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THE AMERICAS: WHEN DO VOTERS SUPPORT POWER GRABS?

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In countries around the globe, democracy 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 longstanding core tenets of liberal democracy, including an active and engaged free press as well as the independence of the justice system and the civil service more broadly. Politicians in countries as wide-ranging as Bolivia, Hungary, and Poland have eroded 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.¹ 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 media. Second, 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 frameworks, expanding executive powers, eliminating term limits, disenfranchising minorities, and drafting new constitutions to cement these changes into the national political system.²

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

Why do many voters in democracies either support or choose to ig-

nore antidemocratic actions by elected incumbents? Why are transgressions against democratic laws and norms punished infrequently? And how much is public opinion affected by the means incumbents employ

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to neutralize checks and balances? For example, do voters hold a narrow, legalistic view of democratic institutions that opens opportunities for officeholders 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 percent of the popu-

lation of the Americas. While they have different histories of democratic rule, all face varying degrees of challenges to their democratic institutions. We fielded our surveys 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 threats from right-wing incumbents (Brazil and the United States). The incumbents at the time were Alberto Fernández and Cristina Fernández (no relation) 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 sympathetic judges. After reading each scenario and being told that these events occurred recently in another country, respondents were instructed to imagine they were a citizen of this country and asked 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 checks and balances. We find that most respondents identify transgressions against democracy as such, and that overall levels of support for such actions are generally low. When prompted with scenarios similar to those that have occurred throughout the region, most people state their opposition to democratic violations by incumbents.

Furthermore, our research suggests that it could be difficult for incumbents to manipulate how people view antidemocratic actions: Different justifications for violations—whether appeals to partisan polarization, to legitimacy, or to majoritarianism—do not radically shift

respondents' support for these antidemocratic acts. Of course, it is possible that manipulation could be easier in real-life situations where citizens are doused for years with a constant flow of one-sided messaging, particularly through biased media outlets.

We also find that breaking democratic norms as opposed to breaking statutory laws does not seem to increase acceptance for democratic violations. When assessing incumbent respect for horizontal checks and balances, citizens do not appear to take a strictly legalistic view 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 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 too sizeable to be dismissed as a “radical fringe.”

Furthermore, across all four countries, respondents who (self-reportedly) voted for the incumbent president are considerably more willing to support antidemocratic actions than those who did not. Some of these individuals support democratic violations since they view these actions as consistent with democracy; yet others support those actions despite recognizing that they are inconsistent with democracy. The gap between pro- and anti-incumbent individuals in their support for antidemocratic actions is especially large in the countries with right-wing incumbents: the United States and Brazil. Backers of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro 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 antidemocratic actions by incumbents and oppose them in principle also oppose severe punishments for incumbents such as impeachment. Most would rather let consequences flow from the ballot box. This provides would-be authoritarians a pathway to eroding democracy 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 using means outside the “normal” electoral process to punish power grabs.

With antidemocratic 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—as well as to the snowballing trend of 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 cannot necessarily know or predict that a leader will engage in antidemocratic activity.³ Perhaps the politician is a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” and dissembles about his or her true intentions. Or perhaps citizens may think that a politician will not actually follow through on some of her or his harshest critiques of the system, whether because they view it as bluster or because they anticipate that the system will be able to restrain the politician. Regardless, by the time such a leader is elected and voters realize their mistake, it is too late for them to effectively oppose the new officeholder. Voters of this kind, who backed an antidemocratic politician out of shortsightedness, should identify antidemocratic actions as such and oppose them.

Second, citizens may be “conditional democrats” who trade off democratic principles for ideological preferences.⁴ Citizens may be willing to tolerate an antidemocratic incumbent who delivers on their partisan demands, especially when politics is highly polarized. In a polarized environment, citizens who withdraw support from an antidemocratic 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. We would expect voters in this category, who sacrifice democratic principles for partisan advantage, to identify antidemocratic actions as such yet support them when undertaken by an incumbent who shares their ideology.

Third, citizens may have differing ideas about 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.⁵ For such voters, even actions such as the political exclusion of parts of the public (as in apartheid South Africa or the southern United States under Jim Crow) would be cast as consistent with democracy, even if undertaken by an incumbent whom they disagreed with ideologically, so long as that incumbent was duly elected.

A growing antidemocratic minority. There is also an alternative possibility: Some citizens may simply embrace antidemocratic 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 nonresponsiveness and celebrate attacks on 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.⁶

In addition to “conditional democrats,” at least two other stripes of people support antidemocratic actions. First are “authoritarians”: anti-democracy voters who both identify antidemocratic actions as such and support them irrespective of whether 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.⁷ Weakening them can therefore be viewed as enhancing vertical political accountability as Robert Dahl might conceive of it.⁸

But citizens who embrace an incumbent’s authoritarian tactics do not always do so in the name of an ostensibly higher 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.” 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.

The World Values Survey documents a troubling decline in faith in democracy. In the United States, for instance, 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 rose from 24 percent in the mid-1990s to 38 percent in the late 2010s. Doubt in democracy as a good way to govern the country rose from 9 percent in the mid-1990s to 17 percent in the early 2010s. Similarly, the share of people who support having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress and elections rose from 27 percent to 57 percent in Argentina between the mid-1990s and the late 2010s and from 38 percent to 69 percent in Mexico over the same period.⁹

In countries where elections are decided by a few percentage points, this growing antidemocratic trend is becoming increasingly consequential. “Authoritarian” and “populist democrat” voters are shaping candidate selection to a greater degree than ever before, advancing the fortunes of political outsiders who promise to shake up or break the system. These outsiders do not play by the traditional rules; indeed, they often fight against the rules and norms that govern political parties and even democracy itself.

A reticence to punish. Democracy is not automatically doomed simply because a substantial minority of citizens support an incumbent who works to undermine it. After all, a democratic majority can oppose an incumbent’s antidemocratic 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 antidemocratic action constitutes a serious blow to democracy, and therefore on whether it is worth expending effort to try to counteract that action. Or, critically, individuals who oppose the incumbent’s attacks on democracy may believe that the appropriate way

to register their discontent is from the bottom up at the polls rather than from the top down through an impeachment process.

There may also be collective-action barriers. Even where individuals actually agree that an action is antidemocratic, a considerable portion of the population may believe that few other citizens will view it as worthy of concerted opposition. Consequently, they do not resist it, since 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 democratic experiences. 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 Institutional Revolutionary Party lost power and the country transitioned to democracy. Argentina and Brazil have both flipped back and forth between democracy and dictatorship since the mid-twentieth century, with military juntas giving way to democratic regimes in the mid-1980s.

Despite these differing histories, each of these countries is now facing challenges to democracy. In Brazil and Mexico, political outsiders—Bolsonaro and AMLO, respectively—have ridden to the presidency on the coattails of disgust with traditional parties viewed as corrupt and out of touch. Bolsonaro has empowered Brazil's military and assailed 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 inspectors-general, trampled on norms of independence in the Department of Justice, and sought to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election by intervening in state-level tallying and the Electoral College certification process. Argentina is polarized by Peronist politician Cristina Fernández, who after facing term limits as president (2007–15) 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 types of antidemocratic 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 United States. These organizations generated samples of around 4,400 citizens in each country. Each firm maintains a large panel of respondents who take brief online surveys in exchange for coupons or donations to charities of their choice. These respondents do not make up purely random samples of the population, but they 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 that filled predetermined demographic quotas (for gender, age, education, income bracket, and region of residence). We further use demographic information to correct for residual minor divergences from national representativeness by re-weighting our sample.¹⁰ 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 presenting respondents with vignettes featuring plausible and common democratic violations carried out by incumbent leaders and their parties: attempted purges of disloyal bureaucrats and efforts to pack the judiciary with loyalists. To increase the likelihood that responses would capture respondents’ views of antidemocratic actions in a way not dictated strictly by their partisan attachments and national news cycles, we told respondents that the events described took place in a different country. We instructed 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.¹¹ Each respondent received two vignettes.

Purging disloyal bureaucrats. We first presented respondents with one of two randomly selected versions of a short vignette describing 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 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 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 nonpolitical, 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, we might expect that a purge of DoJ prosecutors would engender greater opposition, insofar as it would be viewed as an attack on one of democracy's core watchdogs.

Whichever version they received, respondents were presented with one of three randomly assigned scenarios describing the presidential response:

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 longstanding norm against firing civil servants on the basis of their expertise-based decisions. The president ignores the norm and fires the civil servants.

The differences across these three scenarios are meant to capture the potential significance of proceduralism. Even though the final action—purging civil servants—is identical in each case, more citizens might support the incumbent's action, and deem it to be consistent with democracy, if it is taken within the bounds of the law. This could be true even if the incumbent changes the law to enable the action or uses “constitutional hardball” tactics—exploiting procedures, laws, and institutions for partisan gain in ways that push the bounds of legality and violate preestablished norms.¹²

Our focus on proceduralism comes partly in response to arguments that Trump, Bolsonaro, AMLO and others have exposed weaknesses in democracy's guardrails 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 to safeguard against antidemocratic presidents.

Reshaping the supreme court through packing. We next presented respondents with a vignette in which a president and ruling party have been frustrated by the supreme court repeatedly striking down executive orders and legislative acts. The president and ruling party decide to increase the number of seats on the supreme court and add sympathetic judges to ensure that the government can advance its ideological agenda.

We randomly presented subjects with one of three discourses commonly used by incumbents who attack the independence of the courts:

Polarization: The president asserts that the current judges are ideologically biased in ways that endanger the country's core values; court packing is thus needed to curb the rival ideology.

Majoritarian: The president claims 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 claims 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.

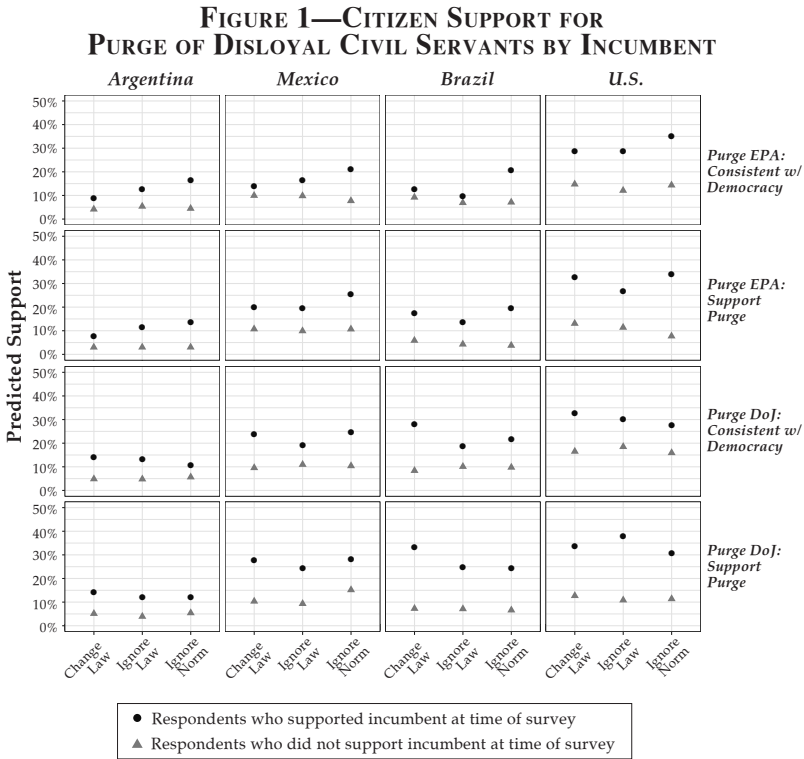
These prompts are intended to test the extent to which respondents' views of democratic violations can be shaped by the justification incumbents provide. Different discourses might resonate differently with citizens' sense of fairness or justice.

Previous studies have mainly explored the roles that partisan polarization and majoritarianism play in support for incumbent actions that are in tension with democracy.¹³ Less attention has been paid to 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 itself seen as the product of illegitimate procedures. For example, public support for court packing may be higher if the preexisting court makeup resulted from past violations of laws or norms.

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 supreme court it seeks to overhaul embodies the opposite ideology. 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. We might expect ideologically congruent subjects to be particularly forgiving of incumbent attacks on the court. Furthermore, the effect of these ideological affinities could vary according to the justification used to pack the court.

For and Against Antidemocratic Action

Purging disloyal bureaucrats. Figure 1 shows the results from the set of experiments about purging disloyal bureaucrats (EPA civil servants in rows 1–2, DoJ prosecutors 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).¹⁴ The figure



provides separate estimates depending on whether respondents were presented with the “change law,” the “ignore law,” or the “ignore norm” scenario. The point estimates 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 percent when pooled across countries and treatment conditions). Respondents also generally judged the move as inconsistent with democracy (88 percent when pooled across countries and treatment conditions). Nonetheless, troublingly large minorities support purging civil servants, with such views expressed by shares of the population in the range of 10 to 35 percent depending on the country and which bureaucrats are being purged. Contrary 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.

The results in Figure 1 also indicate that the precise nature of an incumbent’s antidemocratic actions—whether they break norms, break the law, or change the law—has at best a mild influence on how citizens view these actions. Recent scholarship suggests that many citizens

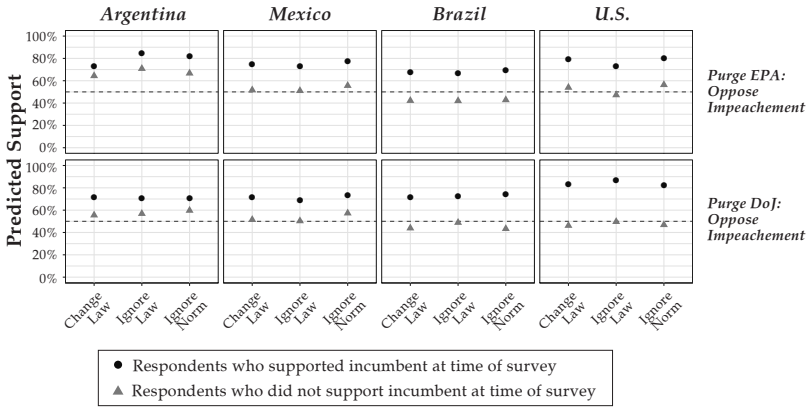
view violations of the law by incumbents differently than norm violations.¹⁵ Because norm violations respect the formal letter of the law, they may not be viewed as attacks on democracy per se, whereas legal violations may be seen as crossing a red line. We find some evidence consistent with this hypothesis, especially among those who voted for their country's incumbent president. The share of respondents supporting the purge at the EPA (Figure 1, row 2) was significantly higher when pro-incumbent respondents were assessing a hypothetical officeholder who ignored a norm rather than a law. The difference was especially high in the United States (6.7 percentage points, or pp), Mexico (5.9 pp) and Brazil (5.7 pp), while in Argentina it was only 2.2 pp. But the effects are of borderline statistical significance, 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. Similarly, respondents who voted for their country's incumbent president did not view purging DoJ bureaucrats substantially differently when it was done by breaking a norm as opposed to by ignoring prevailing law (Figure 1, row 4).

The strongest finding in Figure 1 is the clear difference in margins of support for the hypothetical antidemocratic action between individuals who (self-reportedly) voted for their country's incumbent president and those who did not. In all four countries, individuals who support the incumbent are consistently more likely to approve of efforts by the fictional president of a hypothetical country to purge disloyal bureaucrats. The gap in approval between incumbent supporters and nonsupporters 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 EPA purge (among respondents who received the "ignore law" scenario) 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. The same pattern emerges in the DoJ purge.

On the one hand, this finding is consistent with the idea that citizens view the antidemocratic 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 antidemocratic tendencies; respondent favoritism toward their own party if they imagine that the fictional incumbent, like their real incumbent, belongs to their preferred party; or, most likely, some combination of the two.

Another key finding is that respondents judge actions as "consistent with democracy" and express support for those actions at very

FIGURE 2—CITIZEN SUPPORT FOR IMPEACHMENT IN RESPONSE TO PURGE OF DISLOYAL CIVIL SERVANTS BY INCUMBENT



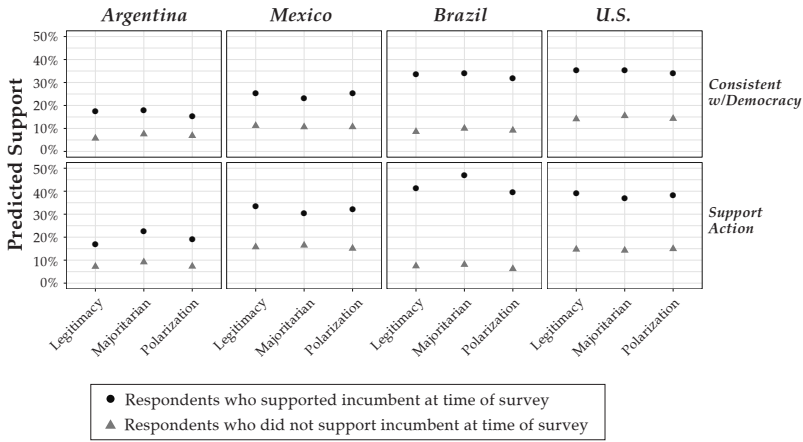
similar levels. There is therefore little evidence that people support norm-violating acts because they oppose democracy, or because of extreme polarization. Instead, when people support these actions they do not consider them to be antidemocratic.

Figure 2 examines whether citizen opposition to the antidemocratic 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 (EPA or DoJ), by support for the incumbent, and by whether the respondents were evaluating a “change law,” an “ignore law,” or an “ignore norm” scenario. 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 scenarios do we find even opponents of the incumbent dipping below 50 percent opposition to impeachment. Incumbent supporters tend to oppose impeachment at levels of 70 percent or greater (and this position is especially prevalent in the United States). The gap between incumbent supporters and opponents on the issue of impeachment is narrowest in Argentina and Mexico and widest in Brazil and the United States.

In concert with the results displayed in Figure 1, these findings suggest that while citizens may not approve of an incumbent who attacks democracy, they do not think that such actions merit extraordinary efforts to remove him or her from office. Most would rather let elections speak. This poses a conundrum for democracy, since incumbents’ attacks on the system can in fact make it difficult to vote them out.

Court packing. We next turn to the court-packing experiment. Figure 3 shows how respondents view an attempt by the incumbent president

FIGURE 3—CITIZEN SUPPORT FOR COURT PACKING BY INCUMBENT



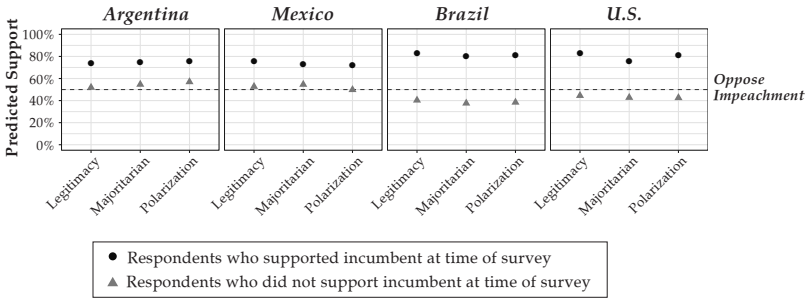
and ruling party to add new seats and place loyalists on the supreme court in order to advance a political agenda that the court is currently blocking. The figure shows predicted probabilities for whether respondents find these actions “consistent with democracy” and whether respondents support the court-packing scheme. Estimates are presented separately for each country.

The point estimates in Figure 3 are split by whether respondents were presented with the “legitimacy,” the “majoritarian,” or the “polarization” 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.

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 of court packing in each country. This minority hovers around 12 percent in Argentina, around 18 percent in Mexico, and around 22 to 25 percent in Brazil and the United States.

Here too, there are notable differences between individuals who voted for the incumbent and those who did not. Individuals who voted for 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 this action as consistent with democracy. Again, the difference between these two groups is clearest for countries ruled by right-wing as opposed to left-wing incumbents. In Brazil and the United States, support among incumbent voters is around 40 percent. Among supporters of the incumbent’s opponent, support in these countries for court packing is closer to 10 percent in Brazil and 15 percent in the United States. The

FIGURE 4—CITIZEN SUPPORT FOR IMPEACHMENT IN RESPONSE TO COURT PACKING BY INCUMBENT



gap between supporters and opponents of the incumbent is again smallest in Argentina, where court packing is viewed rather negatively across the board. Support for court packing in Mexico falls in between.

This finding is consistent with the results of the 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 the hypothetical incumbent justified court-packing with a reference to a majoritarian, legitimacy, or polarization logic was largely inconsequential. A majoritarian justification held slightly more weight than the others in Argentina and Brazil, but not in Mexico and the United States.

Figure 4 next examines whether respondents believe that court packing merits removing the incumbent from office through an impeachment process. As in Figure 3, the results are split by country, by support for the incumbent, and by which justification respondents received for the decision to pack the court.

The results echo those in Figure 2. Respondents by and large oppose impeaching an incumbent who tries to pack the supreme court. Opposition to impeachment is considerable in all four countries, hovering around 60 to 65 percent 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 percent 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 in attitudes toward impeachment for court packing is especially wide in Brazil and the United States.

The same pattern is thus evident in both the court-packing experiment and the experiments on purging civil servants: Citizens by and large identify the action as inconsistent with democracy, and they do not

support the antidemocratic behavior of the incumbent. At the same time, they do not support removing the incumbent through an extraordinary nonelectoral measure such as impeachment.

Whither Democracy in the Americas?

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 only norms. Furthermore, how incumbents choose to justify their anti-democratic actions has little impact on how citizens view these actions, at least in the context of our study.

But nontrivial 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 in the four countries we examined are much more likely to support the antidemocratic 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 take a harsh view of a fictitious incumbent's actions in another country. 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 more general antidemocratic tendencies.

People are also reticent to sanction an incumbent who engages in democratic violations with a response, such as impeachment, that bypasses elections. While they may not support the incumbent's behavior, few citizens judge it severe enough to warrant top-down removal. Most would rather have elections adjudicate controversies over the incumbent's behavior. For incumbents prepared to attack democracy in ways that tilt the electoral playing field to their advantage, this is an opening they can readily exploit. For democracy advocates, it poses a thorny conundrum.

NOTES

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7. See, for instance, Dan Slater, “Democratic Careening,” *World Politics* 65 (October 2013): 729–63.

8. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

9. In Brazil this figure has been fairly constant: It was 58 percent in the mid-1990s and 57 percent in the late 2010s. Exact relevant survey years are 1995, 2011, and 2017 for the United States; 1995 and 2017 for Argentina; 1996 and 2018 for Mexico; and 1997 and 2018 for Brazil. Trends in doubt about democracy as a good form of governance are more mixed for these countries. While it rose in Mexico from 18 percent in the mid-1990s to 24 percent in the late 2010s, it was nearly constant in Argentina and dropped slightly in Brazil.

10. See the online Appendix posted on the authors’ websites for details. We follow best practice for survey experiments and report results for both unweighted and weight samples. See Annie Franco et al., “Developing Standards for Post-Hoc Weighting in Population-Based Survey Experiments,” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 4 (Summer 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 (March 2014): 22–59.

11. 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 can be viewed in the online Appendix.

12. The term and definition are from Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

13. On polarization, see Graham and Svobik, “Democracy in America?”. On majoritarianism, see Grossman et al., “Let the Majority Rule.”

14. The full set of marginal effects for the experiments are in the online Appendix.

15. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

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