bolivia, Hungary, and Poland have made major steps toward eroding democratic checks and balances. Other former democracies such as Nicaragua, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela have entirely relapsed into authoritarianism.

The most menacing threat to liberal democracy now typically comes from elected leaders themselves rather than from the military or “outsider” actors.<sup>i</sup> There is a fairly consistent pattern of democratic erosion in many such cases. First, elected politicians seek to weaken the independence of the judiciary and the news media. Second, national incumbents sideline their real or perceived rivals by purging the bureaucracy, replacing career civil servants with political loyalists, and weakening or selectively ignoring the powers of the legislature. Finally, popularly elected leaders with autocratic tendencies spearhead an effort to rewrite the rules of democratic competition by creating favorable electoral rules, expanding executive powers, eliminating term limits, disenfranchising minorities, and drafting new constitutions to cement in these changes.<sup>ii</sup>

These actions rarely fly under the radar; voters are typically aware of them. While some voters oppose these actions, others may be ambivalent or support them. Still others may not identify them as damaging to, or inconsistent with, democracy.

Why do many voters in democracies choose not to oppose or even support anti-democratic actions by elected incumbents? Why do some voters choose to ignore these actions?

Why are transgressions against democratic laws and norms punished infrequently? And, how consequential are the means by which incumbents neutralize checks and balances? For example, do voters hold a narrow, legalistic view of democratic institutions that opens opportunities to subvert democracy by breaking norms but sticking within the bounds of the law?

We investigate these questions using a set of survey experiments fielded in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. These countries are home to nearly 70% of the population of the Americas. While they have different histories of democratic rule, all face challenges to their democratic institutions to varying degrees. We fielded surveys in these countries in the summer of 2020 at a time in which two of these countries faced democratic threats from left-wing incumbents (Argentina and Mexico) and two countries faced democratic threats from right-wing incumbents (Brazil and the United States). The incumbents at the time were the Peronists Alberto Fernández and Cristina Fernández in Argentina, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Donald Trump in the United States.

Our three survey experiments described common assaults on horizontal checks and balances: (a) a purge of career civil servants in an environmental protection agency who do not support the president's agenda; (b) a purge of independent-minded career prosecutors in the justice department; and (c) packing the courts with loyal, ideologically congruent judges. After reading each scenario and being told that they occurred recently in another country, respondents were asked to imagine they were a citizen of this country and whether they would support the incumbent's action, whether they would think the action is consistent with democracy, and whether the action is an impeachable offense.

Some of our findings provide cause for optimism regarding popular support for democratic checks and balances. We find that most respondents identify transgressions against

democracy as such and that overall levels of support for democratic violations by incumbents are generally low. Most people report opposing these violations when they are prompted with scenarios similar to those that have occurred throughout the region.

Furthermore, incumbents cannot easily manipulate how people view anti-democratic actions; at least not in our research design setting.<sup>iii</sup> Different justifications for violations—whether appeals to partisan polarization, legitimacy, or majoritarianism—do not radically shift public support for these violations.

We also find that breaking democratic norms as opposed to breaking statutory laws does not seem to increase acceptance for democratic violations. Citizens do not appear to take a strictly legalistic view of incumbent respect for horizontal checks and balances that would give cover to behaviors that adhere to the letter of the law but nonetheless erode democracy by breaking democratic norms.

But there are definite democratic fragilities at the street level. In each country, a concerning non-negligible minority supports actions that clearly erode democratic checks and balances. These minorities—ranging from 10 to 35 percent depending on the country and the violation—are far beyond a “radical fringe.”

Furthermore, there is a clear difference in support among people based on whether they (self-reportedly) voted for the incumbent in their country. Pro-incumbent voters in all four countries are considerably more willing to support anti-democratic actions. Some of these individuals support democratic violations since they view them as consistent with democracy; yet others support those actions despite recognizing that the actions are inconsistent with democracy. The gap between pro- and anti-incumbent individuals in their support for anti-democratic actions is especially large in the countries with right-wing incumbents: the United

States and Brazil. Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro supporters are far more likely to support attacks on democracy than their opponents. Argentina comes out as the most democratic on this dimension, with Mexico in the middle.

Finally, substantial majorities of voters who identify anti-democratic actions by incumbents and oppose them in principle also oppose severe punishments for incumbents such as impeachment. Most would rather let elections alone speak. This provides would-be authoritarians a pathway to democratic erosion by engaging in activities that may tilt the electoral field to their advantage. Our findings on impeachment are some of the first to gauge public appetite for punishing power grabs outside of the 'normal' electoral process.

With anti-democratic actions by executives becoming increasingly common and a minority of citizens willing to go along no matter what, our findings speak to the nature of fragilities in critical democracies in the Americas. The findings also contribute to scholarship on the snowballing trend in democratic erosion across the world.

## **DEMOCRATIC EROSION FROM WITHIN**

Existing scholarship highlights three dynamics central to understanding citizen behavior where elected national executives attempt to dismantle democratic checks and balances, institutions and norms. First, when citizens go to the polls, they do not necessarily recognize ex-ante a leader who would engage in anti-democratic activity.<sup>iv</sup> Perhaps the politician is a “wolf in sheep’s clothes” and dissembles about their true intentions. Or perhaps citizens may think that a politician will not actually follow through on some of their harshest critiques of the system, whether because they view it as bluster or because they anticipate that the system will be able to restrain them. Regardless, by the time such a leader is elected and voters realize their mistake it

is too late for voters to effectively oppose the leader. Such (myopic) voters are expected to identify anti-democratic actions as such and oppose them.

Second, citizens may be “conditional democrats” who trade off support for democracy for their ideological preferences.<sup>v</sup> Citizens may be willing to tolerate an anti-democratic incumbent who delivers on their partisan or ideological preferences, especially when politics is highly polarized. In a polarized environment, citizens who withdraw support from an anti-democratic party or politician that is close to them ideologically may end up with an alternative from the other side of the political spectrum that they dislike even more. Voters who trade off democracy due to heightened polarization are expected to identify anti-democratic actions as such yet support them when undertaken by an ideologically congruent incumbent.

Third, citizens may have differing views regarding what constitutes the core principles of democracy. Some may believe that once a leader is democratically elected, his or her actions in office are consistent with the will of the people and therefore democratic by definition.<sup>vi</sup> For such voters, actions like excluding some groups from decision-making bodies (for instance, the exclusion of blacks from political participation in Apartheid South Africa or the Jim Crow southern United States) would be cast as consistent with democracy even if undertaken by an ideologically incongruent incumbent.

### **A Growing Anti-Democratic Minority**

There is an alternative to these dynamics: that perhaps a portion of citizens simply embrace anti-democratic actions by an elected incumbent. Some of these individuals have little devotion to democracy as it is currently practiced. Indeed, some equate democracy with dysfunction or non-responsiveness and celebrate efforts to attack the status quo. This is not

altogether surprising given that many democracies are riddled with fingerprints from the authoritarian past in ways that can leave citizens dissatisfied.<sup>vii</sup>

At least two stripes of people support anti-democratic actions in addition to “conditional democrats.” First are “authoritarians”: anti-democracy voters who identify anti-democratic actions as such yet support them irrespective of whether or not the incumbent shares their ideological affinity.

Second are “populist democrats” who view attacks against specific institutions or advocacy groups as breaking down barriers between citizens and popular rule. This is particularly the case when those institutions and groups are viewed as “elitist” or oligarchic.<sup>viii</sup> Weakening them can therefore be viewed as enhancing vertical political accountability as Dahl might conceive of it.<sup>ix</sup>

But embracing an incumbent’s authoritarian tactics does not always serve a seemingly more laudable democratic principle. Some people, whether authoritarians or conditional democrats, find democracy as it is currently practiced ineffectual, unresponsive, corrupt, or threatening, and they simply want to “tear the system down” as quickly as possible. They may see this as a way to return to a putatively better (though often less inclusive) past or as a path to more decisive rule by a politician they prefer who nonetheless has authoritarian tendencies.

The World Values Survey documents a troubling rise in the loss of faith in democracy. Consider the United States: the share of individuals who believe that it is fairly good or very good to have a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections has risen from 24% in the mid-1990s to 38% in the late 2010s. Doubt in democracy as a good way to govern the country has risen from 9% in the mid-1990s to 17% in the early 2010s.

The United States is not alone in this trend. For example, the share of people who support having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections rose from 27% to 57% in Argentina from the mid-1990s to late 2010s and from 38% to 69% in Mexico over the same period.<sup>x</sup>

In countries where elections are decided by a few percentage points, this growing anti-democratic trend is becoming increasingly consequential. For example, “authoritarians” and “populist democrats” are shaping candidate selection to a greater degree than ever before, advancing the fortunes of political outsiders who promise to shake up or even break the system. These outsiders do not play by the traditional rules and often fight against them, bringing them into conflict with the rules and norms that govern political parties and even democracy itself.

### **A Reticence to Punish**

Simply because a substantial minority of citizens supports an incumbent who works to undermine democracy does not imply that democracy is doomed. After all, a democratic majority can oppose an incumbent’s anti-democratic actions, or those actions can be checked by other independent branches of government.

But the mere fact that a majority opposes an incumbent’s actions does not mean that they are willing to sanction him or her. Individuals may disagree on whether an anti-democratic action is a serious blow to democracy, and therefore on whether it is worth expending effort to try to counteract the action. Or, critically, individuals who oppose the incumbent’s attacks on democracy may believe that the appropriate way to register their discontent is at the polls rather than through (top-down) impeachment processes.

There may also be collective action barriers. Individuals may agree that an action is anti-democratic, but a considerable portion of the population may think that not many other citizens

will consider it worthy of concerted opposition. They consequently do not resist it because they think that doing so will be ineffectual. This creates a coordination problem with respect to defending democracy.

## **EXAMINING DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAS**

In order to examine these dynamics, we conducted a series of surveys with nationally representative samples of respondents in mid-2020 in some of the western hemisphere's largest countries: Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States. These countries have different experiences with democracy. The United States has a long history of democracy, though not without serious deficits. Mexico experienced authoritarian rule from the time of its founding until 2000, when the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) lost power and the country transitioned to democracy. Argentina and Brazil are between these extremes: both have flipped back and forth between democracy and dictatorship since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Military juntas in both countries stepped aside for democracy in the mid-1980s.

Despite these differing democratic histories, each of these countries is now facing challenges to democracy. In Brazil and Mexico, the traditional party systems have been eroding and political outsiders – Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico – have captured the presidency on the coattails of disgust with traditional parties viewed as corrupt and out of touch with the people. Bolsonaro has empowered Brazil's military and attacked its judiciary and the media. AMLO has concentrated power in the executive by attacking the courts and bureaucracy and turning to constitutionally dubious referenda to legitimize his agenda.

Similarly in the United States, Donald Trump demonized the media, fired “disloyal” career civil servants including inspector generals, trampled on norms of independence in the

Department of Justice, and sought to overturn the results of the 2020 election by intervening in state-level tallying and the Electoral College certification process.

Argentina is polarized by the Peronist Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who after facing term limits as president became a senator and then returned to the executive as vice president. Fernández intervened in the judiciary, undercut the media, and faced charges of crony capitalism.

In short, democracy faces headwinds in each of these countries. Their citizens are exposed to debates about the nature of and challenges to democracy. This makes this set of countries fertile ground for examining how citizens assess various anti-democratic actions by incumbents and how they would react to these actions.

### **Survey Design**

We conducted our study with Netquest in Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil, and with Lucid in the USA, who generated samples of around 4,400 citizens in each country. Both firms maintain a large panel of respondents who take brief on-line surveys in exchange for coupons or donations to charities of their choice. These are not a purely random samples of the population but are similar to other common opt-in samples from firms such as Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, and YouGov. To achieve representativeness, the survey firms admitted respondents in a way that filled pre-determined demographic quotas (for gender, age, education, income bracket and region of residence). We further use demographic information to correct for residual minor discrepancies from national representativeness by re-weighting our sample.<sup>xi</sup> The resulting “predicted probabilities” of our models therefore represent our best estimates of the nationally representative averages in each country.

The main portion of our survey entailed giving respondents vignettes about plausible and common democratic violations on the part of incumbent leaders and their parties: attempted

purges of disloyal bureaucrats and efforts to pack the judiciary with loyalists. To increase the likelihood that responses capture respondents' views of anti-democratic actions in a way not dictated strictly by their partisan attachments and in-country news cycles, we told respondents that the events described took place in a different country. We asked respondents to imagine that they were a citizen of that other country and then asked them whether they would support the action, whether they viewed the action as consistent with democracy, and whether they would support impeachment and removal proceedings in response to the action.<sup>xii</sup> Each respondent received two vignettes.

### ***Purging Disloyal Bureaucrats***

We first presented respondents with one of two randomly selected versions of a short vignette that describes a president who feels constrained by career civil servants who are not personally loyal to him.

In one version, which we randomly assigned to half of the study participants in each country, the president instructs apolitical career civil servants at the environmental protection agency (EPA) to implement new guidelines that loosen existing environmental protection rules. The civil servants refuse, arguing that the changes the president is pushing for will significantly harm the environment while also violating the legal mandate of the EPA. The president decides to remove those civil servants and replace them with loyalists.

In the second version, which the other half of our respondents read, the president instructs the department of justice (DoJ) to investigate his main political opponent whom he accuses of corruption. The DoJ's prosecutors, who have been appointed through a non-political meritocratic process, refuse the president's order, alleging that their mandate is to enforce the law, not to

serve the president's political agenda. The president decides to remove those career prosecutors and replace them with loyalists.

Both versions of this setup entail presidential abuses of power. However, respondents might view them differently. In particular, there may be greater opposition to attacking one of democracy's core watchdogs through a purge of DoJ prosecutors.

Both versions of this vignette feature three randomly assigned treatments:

*Change law:* Here, respondents read that the existing civil service law bans the firing of civil servants on the basis of their expertise-based decisions. The president repeals the law and fires the civil servants.

*Ignore law:* Here too, respondents read that the law bans the firing of civil servants on the basis of their expertise-based decisions. The president chooses to ignore the law and fires the civil servants.

*Ignore norm:* Here, respondents read that there is a long-standing norm against firing civil servants on the basis of their expertise-based decisions. The president ignores the norm and fires the civil servants.

The motivation for these three scenarios comes from notions about proceduralism. Even though the final action – purging civil servants – is identical across treatments, citizens may assess the action in light of the procedure underpinning it. Perhaps more citizens will support the incumbent's action and deem it to be consistent with democracy if it is taken within the bounds of the law. This may be true even if the law was changed to enable the action or if an incumbent uses “constitutional hardball” tactics – exploiting procedures, laws, and institutions for partisan gain in ways that push the bounds of legality and violate pre-established norms.<sup>xiii</sup>

Our focus on proceduralism comes partly in response to arguments that Trump, Bolsonaro, AMLO and others have exposed weaknesses in democracy by brazenly transgressing existing norms. These arguments imply that citizens view norm violations as perhaps less problematic than legal violations, and that codifying norms will help safeguard against anti-democratic presidents.

## *Reshaping the Supreme Court through Packing*

We next presented respondents with a vignette that features a president and ruling party that have been frustrated by the fact that the Supreme Court repeatedly strikes down some of their executive orders and legislation. The president and the ruling party decide to add sympathetic judges to the Supreme Court to ensure their ideological agenda can be advanced.

We randomly assigned subjects to one of three common discourses used by incumbents who seek to attack the independence of the courts:

*Polarization:* The president justifies his court packing decision by asserting that the current judges are ideologically biased in ways that endanger the country's core values; court packing is thus needed to curtail the rival ideology.

*Majoritarian:* The president justifies his court packing decision by claiming that his electoral mandate gives him the responsibility to appoint judges who will advance the interests and priorities of the majority.

*Procedural Legitimacy:* The president justifies his court packing decision by claiming that the current opposition party, when it was in power, eased the nomination process to allow it to appoint several sympathetic judges, making the current makeup of the Supreme Court illegitimate.

The logic for this setup is to test the extent to which respondents' views of democratic violations can be shaped by the justification that incumbents use as motivation for the violation. Different discourses might resonate differently with citizens' sense of fairness or justice.

Previous work has mainly explored the role partisan polarization and majoritarianism play in support for incumbent actions that are in tension with democracy.<sup>xiv</sup> Less attention has been placed on the role of procedural legitimacy. The idea is that (at least some) citizens may be more predisposed to tolerate undemocratic actions that deviate from the status quo if the status quo is thought to have been the product of illegitimate procedures. For example, public support for court packing may be higher if the court makeup is a product of past norm or law violations.

We cross the justification treatments with an ideology treatment: subjects read that the ruling party is either right-or left-wing in orientation while the ideology of the Supreme Court it

seeks to overhaul is the opposite. Since we ask respondents to place themselves on a right-left five-point scale, this setup allows us to code each respondent as ideologically congruent or incongruent with the ruling party. Ideologically congruent subjects may be particularly forgiving of incumbent attacks on the court. Furthermore, the effect of this congruence could vary according to the justification used to pack the court.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

We first present our results for the two experiments on purging disloyal bureaucrats followed by the results for court packing experiment.

### **Purging Disloyal Bureaucrats**

Figure 1 displays the first set of results. This figure focuses on the first set of experiments associated with purging disloyal bureaucrats (DoJ prosecutors in rows 1-2, and EPA civil servants in rows 3-4). It shows mean predicted probabilities by country for whether respondents find an incumbent president's actions "consistent with democracy" (rows 1 and 3) and whether respondents support the bureaucratic purge (rows 2 and 4).<sup>xv</sup> The figure provides separate estimates for each experimental condition. In other words, the point estimates in Figure 1 are split by whether respondents received the "change law," "ignore law," or "ignore norm" treatment. They are also split by an important moderator variable: whether respondents were supporters of the incumbent president in their country at the time of the survey.

Figure 1 illustrates several key points. Overall levels of support for a president purging civil servants for political reasons are generally low (11.1% when pooled across countries and treatment conditions). Respondents also generally judged the move as inconsistent with democracy (88% when pooled across countries and treatment conditions). Nonetheless, troubling

minorities in these countries support purging civil servants, in the range of 10-35% depending on the country and which bureaucrats are being purged.

In contrast to some of our prior expectations, levels of support are similar regardless of whether the bureaucrats targeted for removal worked in the EPA or the public prosecutor's office. This finding is somewhat surprising. One could imagine that citizens might identify the public prosecutor's office as a democratic watchdog needing special protection in order to preserve checks and balances. Nonetheless, respondents viewed these scenarios in a similar light.

**[FIGURE 1 HERE]**

The results in Figure 1 also indicate that the precise nature of an incumbent's anti-democratic actions -- whether they break norms, break the law, or change the law -- has at best a mild influence on how citizens view them. Recent scholarship suggests that many citizens view violations of the law by incumbents differently than norm violations.<sup>xvi</sup> Because norm violations respect the formal letter of the law and existing legal procedures, they may not be viewed as attacks on democracy per se whereas legal violations may be viewed as crossing a red line. We find some evidence consistent with this hypothesis, especially for those who voted for the incumbent president. The share of respondents supporting the purge at the EPA (Figure 1, row 3) was significantly higher when pro-incumbent respondents were assigned to the "ignore norm" treatment, as compared to when they were assigned to the "ignore law" treatment. The difference was especially high in the USA (6.7 percentage points, or pp), Mexico (5.9 pp) and Brazil (5.7 pp), compared to Argentina (2.2 pp). But the effects are borderline statistically significant, and the difference between the "ignore norm" and "ignore law" treatments for those who did not vote for the incumbent was effectively zero in all four countries.

The strongest finding in Figure 1 is the clear difference in support for the incumbent's actions based on whether individuals (self-reportedly) voted for the incumbent. In all four countries, individuals who support the incumbent president are consistently more likely to approve of presidential efforts in a hypothetical country to purge disloyal bureaucrats. The gap in approval between incumbent supporters and non-supporters was larger in the countries with right-wing incumbents. It was largest in the United States, ranging between a 14-point gap in support of the purge ("ignore law") and a 23-point gap ("ignore norm"). It was smallest in Argentina: between 5 points ("change law") and 10 points ("ignore norm"). Brazil and Mexico were between these two extremes.

On one hand, this finding is consistent with the idea that citizens view the anti-democratic actions of incumbent politicians through a partisan lens. On the other hand, recall that respondents were told they were reading fictitious vignettes, which provided no information on the partisan identity of the incumbent. Thus, the gap in support for the action of a fictitious incumbent between those who voted for the real incumbent president in their country and those who did not may represent more general anti-democratic tendencies, same-party bias, or most likely some combination of the two.

Another key finding is that respondents judge actions as "consistent with democracy" and support those actions at very similar levels. There is therefore little evidence that people support these actions because they oppose democracy, or because of extreme polarization. Instead, when people support these actions they do not consider them to be anti-democratic.

Figure 2 examines whether citizen opposition to the anti-democratic actions of an incumbent translates into support for impeachment. As in Figure 1, the results are broken down by country, by which experimental version of the bureaucratic purge respondents received,

support for the incumbent, and by the nature of the violation respondents received for the anti-democratic action on the part of the incumbent. The results are striking: respondents largely oppose impeachment processes against incumbents who seek to undermine democracy. The margins of opposition to impeachment are large on average, and only in a few versions of the experimental treatment do we find even opponents of the incumbent dipping below 50% opposition to impeachment. Incumbent supporters tend to oppose impeachment at levels of 70% or greater (and they are especially high in the USA). The gap between incumbent supporters and opponents on opposition to impeachment is narrowest in Argentina and Mexico and widest in Brazil and the US.

**[FIGURE 2 HERE]**

In concert with the results displayed in Figure 1, this suggests that while citizens may not approve of an incumbent who attacks democracy, they do not think that such actions merit extraordinary efforts at incumbent removal. Most would rather let elections speak. This poses a conundrum for democracy, since incumbent attacks on the system can entrench their rule.

**Court Packing**

We next turn to the court packing experiment. Figure 3 displays results for how respondents view an attempt by the incumbent president and ruling party to place loyalists on the Supreme Court in order to advance a political agenda that the Court is currently blocking. The figure shows predicted probabilities for whether respondents find these actions “consistent with democracy” and whether respondents support the court-packing scheme. Estimates are presented separately for each country.

The point estimates in Figure 3 are split by whether respondents received the “legitimacy,” “majoritarian,” or “polarization” treatment justification for court packing. They are

also again split by the moderator variable of whether respondents are supporters of the incumbent president in their country.

**[FIGURE 3 HERE]**

As with the experiments on purging civil servants, support for court packing is low in general. Most respondents, regardless of their political affiliation, view this action as inconsistent with democracy. But as with purging civil servants, a consequential minority approves court packing in each country. This minority hovers around 12% in Argentina but is closer to 22-25% in Brazil and the United States.

Here too, whether an individual voted for the incumbent strongly paints how they view court packing. Individuals who voted for the their country's incumbent are far more likely to support court packing to advance the fictitious government's agenda and are far more likely to judge the action as consistent with democracy. Again, the difference between these two groups is clearest for countries ruled by right-wing versus left-wing incumbents relative to the experiments on purging civil servants. In Brazil and the United States, support among incumbent voters is around 40%. Among supporters of the incumbent's opponent, support in these countries for court packing is closer to 10%. The gap between supporters and opponents of the incumbent is smallest in Argentina, where court packing is viewed rather negatively across the board. Support for court packing in Mexico is between that of Argentina on the one hand and Brazil and the United States on the other hand.

This finding is consistent with the first set of experiments on purging civil servants. Citizens view court-packing as they view attacks on the civil service -- through a partisan lens.

By contrast, how incumbents justify their court-packing scheme has little discernible impact on how citizens assess it. Whether an incumbent presented court-packing according to a

majoritarian, legitimacy, or polarization logic was largely inconsequential. A majoritarian justification held slightly more weight in Argentina and Brazil, but not in Mexico and the United States. Of course, it is possible that when citizens are doused with a constant flow of single-sided messaging over years, the effects could be more substantial.

Figure 4 next examines whether respondents believe that court packing merits removing the incumbent from office through an impeachment process. In a similar fashion to Figure 3, the results are split by country, by support for the incumbent, and by which justification respondents received for court packing on the part of the incumbent.

The results echo the results in Figure 2. Respondents by and large oppose impeachment against an incumbent who tries to pack the courts. Opposition to impeachment is considerable in all of these countries: it hovers around 60-65% on average. But there is a large difference between incumbent supporters and opponents. Opponents of the incumbent tend to be split fairly evenly on impeachment. Only in Brazil and the United States do most opponents consider impeachment to be an appropriate response to court packing. At least 80% of supporters of the incumbent, by contrast, oppose impeachment in these countries. As with the purging of civil servants, the gap between incumbent supporters and opponents on opposition to impeachment for court packing is especially wide in Brazil and the US.

**[FIGURE 4 HERE]**

One main conclusion from the court packing experiment is therefore similar to that from the experiments on purging civil servants: citizens identify the action as inconsistent with democracy, and they do not support the anti-democratic behavior of the incumbent. Simultaneously, however, they also do not support removing the incumbent through an extraordinary non-electoral measure such as impeachment.

## CONCLUSION

Democracy in the Americas is under pressure. But it is not the type of pressure that is typically assumed. Support for incumbent violations of democratic principles, laws, and norms is generally low. Citizens are competent at recognizing violations as inconsistent with democracy, and this is true regardless of whether incumbents transgress formal laws or norms. Furthermore, how incumbents frame their justifications for anti-democratic actions has little impact on how citizens view them, at least in the context of our study.

But non-trivial minorities—from one in ten citizens to one in three, depending on the country and the type of violation -- support incumbent efforts to erode democracy. And there is a clear partisan divide. Individuals are much more likely to support the anti-democratic actions of a fictitious incumbent if they voted for their own incumbent at home. Opponents of the incumbent at home are systematically more likely to view a fictitious incumbent's actions in another country in a harsh light. And this difference was much more prominent in the two of our countries with right-wing incumbents (Brazil and the United States) than in the two with left-wing incumbents (Argentina and Mexico). This suggests a divide in many countries into a politics of “us” versus “them,” but it may also reflect to some degree more general anti-democratic tendencies.

People are also reticent to sanction an incumbent that engages in democratic violations with a response that bypasses elections like impeachment. While they may not support the incumbent's behavior, few citizens judge it severe enough to rise to the level of top-down removal. Most would rather have elections adjudicate the incumbent's behavior. For incumbents who would use this to attack democracy in a way that tilts the playing field to their advantage in

the short term, this is an opening they can readily exploit. It simultaneously poses a conundrum for democracy advocates.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Nancy Bermeo, "On democratic backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (January 2016): 5-19.

<sup>ii</sup> Larry Diamond, *Ill winds: Saving democracy from Russian rage, Chinese ambition, and American complacency* (Penguin Books, 2020); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

<sup>iii</sup> Manipulation may be easier in the real world if people are barraged with a narrative over many months. This may especially be the case if voters access political information through one-sided media channels in which facts and fictions are curated to their imputed preferences.

<sup>iv</sup> Dorothy Kronick, B. Plunkett, and P. Rodríguez, "Heresthetic threats to democracy: Evidence from Venezuela," Working paper, 2019.

<sup>v</sup> Matthew Graham and Milan Svobik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 392-409. Consistent with our findings, these authors also find that strong majorities of citizens recognize democratic violations.

<sup>vi</sup> Guy Grossman, Dorothy Kronick, Matt Levendusky, and Marc Meredith, "Let the majority rule," Forthcoming, *Journal of Experimental Political Science*.

<sup>vii</sup> Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo, *Authoritarianism and the elite origins of democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>viii</sup> See, for instance, Dan Slater, "Democratic careening," *World Politics* 65 (2013): 729.

<sup>ix</sup> Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

<sup>x</sup> In Brazil this figure has been fairly constant: it was 58% in the mid-1990s and 57% in the late 2010s. Trends in doubt in democracy as a good form of governance are more mixed for these countries. While it rose in Mexico from 18% in the mid-1990s to 24% in the late 2010s, it was nearly constant in Argentina and dropped slightly in Brazil.

<sup>xi</sup> See the Appendix for details. We follow best practice for survey experiments and report results for both unweighted and weight samples. See Annie Franco, Neil Malhotra, Gabor Simonovits, and L.J. Zigerell, "Developing standards for post-hoc weighting in population-based survey experiments," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 4, no. 2 (2017): 161-172.

We use calibrated (or raking) weights as described in Stanislav Kolenikov, "Calibrating survey data using iterative proportional fitting (raking)," *The Stata Journal* 14, no. 1 (2014): 22-59.

<sup>xii</sup> We also collected information on attitudes toward democracy that tracked World Values Survey questions and information on how respondents view the quality of democracy in their country at present and in the future. Our survey instruments are in the Appendix.

<sup>xiii</sup> The term and definition are from Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).

<sup>xiv</sup> On polarization, see Graham and Svobik (2020). On majoritarianism, see Grossman et al. (2020).

<sup>xv</sup> The full set of marginal effects for the experiments are in the Appendix.

<sup>xvi</sup> Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018).