

# ANTI-DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES, THE WINNER-LOSER GAP, AND THE RISE OF THE LEFT IN MEXICO

*Actitudes antidemocráticas, la brecha entre ganadores  
y perdedores y el ascenso de la izquierda en México*

*Atitudes antidemocráticas, a lacuna entre vencedores  
e perdedores e a ascensão da esquerda no México*

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## **Abstract**

Weak support for democratic norms and institutions poses a serious challenge to the survival of democracy. Studies of public opinion often assume that citizens hold politicians accountable for respecting democratic norms. This study examines citizens' attitudes toward democracy in Mexico. It focuses on the 2018 election as a critical juncture when Andrés Manuel López Obrador (MORENA) won the presidential election on his third attempt. Data from the LAPOP's Americas Barometer (2012-2019) show that—consistent with the loser-winner gap literature —President López Obrador's supporters increased their satisfaction with democracy after the 2018 election. However, unlike most voters who elected winners of elections, they did not become more committed to democracy. Even in some cases, after 2018, AMLO voters are more likely than other partisan groups to support anti-democratic interventions, particularly support for a coup when crime is high. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the winner-loser gap in the context of Mexico's democratic erosion. Although the results of this paper are based

on exploratory evidence, they highlight that an important portion of voters is willing to sacrifice democracy and support their co-partisans' actions that undermine democracy.

**Palabras clave:**  
*brecha ganador-perdedor;*  
*democracia;*  
*normas democráticas;*  
*México*

#### Resumen

El débil apoyo a las normas e instituciones democráticas plantea desafíos importantes para la sobrevivencia de las democracias. Un supuesto clave en los estudios de opinión pública es que los ciudadanos rinden cuentas a los políticos cuando no respetan las normas democráticas. El presente estudio examina las actitudes de los ciudadanos hacia la democracia en México. Se centra en las elecciones de 2018 como un momento crítico cuando Andrés Manuel López Obrador (MORENA) ganó las elecciones presidenciales en su tercer intento. El presente artículo se basa en datos del Barómetro de las Américas de LAPOP (2012-2019) y, consistente con la literatura sobre la brecha entre perdedores y ganadores, encontramos que después de las elecciones de 2018, los partidarios del presidente López Obrador aumentaron su satisfacción con la democracia. Sin embargo, a diferencia de la mayoría de los votantes que eligen a los ganadores de las elecciones, los votantes de AMLO aumentaron su compromiso normativo con la democracia. Incluso, en algunos casos, después de 2018, los votantes de AMLO tienen más probabilidades que otros grupos partidistas de apoyar intervenciones antidemocráticas, en particular el apoyo a un golpe de estado cuando la criminalidad es alta. Los hallazgos de este estudio contribuyen a nuestra comprensión de la brecha entre ganadores y perdedores en el contexto de la erosión democrática en México. Si bien los resultados de este artículo se basan en evidencia exploratoria, resaltan que una porción importante de votantes está dispuesta a sacrificar la democracia en beneficio de sus intereses partidistas y apoyar acciones iliberales que socavan la democracia.

**Palavras-chave:**  
*lacuna perdedores e vencedores;*  
*democracia;*  
*normas democráticas;*  
*México*

#### Resumo

O fraco apoio às normas e instituições democráticas representa desafios significativos para a sobrevivência democrática. Uma premissa fundamental em estudos de opinião pública é que os cidadãos responsabilizam os políticos pelo respeito às normas democráticas. O presente estudo examina as atitudes dos cidadãos em relação à democracia no México, com foco nas eleições de 2018 como um momento crítico, quando Andrés Manuel López Obrador (MORENA) venceu a eleição presidencial em sua terceira tentativa. Com base em dados do Barômetro das Américas da LAPOP (2012-2019), descobrimos que, em consonância com a literatura sobre a lacuna entre perdedores e vencedores, os apoiadores do Presidente López Obrador aumentaram sua satisfação com a democracia após as eleições de 2018. No entanto, ao contrário da maioria dos eleitores que escolheram os vencedores das eleições, eles não se tornaram mais comprometidos com a democracia. Em alguns casos, após 2018, os eleitores de AMLO são mais propensos do que outros grupos partidários a apoiar intervenções antidemocráticas, especialmente o apoio a um golpe em momentos de alta criminalidade. Os resultados deste estudo contribuem para nossa compreensão da lacuna entre vencedores e perdedores no contexto da erosão democrática no México. Embora os resultados deste artigo se baseiem em evidências exploratórias, eles destacam que uma parte importante dos eleitores está disposta a sacrificar a democracia e apoiar ações iliberais e partidárias que minam a democracia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Weak support for democratic norms and institutions poses significant challenges for the consolidation of democracy. A key assumption in studies of public opinion is that citizens hold politicians accountable for respecting democratic norms (Lippman 1925, Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Public disapproval and punishment of incumbents' authoritarian behavior are important checks on incumbents' actions (Helmke and Levitsky. 2006). If voters do not punish politicians who violate democratic norms, politicians may feel emboldened to continue their attacks, leading to democratic decline.

The present study examines citizens' attitudes toward democracy in Mexico. It focuses on the 2018 election as a critical juncture when Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) won the presidential election on his third attempt. During the 2018 presidential campaign, López Obrador denounced the main parties in Mexico— the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN)—for being part of a corrupt elite that robbed him of the presidency in 2006 and 2012 (Bruhn, 2012) and impoverished Mexico with neoliberal policies and widespread corruption. In his third attempt to win the presidential elections, he won with 53 percent of the vote and his coalition won a majority in Congress. His historic victory in 2018 was an outcome of a strong rejection of the country's major parties exacerbated by affective polarization (Castro Cornejo 2023), particularly negative partisanship against the PRI and the PAN. López Obrador was able to build a broad coalition of voters (Aguilar 2021; Aparicio and Castro Cornejo 2021) and received support equally from men/women, lower-educated/highly-educated voters, younger and older generations, rural/urban voters—who rejected the major parties in Mexico.

López Obrador was inaugurated on December of 2018. Since taking over government, as different studies argue, Mexico has faced democratic threats from López Obrador's illiberal agenda: he has concentrated power in the executive; attacked the courts, the bureaucracy, and the electoral authorities; he weakened autonomous government institutions and undermined institutional checks and balances (Aguilar Rivera 2022, Albertus and Grossman 2021, Mainwaring and Pérez Liñán 2023, Monsiváis Carrillo 2023, Petersen and Somuano 2021, Sanchez Talanquer and Greene 2021). In this context, it is important to analyze how the Mexican public views violations of democratic norms. Relying on data from the LAPOP's Americas Barometer (2012-2019) and, consistent with the loser-winner gap literature (Anderson et al 2005, Blais and Gelineau 2007), we find that after the 2018 presidential election, President López Obrador's supporters increased their satisfaction with democracy. However, unlike most voters who elected winners of elections, they are more likely than other partisan groups to support anti-democratic interventions, particularly support for a coup when crime is high.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the winner-loser gap (Anderson *et al.* 2005, Cantú and Ponce 2015) in the context of democratic erosion in Mexico. While recent literature has analyzed López Obrador's voters weak institutional trust after winning the election (Monsiváis-Carrillo 2023), we focus on their support for undemocratic elite actions. Consistent with recent literature, the results of this paper highlight the importance of not only studying the losers' postelection attitudes—who are usually more disaffected with democracy after losing an election (Anderson *et al.* 2005)—but also the winners' attitudes, particularly their commitment to democracy (Cohen *et al.* 2022, Singer 2018). Electoral victories can increase voters' satisfaction with democracy but can also provide a base of support for politicians' future actions that violate democratic norms (Claasen 2020, Cohen *et al.* 2022). While the results of this paper rely on exploratory evidence, they highlight that an important portion of voters is willing to sacrifice co-partisan interests over democracy (Graham and Svobik 2020) and support illiberal actions that undermine democracy (Singer 2018).

This paper is structured as follows. The first section discusses literature on democratic attitudes and the loser-winner gap. We provide a general overview on democratic attitudes in Mexico that focus on elite attacks against government institutions after the 2018 presidential election. Relying on data from LAPOP's Americas Barometer (2012-2019) we analyze different indicators of democratic commitment—satisfaction with and support of democracy—highlighting the attitudes of the winners of the election after López Obrador's historic victory. The final section concludes with some thoughts about the future of democracy in Mexico.

## 2. LOSERS, WINNERS, AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

A key assumption in studies in public opinion is that citizens serve in a democracy to hold politicians accountable with respect to democratic norms (Lippman 1925; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Carey *et al.* 2022). As seminal research in comparative politics argue, (Dahl 1956; Almond and Verba 1963), democracy only survives when citizens hold strong pro-democratic values. While a democratic regime provides formal checks and balances to constrain the power of the executive, the public's disapproval and punish of incumbents' authoritarian behavior also constitute an important check on incumbent actions to erode democracy (Helmke and Levitsky 2006). As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue, if voters do not punish politicians who violate democratic norms, politicians will feel emboldened to continue, which could lead to the decline of democracy.

Recent studies question this assumption arguing that realistically it is hard to expect that ordinary people to check authoritarian ambitions of elected politicians (Graham and Svulik, 2020; Carey *et al.* 2022; Svulik, 2019; Touchton *et al.* 2020). As Svulik argues, electoral competition can confront voters with a choice between two valid but conflicting considerations: democracy and partisan interests. Under this scenario, an important portion of voters will be willing to sacrifice democratic competition in favor of electing a co-partisan candidate who champions their partisan interests (Graham and Svulik 2020). This partisan bias is consistent with the winner-loser gap literature which highlights that voters who support a winning candidate differ systematically from those who support a losing candidate. For example, winners of the election are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction with democracy after election day (Blais and Gelineau 2007) but also support for democracy (Bowler and Donovan 2002), institutional trust (Moehler 2009), trust in elections (Maldonado and Seligson 2014), attitudes towards electoral integrity (Cantú and Ponce 2015), and the general political system (Bowler and Donovan 2002) in both established and young democracies (Norris 1999).

In this study, we focus primarily on voters' democratic attitudes—satisfaction with and support for democracy—and the winner-loser gap in the context of the recent confrontations between President López Obrador's administration and democratic institutions in Mexico. Satisfaction with democracy is an expression of approval of the democratic regime which tends to increase or decrease during elections (Blais and Gelineau 2007). As different studies highlight, there is both an expressive and programmatic component of winning an election that makes voters happier since their party won the election and their preferred policies will be implemented in the future government (Anderson *et al.* 2005, Blais, Morin, and Singh 2017). This increased satisfaction with democracy is particularly experienced by those voters who are ideologically close to the resulting government (Curini *et al.* 2012), those who support the leading party of the electoral coalition (Singh *et al.* 2012) and when voters have strong partisan attachments to the winning parties (Singh 2014).

Moreover, elections can overcome deficits of representation (Blais *et al.* 2017). In the case of Mexico, this mechanism is particularly important since AMLO repeatedly accused that the results of the 2006 and 2012 presidential election were the result of electoral fraud, and thus unrepresentative of the people's will (Bruhn 2012, Castro Cornejo 2023). Regardless of the merit of this accusation, López Obrador's consistent accusations against electoral institutions increased grievances against the political system, making AMLO voters perceive that the political process was unfair to them (Cantú and Garcia Ponce 2015; Ugues Jr. and Medina Vidal 2015; Monsiváis-Carrillo 2023). Once their co-partisan candidate was able to win the presidency in his third attempt, one would expect that their satisfaction with democracy would increase.

Given this discussion, we expect that voters who support the winning party are generally more supportive of democracy than those who support parties that lose the election, what the literature refers as the winner-loser gap (Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Norris, 1999). Moreover, given the historic victory of MORENA's candidate López Obrador, we expect that his voters will be the most likely to report satisfaction with democracy and even support for democracy in abstract after the 2018 presidential election.

*Hypothesis 1. Winners (AMLO voters) are more likely than losers (PAN/PRI voters) to report higher levels of satisfaction with democracy than losers of the election after the 2018 presidential election.*

We also present a second hypothesis that accounts for partisan support for non-democratic actions, even among supporters of a democratically elected president. While the theoretical expectation from the loser-winner gap literature is that winners will increase democratic commitment, recent literature suggest that this is not always the case (Cohen *et al.* 2020; Singer 2018). While they can support democracy on the abstract, they can also be tolerant and enthusiastic about their co-partisan's illiberal actions once in power. In other words, these voters can report high levels of satisfaction with democracy and, simultaneously, prioritize partisan interests over democracy and support illiberal actions that seek to undermine democracy (Graham and Svobik 2020). Understanding when these two mechanisms are at play adds to our understanding of the winner-loser gap in elections. While the literature highlights the importance of alleviating the electoral losers' concerns—e. g. their distrust of elections—since they can damage the legitimacy of the political system, winners' postelection attitudes are very consequential for democratic survival and consolidation. They can provide a base of support for politicians' future actions that violate democratic norms (Claasen 2020).

This type of behavior would be particularly likely among partisans who support elites who demonstrate weaker commitment to democracy. As most public opinion literature argues, attitudes are not formed in a vacuum: they reflect a combination of political predispositions and elite communication (Zaller 1992). Since voters are motivated to interpret information through a partisan lens (Bar-tels 2000) and given López Obrador's rhetoric and behavior against democratic institutions, it is likely that his voters did not increase their level of commitment to democracy after the historic victory in the 2018 presidential election. Rather, they would likely to support undemocratic actions like executive aggrandizement.

*Hypothesis 2. Winners (AMLO voters) are more likely than losers (PAN/PRI voters) to report support undemocratic actions after the 2018 presidential election.*

In the next sections, we evaluate the public attitudes towards democracy after López Obrador won the 2018 presidential election, particularly focusing on the winner-loser gap.

### 3. DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC OPINION IN MEXICO

Before the 2018 presidential election, the party system in Mexico was one of the most stable in Latin America (Mainwaring 2018).<sup>1</sup> Although Mexico has only been considered a democracy since 2000, its political parties have existed for decades. The authoritarian successor party (PRI), and the center-right PAN and the center-left PRD opposition parties were key actors during Mexico's democratic transition from 1988 through 2000. After democratization, the PRI, PAN, and PRD continued as key actors in governing, negotiating electoral reforms, and channeling social demands. (Flores-Macías 2018; Langston 2017). The three major parties had relatively strong party organizations, meaningful party labels, and partisanship levels were well above the regional average (Castro Cornejo 2019).

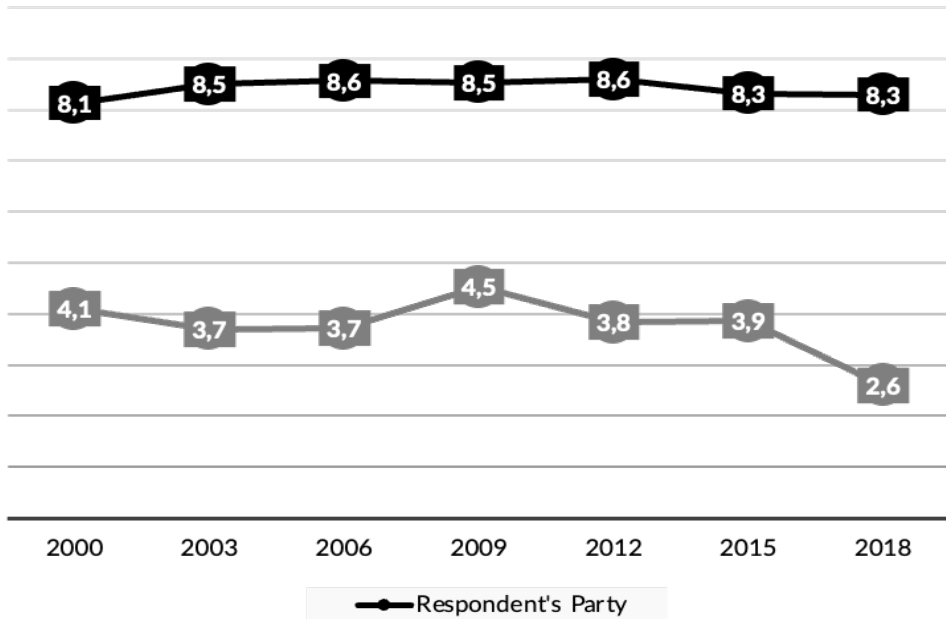
The 2018 presidential election represents a break with the traditional party system. MORENA and its candidate, López Obrador, won the country's presidency with 53 percent of the votes (far more than the last three presidential elections) and the constitutional legislative majority together with its partisan allies in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. López Obrador had already been a presidential candidate in 2006 as a PRD candidate when he lost the election to Felipe Calderón, the candidate for the National Action Party (PAN), by less than one percent of the vote share. Following his resignation from the PRD, López Obrador founded, along with his political allies, a personalist party—the National Regeneration Movement or Morena—which backed his third bid for the presidency. In 2018, his campaign focused primarily on denouncing the corruption of the PRI and PAN governments, energizing the internal market, and repealing the neoliberal structural reforms approved by the «Pact for Mexico» during the six-year term of Enrique Peña Nieto. His successful campaign can partially be attributed to voters' negative evaluations of the national economy, public safety, and corruption: two thirds of the electorate considered the national economy, public safety, and corruption worse than under the previous governments (Beltrán *et al.* 2020).

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1. For the period 1990–2015, the party systems of Mexico, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, and Chile registered almost perfect stability in the main contenders in their presidential elections. When additional indicators (interparty electoral competition and stability of the parties' ideological positions) are added, Uruguay, Mexico, and Chile are the most stable party systems in Latin America (Mainwaring 2018).

Relevant for this study, since Mexico's transition to democracy in 2000, affective polarization—which can be defined as intense dislike between partisans of the different party options (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019)— has gradually increased, driven primarily by an increase of out-party animus. While the average feeling thermometer (on a 0-10 scale) of the respondents' party remained stable, the average feeling thermometer of opposing parties was 4.1 in 2000 and had decreased to 2.4 by 2018 (figure 1). This context offered López Obrador the ideal political environment to politicize voters' grievances: a polarized party system, an effective framing that denounced the corrupt elite (the «PRIAN»), and an angry electorate ready to be mobilized against the major political parties (Castro Cornejo, Beltrán, and Ley, 2019).

**Figure 1. Affective Polarization in Mexico (2000-18). Average Feeling Thermometer Ratings (0: Very Bad; 10: Very Good). Among voters who self-identify with a political party**



Source: Mexican Election Study (Beltrán et al. 2020).

López Obrador's government was inaugurated on December the 1<sup>st</sup> with a solid presidential approval of between 75 and 80 percent, which remained positive in the next few years of his presidency—around 60 percent—according to several polling firms in Mexico.



### 3.1. *Elite Attacks on Democratic Institutions in Mexico*

Recent political leaders have discovered they can earn short-term political capital by attacking democratic institutions, especially electoral authorities (Langston 2020). Despite regular alternations of power by Mexico's three main traditional parties before 2018, and the ability of a new party to take the presidency in 2018, the democratic credentials of electoral authorities—like the National Electoral Institute and the Federal Electoral Tribunal— have been under constant attack from the President López Obrador.

When political representation is effective, citizens are likely to channel their demands via political parties, accept elections as the legitimate path to accessing power, and adhere to election outcomes, whether their party won or lost (Bruhn 2012). The 2006 presidential election, the first after Mexico's transition to democracy in 2000, was the first representation crisis in Mexico's young democracy, which exposed its lack of consolidation. After López Obrador, then-candidate of the PRD, lost the election, he denounced the results as fraudulent, organized massive protests, and refused to accept the outcome of the election (Aparicio 2009).

As commitment to democratic principles eroded at the elite level, satisfaction with parties and the party system declined at the mass level. The 2006 post-election crisis provided a compelling narrative that AMLO would use during his next two attempts to win the presidency in 2012 and 2018. He continually claimed that Mexico had been kidnapped by a corrupt elite, a «political mafia» («mafia del poder» in Spanish: Dussauge 2021; Sarsfield 2023) formed by the PAN, the PRI (the «PRIAN» as he colloquially refers to both parties), and the business sector, which together had allegedly impoverished Mexico through neoliberalism and rampant corruption. In the 2012 presidential election, López Obrador once again alleged massive electoral fraud favoring the PRI's candidate, Enrique Peña Nieto. Given these events, it is not surprising the important winner-loser gap within the Mexican public in public evaluations of electoral institutions (Ugues Jr. and Medina Vidal 2015, Monsiváis-Carrillo 2023) and electoral integrity (Cantú and García Ponce 2015).

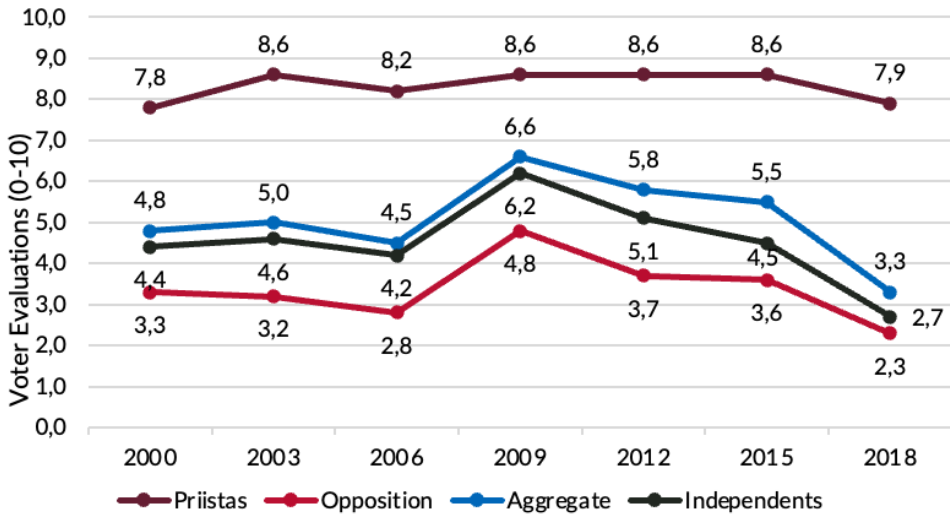
Unlike in 2006, after the 2012 presidential election, leaders of the PRD did not join him in mobilizing against the elected government. Instead, the more pragmatic faction conceded and helped forge a political agreement with the PRI and PAN, known as the «Pact for Mexico,» to approve economic reforms after a decade of congressional gridlock. The «Pact for Mexico» passed structural reforms designed to strengthen economic competition, improve education, and open the energy sector to foreign investment. While the Pact for Mexico was successful in passing a raft of constitutional changes and enabling legislation, it created two interrelated problems: the increasing ideological convergence of the three major parties in Mexico, and a perception of shared governance, fueled by interparty

agreements, that weakened programmatic linkages between citizens and the party system (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). AMLO condemned the PRD's collaboration with the PRI government and denounced his party for «betraying the people» by approving neoliberal reforms with the PAN and PRD in Congress. He eventually resigned from the party and founded his own political movement, MORENA, in 2014. This political decision was pivotal since AMLO now enjoyed autonomy from party institutions and could run as an anti-establishment candidate.

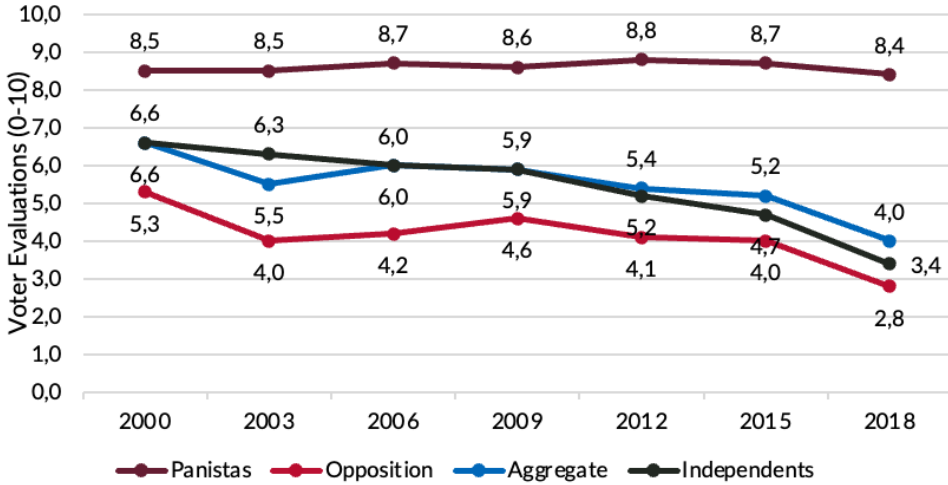
General discontent with political parties as channels of representation drove citizens away from the traditional three-party system. As a result, data from the Mexican Election Study (Beltrán *et al.* 2020) show that voters' evaluations of the PRI and the PAN, based on a 0 to 10 scale, showed the most negative results since the democratic transition. As shown in Figure 2 (Panel A), while PRI supporters maintained a favorable view of their party, other voters' evaluations declined from a high of 6.5 in 2009, when the PAN held the presidency, to a low of 2.0 by the 2018 presidential election. A similar trend emerges for PAN party supporters. Panel B of Figure 9 shows that PAN supporters reported high levels of support for their party (around 8.5) over time, but the party's appeal to other voters fell over the course of the decade to approximately 3.0 by 2018.

Figure 2. Evaluations of Main Parties in Mexico, 2000–2018

A. Voter Evaluations of the PRI Party



**B. Voter Evaluations of the PAN**



Source: Mexican Election Study (Beltrán et al. 2020)

Since his government was inaugurated, López Obrador has concentrated power in the executive, attached the courts and bureaucracy (Albertus and Grossman, 2021), weakened autonomous government institutions, and undermine the division of powers (Aguilar 2022, Petersen and Somuano 2021). While his party controls the Congress, his government has sought to weaken the Judiciary as a democratic check by appointing loyalists to the Supreme Court, forcing the resignation of a Supreme Court justice with ties to past administrations and seeking to extend the Supreme Court chief justice's term—who was perceived as loyal to the President and, constitutionally, can only serve a single four-year term (Villanueva Ulfgard 2023). More recently, he tried to weaken the independence of the country's electoral authority, reducing the Electoral Institute's budget which would force the Institute to cut staff and close offices across the country a year before the largest election in the nation's history (2024). The Supreme Court invalidated part of this electoral reform championed by President López Obrador because of serious violations in legislative procedure. Moreover, as recent studies suggest (Sánchez Talanquer 2020; Sánchez Talanquer and Greene 2021), his government has eroded the conditions for pluralistic politics and public deliberation, given López Obrador's propensity to demonize the opposition and critical media, as well as his general inability to recognize dissenting views as legitimate.

## 4. EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

To examine the loser-winner gap in democratic attitudes in Mexico, the next section analyzes different indicators of democratic commitment—satisfaction and support of democracy—that are part of LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer (2008 to 2019, see table 1). We identify losers and winners by identifying respondents who reported that voted for the winning or the losing party/candidate in the previous presidential election. In particular, we identify PRI voters, PAN voters, and voters who supported Andrés Manuel López Obrador (voted for the PRD in 2006 and 2012 or MORENA in the 2018 presidential election). In the models reported in Appendix B, we also include control variables that can be associated with the dependent variables of this study: retrospective evaluations of the economy and sociodemographic variables like gender, age, if lives in a urban/rural municipality, or a victim or crime.

**Table 1. Democratic Attitudes in Mexico (LAPOP’s Americas Barometer)**

Satisfaction with democracy	In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Mexico?
Support for democracy	Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? 7-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree.
Opposition to military coups	Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d’état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified... When there is a lot of crime (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified. When there is a lot of corruption (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.
Opposition to executive aggrandizement	Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Legislative Assembly and govern without the Legislative Assembly? (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.

*Source:* AmericasBarometer.

In the next section, we show that support for democratic principles has become increasingly polarized along partisan lines over time. While most Mexicans

support democracy in the abstract, there is a growing constituency that supports the government's violation of democratic norms. Even though they are the winners of the last presidential election, in some cases, President López Obrador's supporters tend to support these illiberal actions more than other partisan groups.

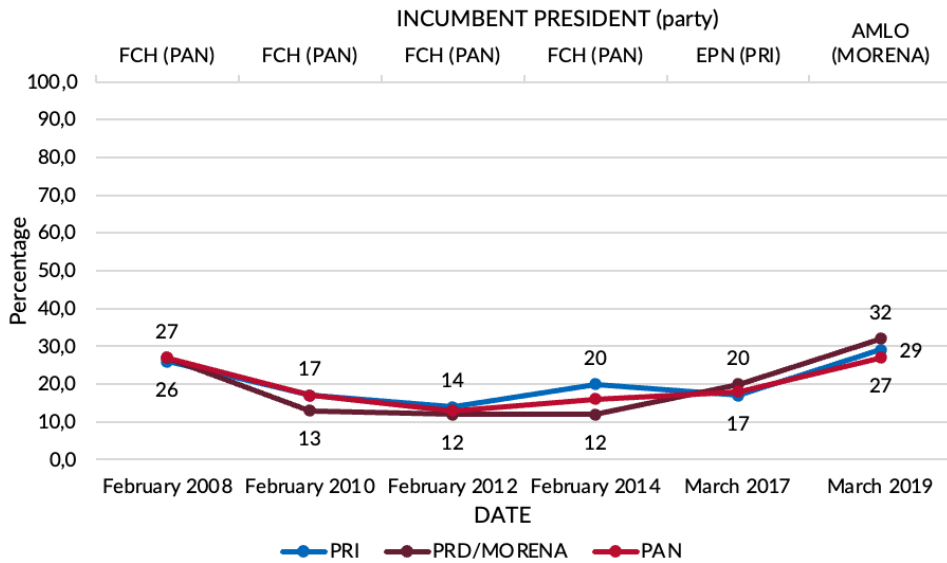
## 5. RESULTS

As previously discussed, many studies find that citizens who support election winners evaluate democracy more positively than those who support election losers: they are more satisfied with democracy and express greater confidence in democratic institutions (Anderson *et al.* 2005). Figure 3 plots satisfaction with democracy by partisan groups over time. Among President López Obrador's voters (PRD voters in 2006 and 2012 and MORENA voters in 2018), satisfaction with democracy was low in comparison to other partisan groups from 2008 to 2017, averaging only 29 percent across surveys. However, we observed a large jump from 20 to 49 percent in the 2019 survey, conducted after AMLO's election. Thus, consistent with hypothesis 1, satisfaction with democracy is linked to the results of the past election: attitudes about democracy among AMLO voters are far more positive when their party won (+29 increase). However, we do not see a decline in satisfaction with democracy among PAN and PRI voters, their satisfaction increases by 11 and 22 percentage points, respectively. In fact, differences in satisfaction with democracy among partisan groups are not statistically significant in 2018 (Appendix B). In other words, while AMLO voters significantly increased their satisfaction with democracy (as expected by the loser-winner gap literature), their levels of satisfaction do not differ from PAN and PRI voters in 2018; therefore, we cannot fully confirm hypothesis 1 given PAN/PRI voters' behavior. The increased satisfaction among losers of the election is probably related with the fact that the 2018 represented a historic election in Mexican politics, the first time the left won the Presidency, which made out-partisans of MORENA satisfied with the way democracy works, even though it was against their partisan interests.

We observe similar dynamics comparing measures of democratic support among PAN voters, PRI voters, and AMLO's supporters. Figure 4 shows levels of support for democracy (agreement with «*democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government*») by partisan groups over time. After their loss in the 2012 presidential election, in 2014, AMLO voters reported the lowest support for democracy: 55 percent, compared to 67 percent among PRI voters and 72 percent among PAN voters. Support for democracy declined across all groups in 2017. That year, only 49 percent of previous AMLO voters agreed that democracy is better than any other form of government, compared to 64 and 54 percent for PAN and PRI voters, respectively. This year also saw a widening gap

in democratic support between AMLO voters and PRI and PAN supporters, of 15 and 25 percentage points, respectively.

**Figure 3. Satisfaction with Democracy by Partisan Group, 2008–2019. In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Mexico?**



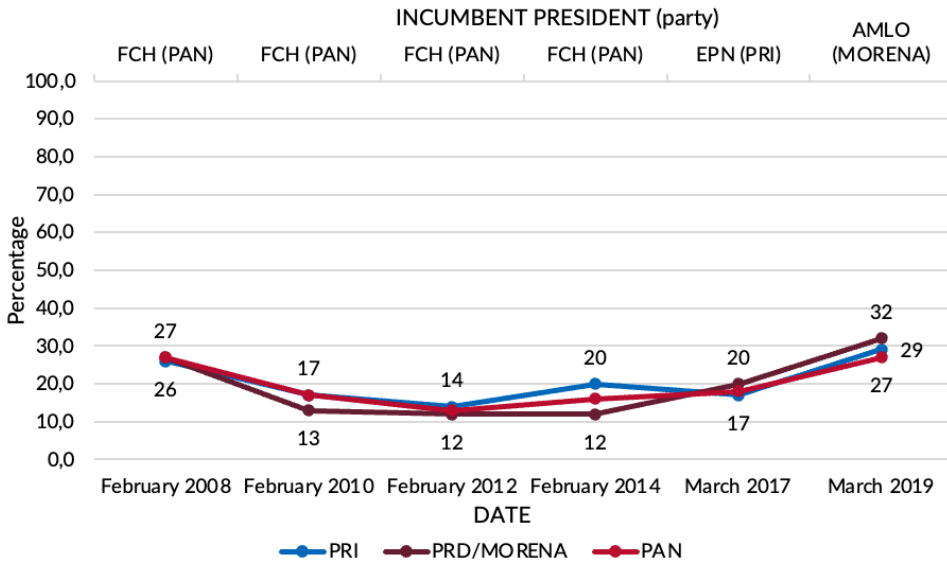
Note: Satisfaction calculated by summing the percentages of «Satisfied» and «Very Satisfied» responses. FCH = Felipe Calderón Hinojosa; EPN = Enrique Peña Nieto; AMLO = Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Source: AmericasBarometer.

However, following AMLO’s 2018 victory, his supporters became winners, and their support for democracy increased substantially from 49 to 67 percent, a gain of 18 percentage points from 2017. Indeed, in 2019, AMLO supporters expressed significantly higher support for democracy than PRI—61 percent—and PAN—58 percent—voters. The differences are statistically significant compared to AMLO voters’ support for democracy (Appendix B).

At this point, AMLO voters seem to follow the theoretical expectations of the loser-winner gap literature: after election day, they are more satisfied with democracy and they express even stronger support for democracy, at least, in the abstract. Next, we examine specific indicators of support for anti-democratic actions since we can find potential variation in support for hypothesis 2: general support for democracy but support for specific illiberal actions that weaken

**Figure 4. Support for Democracy by Partisan Group, 2008–2019. Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.**



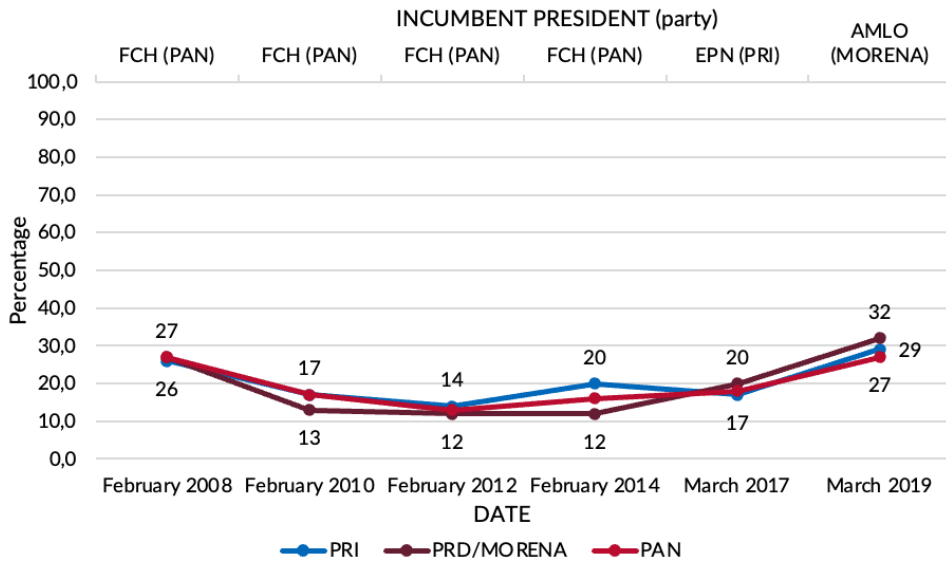
Note: Support calculated by summing the percentages of «Somewhat Agree,» «Agree» and «Strongly Agree» responses. FCH = Felipe Calderón Hinojosa; EPN = Enrique Peña Nieto; AMLO = Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Source: AmericasBarometer.

democracy. We specifically analyze support for executive aggrandizement and military coups. Figure 5 shows responses to the following question: «Do you believe that when a nation is facing difficult moments, that the president of the country can justifiably shut down Congress and govern without the legislature?» In the 2019 survey, President López Obrador’s supporters even though they are winners of the elections, they are not less likely to justify shutting down the Congress. AMLO voters, in fact, behave as losers as the election since they are as likely as PRI and PAN voters to support such scenario. However, given that differences are not statistically significant, even though AMLO voters increase their support to shut down the Congress, in this indicator we cannot fully support hypothesis 2.

In other scenarios in which LAPOP’s Americas Barometer measure respondents’ views on executive aggrandizement, we see a larger partisan gap. For instance, figure 6 shows support for a military coup when crime is high and a clear loser-winner gap. We observe substantial declines from 2008, when roughly two-thirds of each partisan group expressed support for this type of action. We also observe important partisan divergence in more recent surveys. After the 2018

**Figure 5. Executive Aggrandizement – Support for Closing Congress by Partisan Group, 2008–2019. Do you believe that when a nation is facing difficult moments, that the president of the country can justifiably shut down Congress and govern without the legislature?**



Note: FCH = Felipe Calderón Hinojosa; EPN = Enrique Peña Nieto; AMLO = Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

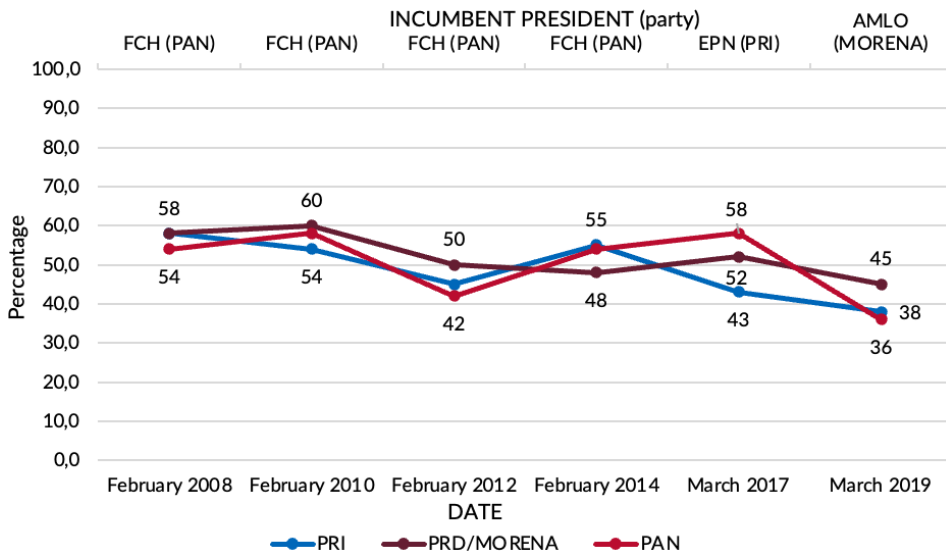
Source: AmericasBarometer.

presidential election, PAN and PRI supporters were less likely to favor a coup (at 35 percent and 27 percent, respectively), relative to AMLO voters, who continued to support a coup in the face of high crime (45 percent, statistically significant, Appendix B) after their candidate won the presidential election. These patterns strongly support hypothesis 2.

The increasing support for executive aggrandizement, particularly among incumbent voters in 2019, is likely related to the strong attachment to López Obrador among his voters. Because López Obrador has consistently criticized government institutions (Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene 2021, Monsiváis-Carrillo 2023), even after winning elections, they report low levels of support for democratic institutions. As such, his supporters do not behave like winners. In fact, this finding is consistent with other studies that find that MORENA partisans not only report support for actions that violate democratic norms but also low levels of institutional trust even after winning the election (Monsiváis-Carrillo 2023, INEGI 2021).



**Figure 6 Support for a Coup When Crime is High by Partisan Group, 2008–2019. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances: When crime is high**



Note: FCH = Felipe Calderón Hinojosa; EPN = Enrique Peña Nieto; AMLO = Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

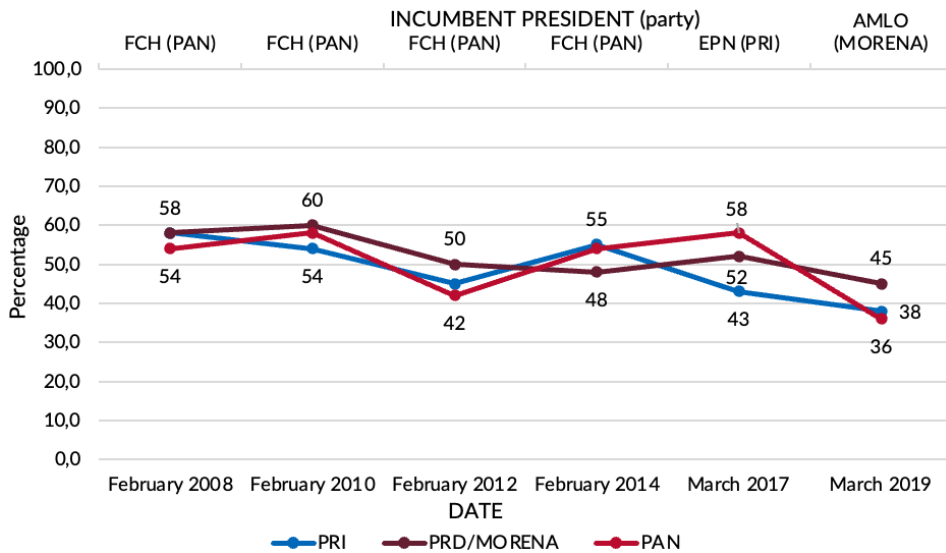
Source: AmericasBarometer.

Finally, Figure 7 shows support for another indicator of support for illiberal actions, in particular, coup by the military when corruption is widespread. We again observed a downward trend between 2008 and 2019. From 2017 to 2019, there was a decrease of the percentage of PAN voters (58 percent to 36 percent) and PRI voters (43 percent to 38 percent) who supported this anti-democratic intervention. However, once again, among MORENA voters, we saw a less pronounced decline between 2017 and 2019 (52 percent to 45 percent). In other words, about half of the incumbent President’s supporters approved of the military seizing control when corruption is widespread. The differences, however, are not statistically significant (Appendix B), therefore, we do not find support for hypothesis 2 in this scenario.

Overall, we see that MORENA voters do not seem to behave like winners of the 2018 election, as expected by the loser-winner gap literature. While they are more satisfied with democracy—and even report stronger support for democracy

in the abstract—after the election, AMLO voters do not decrease their support for executive aggrandizement and, in fact, are more likely to support a coup than other partisan groups, particularly when crime is high.

**Figure 7. Support for a Coup When Corruption is Widespread by Partisan Group, 2008–2019. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion, would a military coup be justified under the following circumstances: When corruption is widespread**



Note: Satisfaction calculated by summing the percentages of «Satisfied» and «Very Satisfied» responses. FCH = Felipe Calderón Hinojosa; EPN = Enrique Peña Nieto; AMLO = Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Source: AmericasBarometer.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined public attitudes toward democracy in Mexico. Contrary to expectations of traditional loser-winner gap literature that argues that winners tend to exhibit strong support for democratic institutions, a substantial proportion of AMLO voters express willingness to support for illiberal actions that undermine democracy. While they can support democracy on the abstract—even more satisfied with democracy after winning the presidential election—they can also be tolerant

and enthusiastic about their co-partisan's illiberal actions once in power. Particularly in conditions when crime is perceived to be high (Zechmeister and Lupu 2019), AMLO voters prioritize partisan interests over democracy (Singer 2018).

One explanation as to why supporters of the president would express support for a coup under such circumstances is that López Obrador as president has been a strong advocate of military involvement in civilian activities, such as building infrastructure (e. g. airports, trains, highways, etc), policing the airports and customs areas or the country's southern border to stop immigration surges, and playing a prominent role in domestic security. This alliance with the military, uncommon in recent Mexican history, may lead MORENA voters to understand military interventions as aligned with their preferences. Alternatively, the increased involvement of the military in public life may make Mexican citizens, and especially MORENA voters, more likely to view the military as a legitimate political actor that would be able to respond effectively to high levels of crime, particularly if those individuals have not seen improvement in their lives in recent years.

Overall, these results coincide with recent literature that survival of democracy (Singer 2018, Cohen *et al.* 2022, Monsiváis-Carrillo 2023) is more challenging than the literature normally assumes. While most literature is concerned about losers' post-election behavior, winners who support a candidate with hegemonic aspirations can be a base of support of politicians' future illiberal actions. While public opinion by itself does not directly break democracies, their support makes democratic backsliding more likely (Classen 2020). Like Bolsonaro voters in Brazil's 2018 presidential election (Cohen *et al.* 2022), election results in Mexico's 2018 presidential election could exacerbate tolerance or support for democratic erosion: weakening of checks and balances and pluralistic politics and support for executive aggrandizement.

In terms of the scope of the argument of this paper, it is important to highlight that the evidence discussed in this paper is exploratory. Future studies should try to identify why some AMLO voters support democracy in the abstract, but they are willing to support illiberal actions that weaken democracy. Elite cues are important to understand public opinion formation, and it is likely that some voters are more likely to be responsive to AMLO's rhetoric and support the attack on democratic institutions. In that sense, it is possible that voters who have been loyal to López Obrador across different elections, are more likely to express grievances against the political system and, therefore, support undemocratic actions. Similarly, those voters who are more polarized, particularly affectively polarized against PAN and PRI, are likely to prioritize partisan interests over democracy.

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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX A. LAPOP'S AMERICASBAROMETER DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES ITEMS

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES	QUESTIONS
Support for democracy	ING4. Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Response options: Seven-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree.
Opposition to military coups	Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified... JC10. When there is a lot of crime Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.
	Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified... JC13. When there is a lot of corruption Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.
Opposition to executive aggrandizement	JC15A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Legislative Assembly and govern without the Legislative Assembly? Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.
	JC16A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to dissolve the Supreme Court and govern without the Supreme Court? Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.

Source: AmericasBarometer.

## APPENDIX B

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Satisfaction	Support	Coup (crime)	Coup (corruption)
Winners (AMLO vs PAN/PRI)	0.01 (0.07)	0.26** (0.13)	-0.17*** (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)
Education	0.01** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Gender (Female vs Male)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.26*** (0.10)	-0.11** (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
Age	-0.00** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Municipality (Urban vs Rural)	-0.05 (0.06)	0.11 (0.12)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Economy	0.13*** (0.04)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Victim Crime	-0.21*** (0.06)	-0.05 (0.11)	0.02 (0.05)	0.12** (0.05)
Constant	2.76*** (0.21)	4.01*** (0.40)	1.19*** (0.19)	0.88*** (0.18)
Observations	879	892	431	448
R-squared	0.05	0.05	0.12	0.07

Source: Authors' analysis.