

DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES IN PANAMA (2012-2021)

Desarrollo de las actitudes democráticas en Panamá (2012-2021)

Desenvolvimento de atitudes democráticas em Panamá (2012-2021)

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Abstract

How have the attitudes of citizens towards democracy in Panama evolved? What explains the decline in democratic values among the population? This paper describes the evolution of attitudes in Panama between 2012 and 2021 and examines the political dynamics that have contributed to changes in attitudes over time. To describe the evolution of democratic attitudes, we draw on cluster analysis, which identified groups of citizens with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes in each of five waves of AmericasBarometer data. The central finding that emerges from the cluster analysis is that there are significant drops in support for democracy and tolerance since 2014. In the analysis we discuss in the light of theory a possible influence of former President Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014) on the overall high support for democracy and democratic institutions in 2012, and a possible legacy of his administration on the subsequent evolution of democratic attitudes between 2014 and 2021.

Palabras clave:

Panamá;
Democracia;
Valores; Actitudes;
Martinelli

Resumen

¿Cómo han evolucionado las actitudes de los ciudadanos hacia la democracia en Panamá? ¿Qué explica el declive de los valores democráticos entre la población? Este artículo describe la evolución de las actitudes democráticas en Panamá entre 2012 y 2021 y examina las dinámicas políticas que han contribuido a los cambios en ellas a lo largo del tiempo. Para describir la evolución de las actitudes democráticas, recurrimos al análisis de clusters, que identificó grupos de ciudadanos con patrones distintos de actitudes democráticas en cada una de las cinco olas de datos del Barómetro de las Américas. El hallazgo central que surge del análisis de clusters es que hay caídas significativas en el apoyo a la democracia y la tolerancia desde 2014. En el análisis discutimos a la luz de la teoría una posible influencia del expresidente Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014) en el alto apoyo general a la democracia y las instituciones democráticas en 2012, y un posible legado de su administración en la posterior evolución de las actitudes democráticas entre 2014 y 2021.

Palavras-chave:

Panamá;
Democracia;
Valores; Atitudes;
Martinelli

Resumo

Como evoluíram as atitudes dos cidadãos em relação à democracia em Panamá? O que explica o declínio dos valores democráticos entre a população? Este artigo descreve a evolução das atitudes no Panamá entre 2012 e 2021 e examina a dinâmica política que contribuiu para as mudanças nas atitudes ao longo do tempo. Para descrever a evolução das atitudes democráticas, recorreremos à análise de clusters, que identificou grupos de cidadãos com padrões distintos de atitudes democráticas em cada uma das cinco ondas de dados do Barômetro das Américas. A principal conclusão que emerge da análise de agrupamento é que há quedas significativas no apoio à democracia e à tolerância desde 2014. Na análise, discutimos, à luz da teoria, uma possível influência do ex-presidente Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014) no alto apoio geral à democracia e às instituições democráticas em 2012, e um possível legado de sua administração na evolução subsequente das atitudes democráticas entre 2014 e 2021.

1. INTRODUCTION

Panama transitioned to democracy in 1989, later than most other countries in Latin America. Despite this, Panamanian democracy is recognized in several indexes for being above average in Latin America and the Caribbean (Altman & Pérez-Liñán 2002; Alcántara Sáez 2007; Barreda 2011). The Freedom House index ranked Panama in 2022 with a score of 83/100, ranking only below Uruguay, Chile, Costa Rica, Belize, and Argentina in the region (Freedom House 2022). The Democracy Index by The Economist Intelligence Unit indicated in 2021 that Panama was only surpassed by Uruguay, Costa Rica, Chile, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Brazil (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). In the Latin American Democracy Development Index by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Panama

was rated only below Uruguay, Chile, Costa Rica, and Peru in 2016 (Konrad Adenauer Foundation 2016).

But how have the attitudes of citizens towards democracy in Panama evolved? This paper describes the evolution of democratic attitudes in Panama between 2012 and 2021 and examines the political dynamics that have contributed to the changes in attitudes over the period. In that description we will point out a marked decline in democratic values in 2014, the last year of Ricardo Martinelli's government (2009-2014). It is a noteworthy case that in a country that has such good democratic indicators and a much better economy than most countries in the region there was a significant part of the population that adopted positions contrary to democratic values. What explains the sudden decline in democratic values among the population?

To describe the evolution of democratic attitudes, we draw on cluster analysis, which identified groups of citizens with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes in each of five waves of AmericasBarometer data. To enrich the analysis, we also examine the evolution of support for democracy and tolerance for the political participation of regime critics. To identify the political dynamics that have contributed to changes in attitudes, we trace the linkages between political developments and public opinion.

The central finding that emerges from the cluster analysis is that the 'Institutionalists' cluster, who oppose both executive aggrandizement and military coups make up the largest group in all survey waves in the period of study. However, additional examination of democratic attitudes shows significant drops in support for democracy and tolerance in 2014. In the analysis we discuss a possible influence of former President Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014) on the overall high support for democracy and democratic institutions in 2012, and a possible legacy of his administration on the subsequent evolution of democratic attitudes between 2014 and 2021. It's possible that the enormous popularity of Martinelli and his administration increased support for democracy, while his pugilistic political style weakened political tolerance thanks to the antagonism created by his leadership. However, measurements of democratic attitudes prior to 2012 are lacking and we cannot conclusively test that hypothesis.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The first section presents a brief recapitulation of the discussion on the change in democratic attitudes and the effects of populism and its strategic antagonism on citizen attitudes. The second section examines the evolution of democratic attitudes using cluster analysis based on data from the AmericasBarometer surveys conducted from 2012 to 2021, complemented by trend analysis of key attitudes over the same period. The third section turns to historical analysis of Panama's recent political dynamics to explain these temporal variations and, specifically, the sudden decline of 2014. The final section concludes.

2. WHY THE CHANGE IN DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES?

Why do citizens change their attitudes towards democracy? There is a body of literature that draws attention to the growing distance between democracy as a system of governance and broad segments of the citizenry (Montero, Gunther & Torcal, 1999; Norris, 1999; Pharr, Putnam & Dalton, 2000; Torcal, 2006; Torcal, 2016; Kriesi, 2020). Among these authors, some people suggest potential explanations such as generational shifts (Foa & Munck, 2016; Monsivais, 2020), dissatisfaction with democracy stemming from economic stagnation and increasing inequality (Córdova & Seligsson, 2010), and even a natural response of civic spirit within democracy, recognizing the possibility of dissent (Alexander & Welzel, 2022; Norris, 2022; Voeten, Krogh & Walsh, 2022).

However, these responses are more characteristic of gradual processes and do not account for sudden shifts in democratic attitudes, as was the case in at least 2006 and 2014 in Panama. To explain such abrupt changes, it makes sense to consider the outcomes of affective polarization resulting from populist strategies that hinge on antagonism. High support for democracy in the abstract along with low tolerance for opposition are characteristics associated with having a populist leader in power, the development of affective polarization that does not conceive of the political contender as valid (Heit & Nicholson, 2012; McCoy & Sumer, 2019; Summer, McCoy & Luke, 2021; Torcal & Carty, 2023). Such a presidency can help to increase support for democracy while lowering the tolerance for others to politically contest the incumbent leader's rule.

All of this ultimately points to the antagonism inherent in certain populist leaderships. This antagonism involves the formation of an opposition around a "we" versus "them" dynamic, allowing for the articulation and creation of identities when different positions and political projects come into conflict. The problem arises because this opposition deepens a "friend versus enemy" logic that has consequences for democratic attitudes such as tolerance and the recognition of plurality. The other begins to be perceived as a threat that must be eliminated (Schmitt, 1932; Laclau, 2005; Laclau, 2008; Canovan, Appleton, 2021).

In the next section we will examine the evolution of democratic attitudes in Panamá using cluster analysis based on data from the AmericasBarometer surveys conducted from 2012 to 2021, complemented by trend analysis of key attitudes over the same period.

3. DESCRIBING DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES

We used data from the AmericasBarometer and cluster analysis to classify Panamanians into groups or «clusters» with distinct attitudinal profiles. The aim is

to maximize similarity *within* each cluster while maximizing dissimilarity *between* clusters. One advantage of cluster analysis compared to other classification schemes is that it is highly inductive, meaning that it lets respondents «speak for themselves» without making assumptions in advance about how to group them. Annex 1 provides detailed information regarding the study's methodology. Five democratic attitudes are used to generate clusters:

- *Support for democracy*: The extent to which respondents agree or disagree that «democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.»
- *Opposition to military coups*: Whether respondents believe it would be justified for the military to take power in a military coup in certain circumstances.¹
- *Opposition to executive aggrandizement*: Whether respondents believe it would be justified for the president to close Congress and the Supreme Court and govern without them.
- *Tolerance of protest and regime critics*: The extent to which respondents support the right to protest and other political rights of regime critics.
- *Support for democratic inclusion*: The extent to which respondents support the political inclusion of homosexuals.

All five attitudes are available in the first four AmericasBarometer survey waves (2012, 2014, 2016, & 2018). Only three attitudes—support for democracy, opposition to military coups, and opposition to executive aggrandizement—are available in 2021 because the survey included a limited set of questions. The 2021 cluster analysis results are therefore not comparable to those of prior waves and not discussed in the report. Annex 2 presents the main cluster analysis results for all waves.

The cluster analysis identified three clusters in 2012 and four clusters in each of 2014, 2016, and 2018. In all waves, a share of respondents—the «unclustered» group—was not classified into any cluster. To facilitate comparisons over survey waves, the resulting clusters can be grouped into four «cluster families» that share a set of defining characteristics:

1. Regarding respondents who express they would support—i.e., not oppose—a military coup under certain circumstances, it should be mentioned that this idea is more symbolic than real. Although military regimes have existed in Panama, a Constitutional Reform of 1992 established that the country would not maintain an army.

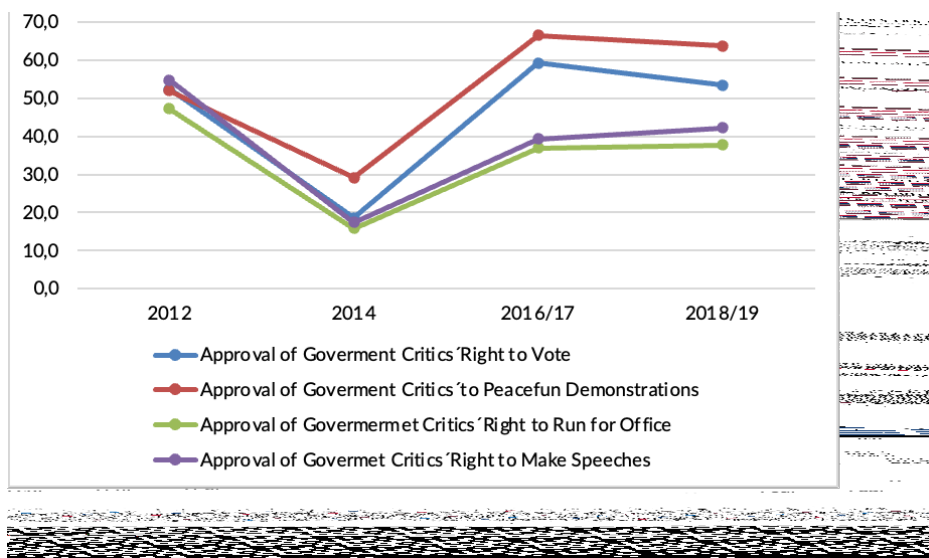
- Institutionalists: Individuals in this cluster family are characterized by full opposition to coups and executive aggrandizement. In this sense, they represent «ideal» democratic citizens compared to the other cluster families.
- Presidentialists: Individuals in this cluster family exhibit full opposition to coups but less than full opposition to executive aggrandizement.
- Military Interventionists: Individuals in this cluster family exhibit full opposition to executive aggrandizement but less than full opposition to coups.
- Authoritarians: Individuals in this cluster family are characterized by less than full opposition to both coups and executive aggrandizement.

Figure 1 shows the relative size of these cluster families over time. Four points are noteworthy. First, Institutionalists make up the largest cluster in all years, suggesting a relatively high level of support for democratic institutions and practices throughout the decade under study. Second, the share of Institutionalists declines significantly across survey waves, dropping from a high of 80.8 percent of respondents in 2012 to a low of 55.4 percent in 2018. Third, the declining share of Institutionalists corresponds with increases in Presidentialists and Authoritarians. Presidentialists first appear as a distinct cluster with 8 percent of respondent in 2014 and increase to 12.7 by 2018. Authoritarians increase from 0.2 percent in 2012 to 9.6 percent in 2014 and then remain relatively stable. Finally, it is at least worth mentioning that the Military Interventionists are the second most important group during the entire period studied. This is striking because since the transition to democracy there has been no national army. What can be understood is that even without an army some of the values of the pre-transition dictatorship persist.

The cluster analysis identified the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics that significantly distinguish respondents in each cluster from the rest of the sample for each survey wave. The study examined several variables, including age, gender, wealth, race, education, crime victimization, corruption victimization, political efficacy, and political participation. While respondents in all clusters are statistically significantly different from others in a few variables in each wave, there are no stable patterns across all waves and the differences are substantially small. This suggests that the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics examined do not structure attitudes toward democracy in a meaningful way. These caveats aside, we do find some recurrent statistically significant differences across two or more waves that are worth highlighting.

We focus on the variables that differentiate Institutionalists from all other respondents. First, Institutionalists tend to be slightly older. In 2012 and 2014, the percentage of respondents in the 60 and over age bracket was higher

Figure 1. Evolution of Clusters, 2012-2018



Source: AmericasBarometer.

among Institutionalists than among the rest of the sample. In 2016 and 2018, the percentage of respondents in the 18 to 29 age bracket was lower among Institutionalists than among the rest of the sample. Second, Institutionalists tend to be wealthier. In three of the four waves (2012, 2014, & 2016), the percentage of respondents in the highest wealth income was higher among Institutionalists than among the rest of the sample. Lastly, Institutionalists tend to have experienced less crime and corruption. In three of the four waves (2012, 2014, & 2016), the percentage of respondents who reported having been victim of a crime in the past 12 months was lower among Institutionalists than among the rest of the sample. Similarly, in three of the four waves (2012, 2016, & 2018), the percentage of respondents who reported having been asked for a bribe in the past 12 months was lower among Institutionalists than among the rest of the sample.

The declining share of Institutionalists shown in Figure 1 corresponds to three major trends in public opinion: a decline in support for democracy, a drop in opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement, and an erosion of political tolerance.

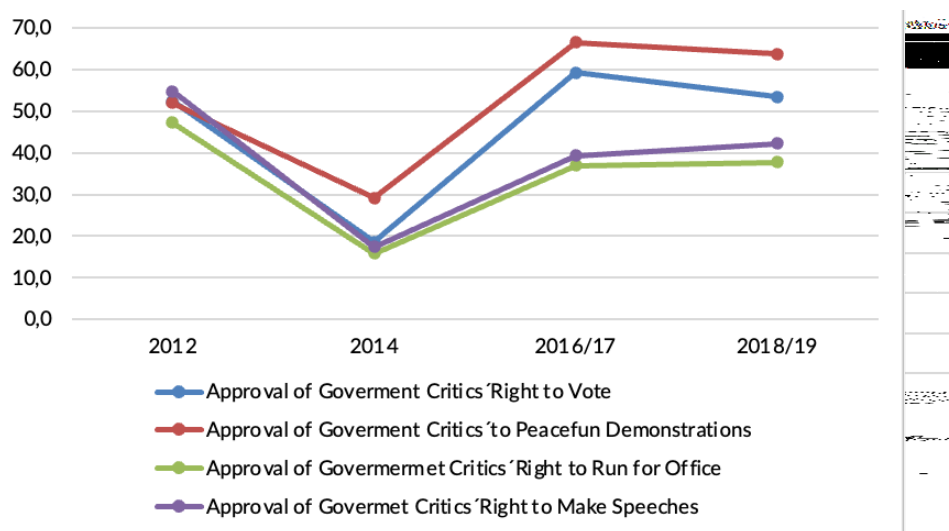
In 2012, 65.3 percent of Panamanians claimed to support the idea that democracy was the best form of government—this is the highest percentage throughout the period under study. By 2014, things had changed drastically; support for democracy fell by more than 18 percentage points, to just 47.1

percent. This drop coincided with the end of President Ricardo Martinelli term, a Panamanian businessman and politician who enjoyed high levels of popularity throughout his term in office (2009-2014). In 2016, support for democracy rebounded to 58.1 percent but only to decline again 53 percent in 2018. The following year saw the end of Juan Carlos Varela's presidency (2014-2019). By 2018, Varela's popularity had drop as he was mired in the region-wide Lava Jato and Odebrecht corruption scandals.

In the historical series of LAPOP, the year with the highest level of satisfaction with democracy (77.7 percent), greatest pride (57.0 percent) and support (58.0 percent) for the political system coincides with the beginning of the Ricardo Martinelli's legislature (2010).

Figure 2 displays responses to the survey questions capturing respondents' attitudes towards military coups and executive aggrandizement. It shows an erosion of support for basic democratic institutions. For example, in 2012, 79.9 percent of respondents thought that a military coup when corruption is high would not be justified and by 2018, this percentage had decreased to 65.5 percent. Similarly, in 2012, 91.2 percent of respondents thought that the Executive closing the Legislature in very difficult times would not be justified and by 2018, this percentage had decreased to 74.6 percent.

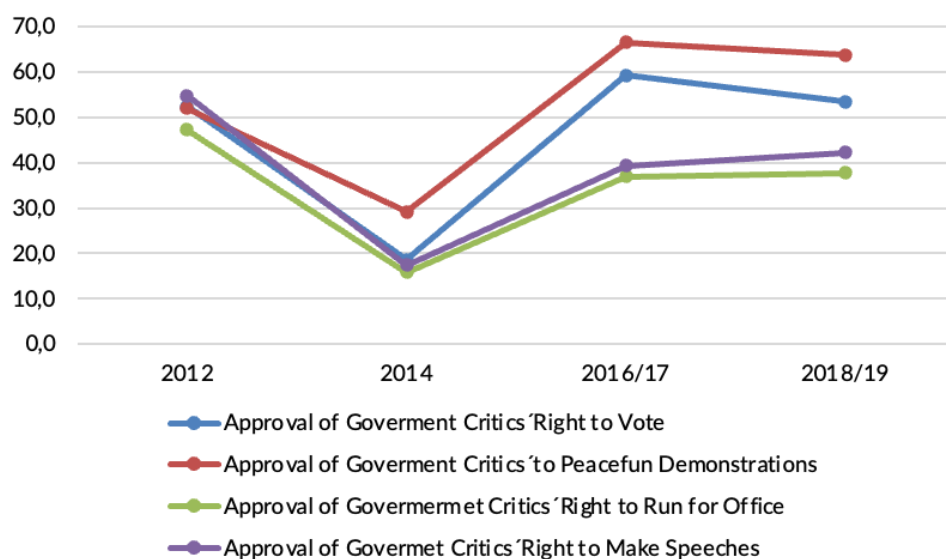
Figure 2. Opposition to Military Coups and Executive Aggrandizement, 2012-2018



Source: AmericasBarometer.

A third important trend relates to political tolerance, as measured by several questions that ask whether regime critics should be afforded political rights. As shown in Figure 3, tolerance was relatively low in 2012 and dipped significantly in the 2014. Tolerance improved substantially and remained relatively stable in subsequent years.

Figure 3. Tolerance of Panamanians to the Political Participation of Regime Critics, 2012-2018/19



Source: AmericasBarometer.

In the next section we discuss in the light of theory a possible influence of former President Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014) on the overall high support for democracy and democratic institutions in 2012, and a possible legacy of his administration on the subsequent evolution of democratic attitudes between 2014 and 2021. Following his departure from office in 2014, support for key institutional principles, as well as for democracy itself, declined significantly. Likewise, the weak support for regime critics enjoying political rights in 2014 stems from the strong support for Martinelli, a populist leader who sought to discredit and delegitimize his political rivals. However, it should be clarified that the absence of specific data on democratic attitudes prior to Martinelli's arrival to power prevents us from testing this hypothesis.

4. CONJUNCTURE, DISRUPTIVE LEADERSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES

Since the invasion and transition and until the Martinelli presidency Panama's political system has been dominated by two major parties, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD, party founded by General Omar Torrijos) and the Panameñista Party (heir to the legacy of Arnulfo Arias). For many years, these parties presided over a stable political system recognized in several indexes for being above average in Latin America and the Caribbean. In that regard Panama's democracy and party system have been a formally representative game that has been recognized for its exceptionality. For example, Loxton (2022) considers that the Panamanian case is a rare case of democratization by military invasion where an authoritarian party (PRD) later became electorally viable.

But it is not without consequence that, although the Panamanian democracy works in electoral terms, it is based on a trajectory in which, unlike Uruguay and Costa Rica, inequality has prevailed (Bohigues, 2021). Panama had also been distinguished by few programmatic changes and many consensuses and pacts (Brown Arauz & Perez, 2019). The political system has been characterized by political stability among political parties, which have expressed limited programmatic differences, shaping the field of debate with high ideological homogeneity (Dabène, Nevache, Wintgens & Brown-Araúz, 2023). Politically represented parties have been ideologically homogeneous, as indicated by the findings of the "Latin American Elites Project (PELA-USAL)" conducted by the University of Salamanca. The farthest left classification in the historical series is held by the PRD with a score of 5.12 obtained in 2012, and the farthest right result was recorded by the CD in 2004 with a score of 6.55, leaving the entire series with a narrow 1.43 margin of variation, implying a very low level of polarization. Notably, no major leftist political party has achieved parliamentary representation since 1990 and the system has been unable to discuss and include new public agendas (Brown Araúz & Perez, 2019). Political stability has come at the cost of the exclusion of new actors in representation, bringing with it problems of legitimacy and satisfaction (Brown Araúz and Luna Vásquez 2013; García-Rendón and Subinas, 2022).

All this is explained in part by the low representativeness and inclusiveness of the new political actors in the electoral system, which favors large parties and excludes small ones. The combination of low-magnitude electoral districts, a seat allocation formula that tilts the balance in favor of larger parties, and relevant disparities in terms of political financing, nullified the political game for emerging actors (Guevara Mann 2004; Brown Arauz 2005; Sonnleitner, 2010; Brown Arauz 2020).

Important economic and social changes are added to the context before Martinelli. Eleven years after the transition, control of the Panama Canal was

definitively returned to the country, marking a fundamental milestone in Panama's development. Subsequently, between 2004 and 2018, Panama experienced an average annual growth rate of 7.0 percent, compared to 3.3 percent for Latin America as a whole (Astudillo, Fernández and Garcimartín, 2019). This resulted in Panama entering the short list of high-income countries in the region in 2017. Nonetheless, persistent inequality continues to exist in Panama, as evidenced by asymmetric access to basic services, a dual labor market, and poor social protection, among other indicators (Cecchini, Holz and Mojica, 2020).

All this context is necessary to note in order to understand how Ricardo Martinelli's leadership could explain the changes in democratic attitudes during the study period. Martinelli is a non-traditional political who managed to break that party consensus at the time of the country's economic boom, creating ties and attitudes towards the system that were not present with traditional party links.

But how did the former president could impact these attitudes? For two particular reasons: First, many of Martinelli's supporters tied their assessment of democracy with the development of this president's political career. His first years in government saw high support among citizens, boosting support for democracy, while his exit from government coincided with a disillusionment with democracy for not allowing his project to continue. In short, Martinelli's supporters may have reasoned as follows: «if Martinelli is in government, democracy works well and has my support. However, if he is not in government, then democracy does not work as well and does not have my support.». This assumption does not apply exclusive to Martinelli. As we describe below, a somewhat similar dynamic of expectations and disappointments was evident during the government of Martín Torrijos (2004-2009).²

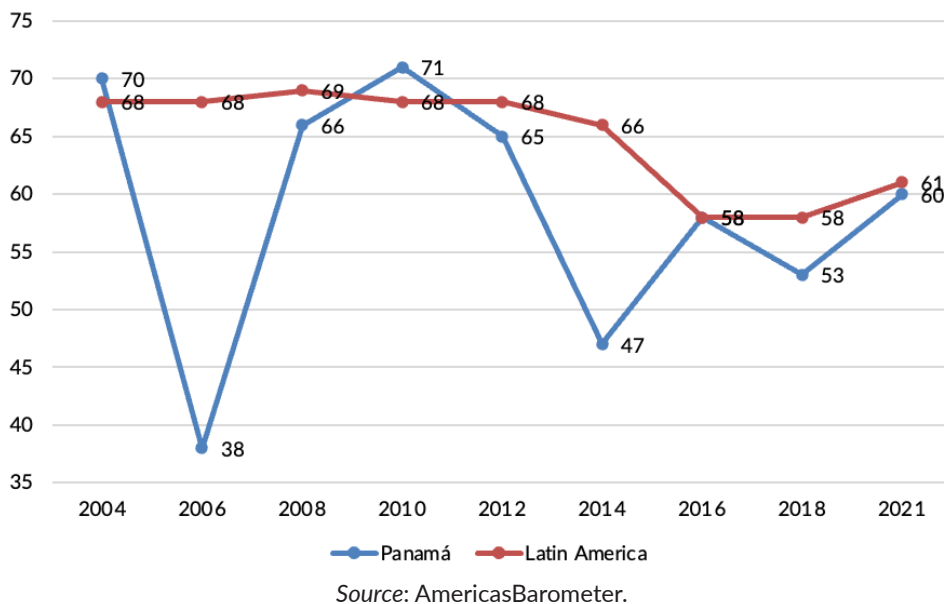
Secondly, Martinelli's leadership normalized a confrontational, polarizing political style where traditional politicians, especially the opposition, business, and Martinelli's critics, including the media, were ridiculed and delegitimized. This leadership style eroded tolerance for the opposition and their political rights among some sectors of the Panamanian citizenry.

To situate recent dynamics in the longer-term trends, Figure 4 shows support for democracy in Panama relative to the regional average for Latin America starting in 2004. The figure shows that support for democracy in Panama has at times deviated from regional trends by a wide margin. In 2006, during Torrijo's presidency, support for democracy dropped to a record low of 38 percent, or 30 percentage points below the regional average. In 2014, at the end of Martinelli's

2. Torrijos was the son of General Omar Torrijos, who ruled Panama from 1968 to 1981 and founded the PRD in 1979.

presidency, support for democracy fell to 47 percent, almost 20 points below the Latin American average. What explains the large deviations from regional trends in 2006 and 2014?

Figure 4. Support for democracy in Latin America and Panama, 2004-2021



We discuss that in both cases, short-term declines in democratic support could be related to domestic political events that call into question the performance of democratic institutions. Low support for democracy in 2006 coincided with three things. The first was a referendum on the expansion of the Panama Canal. At the time, large swaths of the population were not feeling the benefits that Omar Torrijos had promised for all society following the return of the canal to Panamanian control six years earlier. The second was the transformation of the pension system from a solidarity system to a mixed one introducing individual retirement accounts in Panama for the first time. The third was the disappointment that Martin's government represented in comparison with his father. While Torrijos Sr. has been historically associated with an era of national development, Martin failed to satisfy in terms of popularity such a legacy. These three things may have increased the perception of lack of protection or abandonment among broad sectors suffering from social vulnerability, dramatically lowering support for democracy.

To understand the low level of support for democracy in 2014, and the general trends in Panamanians' democratic attitudes between 2014 and 2018, we examine Martinelli's leadership. Specifically, we describe how his leadership affected both citizens' views about democracy and their tolerance for the rights of political opponents.

Martinelli's election in 2009 broke with the partisan balance that the PRD and the Panameñista Party had enjoyed since the transition to democracy in 1989 (Brown Arauz, 2014). Despite being part of the Panamanian business elite, Martinelli was often characterized as a political outsider who emerged from the circles of economic power (Brown Araúz & Rosales, 2015). His emergence broke the culture of party pacts and consensus, introducing political antagonism into the system. While this was related to the rise of personalist and disruptive leaders across the region, it also responded to the unique political, social, economic, and historical characteristics of Panama. Martinelli managed to establish a division between the «them» of the previous parties and economic elites and the «us» of himself and his supporters, thus strengthening the bond with his followers and polarizing the political climate. The ex-president provided the Panamanian people with a compelling explanation of the origins of their problems, attributing responsibility to the political parties. His leadership was grounded in antagonism between a hardworking populace and a corrupt political elite that only worked when seeking self-benefit (Brown Araúz & Nevache, 2023).

The first outstanding feature of Martinelli's government was successful economic performance, with nominal GDP growth per year averaging over 10 percent during his administration. Poverty dropped from 33 percent in the first year of his presidency to 26 percent in his final year (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2022). Martinelli claimed that his administration's increased spending in monetary transfers via direct subsidies to citizens made poverty reduction possible. (CEPAL, 2022). These economic policies entailed major growth in public spending, with an increase of 8 billion dollars, and this resulted in a 60 percent increase in the public debt of the non-financial sector—a milestone for a country with a very restrained fiscal policy (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, 2022). These economic policies proved disruptive in a country known for financial discipline, little inclination toward government spending or debt, and a firm rejection of subsidies.

In addition, Martinelli carried out significant public works projects, such as the construction of a subway, airports, and highways, as well as the second and third phases of the coastal beltway in Panama City, a space with sports fields and many recreational and meeting spaces for citizens. These works improved the connectivity of the working classes with their jobs. They also fostered recreation in the heart of the city, improving the living conditions of a sizable economically vulnerable population. It is partly due to these achievements that Martinelli's

popularity remained high during his term, reaching 54 percent in 2013, a high figure for a Latin American president approaching the end of its term at the time. (El País, 2013).

It is possible that Martinelli influenced democratic attitudes between 2012 and 2021 through an association of support for democracy and presidential approval and favorability. In 2010, just one year into Martinelli's term, Panamanian citizens registered their highest support for democracy since the AmericasBarometer's inception, with 71 percent voicing support for democracy. This was only the second time that democratic support was above the Latin American average, the other being 2004, the first year of the Martin Torrijos government. Support was 70 percent then. Both were the first year of government for presidents who took office during economic boom times, claiming to represent something different from the prior government. This gives some indication that attitudes toward democracy could be related to public support for incoming governments—a recognition of being satisfied with the results of democracy at that moment. Thanks to his leadership style and popularity, Martinelli could be linked to the evaluation of Panama's democracy. The 2010 and 2012 questions on democratic attitudes were inextricably related to attitudes about Martinelli's figure, his administration, and his policies.

How can we explain the decline in support for democracy in 2014 along with the erosion of tolerance for the political rights of regime critics? During his administration, Martinelli entered public disputes and confrontations with opposition sectors, businessmen, and the media. Regarding his political adversaries, a sharp rift opened with his own vice-president, Juan Carlos Varela, due to competing electoral interests in 2014 (BBC, 2014). Regarding businessmen, he accused them of not paying taxes and called them «*empresaurios*», a demeaning play on words combining «*empresario*» (businessman) with «*dinosaurio*» (dinosaur). His remarks about the media were constantly pejorative. Martinelli's rhetoric aimed at delegitimizing his adversaries, and this, we believe, affected democratic values among his followers. As shown in first section, between 2012 and 2014, approval of regime critics' right to vote dropped by 34 percentage points (to 18.6 percent), approval of critics' right to protest dropped by 23 points (to 29.1 percent), approval of critics' right to run a candidate dropped by 31 points (to 15.8 percent), and approval of critics' right to give political speeches dropped by 37 points (to 17.4 percent).

Beyond rhetoric, Martinelli's actions likewise dealt a blow to democratic attitudes. In the last year of this term, he was accused of illegally intercepting the communications of his political opponents and the media (Swissinfo, 2021). In March of 2013, the Electoral Ethical Pact was signed by representatives of the Catholic Church, the media, and members of the political parties, but Martinelli's party (Cambio Democrático) opted not to sign. Also during his administration, the

security services were militarized in what has been considered a detriment to the democratic stability of the country (Guevara Mann, 2016), and Martinelli and his sons have since been accused of multiple cases of corruption (Pérez, 2017). The latest development in this regard is that his sons were convicted in the United States for receiving bribes from the construction company Odebrecht while their father was in power, a clear sign of the cloak of corruption surrounding his mandate (BBC, 2022).

It's possible that the same popularity that contributed to high support for democracy in 2010 and 2012 became a double-edged sword for democracy in 2014. In that year, Martinelli left power, succeeded by his former ally and now rival Varela. To some, democracy no longer seemed as valuable, with only 47 percent of Panamanians supporting it, while military coups were not so strongly rejected, and the political rights of regime critics were afforded thought to have less right of participation.

Martinelli has remained politically relevant after leaving office, and subsequent corruption scandals have not undermined his support. A recent poll ranks Martinelli as the candidate with the highest support for the 2024 election. (Gordon, 2022). To explain the former president's invulnerability to scandals and criticism, a common phrase repeated by the media and citizens is that «he stole, but he achieved.» (Claramente CM, 2018). For his followers, «he achieved» is the relevant point, while for his detractors «he stole» is more important. On March 23, 2019, Martinelli referred to this slogan on Twitter, clarifying that he did indeed «achieve» and asking followers to pay no attention to «unproven» corruption accusations. (Martinelli, 2019).

In sum, it's possible that Martinelli broke the traditional culture of consensus and pacts in Panama's still-young democracy and split the political chessboard in two sections: his supporters and his detractors. (Laclau, 2014). As a consequence, citizen attitudes and values, as well as democratic institutions themselves, could have been influenced by the popular former president. While support for democracy and tolerance for the political rights of regime critics have been in an upward trajectory since 2014, they remain below the high levels experienced before and during Martinelli's presidency. However, again, we cannot conclusively test that hypothesis for lack of data.

5. CONCLUSION

Cluster analysis identified a sizable segment of the Panamanian citizenry that is committed to democratic institutions, opposing both military coups and executive branch-driven democratic ruptures. The results show that this 'Institutionalists' segment comprises the largest share of respondents in all survey

waves, an encouraging finding. At the same time, the share of institutionalists declined between 2012 and 2018, corresponding to declines in rejection of military interventions and executive aggrandizement. We also observe short-term dips in support for democracy and in political tolerance in 2014.

Interestingly, the second most important group in the period studied are the Military Interventionists. What can be understood is that even without an army some of the values of the pre-transition dictatorship persist. This could be assumed to be a generational issue that will be changing but unfortunately the young people are the ones who adopt the positions furthest from democracy in relation to the rest of the population.

Compared with the rest of Latin America, Panama registered weaker support for democracy (lower by 20 percentage points) in 2014. This was the year of Martinelli's departure from power, and we believe that trends in democratic support could be related to his role in Panama's political system. Martinelli was able to connect his own political favorability with the popular support given to democracy.

In 2022, and following many scandals and allegations of corruption, Martinelli is currently campaigning for the next presidential election (2024), and this gives testimony to the strength of connection he has achieved with Panama's citizenry. During his term in office, Martinelli presented solutions and direct answers to the citizens' demands for improved wellbeing while breaking with the traditional political parties, the media, and the powerful elite families. This marked a major shift from the two-party political system that had proven lethargic in responding to the country's social and economic needs. Thus, after Martinelli's first year of government, support for democracy was three points above the Latin American average (71 percent); in the year he left power (2014), support for democracy was 20 percentage points below the regional average (47 percent). The identification of his personal leadership with an acceptance of democracy can thus be said to break with regional dynamics in terms of democratic attitudes.

Martinelli's discourse, his actions, and his style of political leadership altered the ways in which his followers conceive of democracy. He introduced a strategy of antagonism against his rivals that broke with the political balance in place since the transition to democracy, characterized by alternation between two complementarity major parties and a period of stability, consensus, and pact-building. Martinelli's rhetoric tended toward strong disqualification of all his political rivals. In this political climate, Martinelli's followers and his opponents both had to face the dilemma of how to coexist in democracy where the ideas of «the other» are judged unworthy of expression, even in the public and electoral spheres. The decline in the values of tolerance for the political rights of the opposition since the end of his administration could illustrate the impact that this president's leadership has had on democratic attitudes in general.

The Panamanian political system has employed the call for consensus and dialogue as a means of resolving conflicts, but with uncertain outcomes when it comes to addressing the structural imbalances affecting the most vulnerable sectors (Brown Aráuz & Pérez, 2019; García-Rendón & Subinas, 2023). Simultaneously, Panamanian society has operated with a conspicuous absence of politics, understood as the discussion of public affairs, and has been characterized by the primacy of private interests in conflict resolution (García-Rendón & Subinas, 2023). Democracy cannot survive without consensus, but it also requires that conflict is expressed in the form of differentiated options. The absence of political pluralism in a society that neglects the demands of vulnerable sectors provides fertile ground for the emergence of leaderships that introduce antagonistic logics into the fields of contention, thereby impacting democratic attitudes. Regardless of whether Martinelli is permitted to run in the 2024 election, he has already paved the way for other actors to take up his pugilistic political strategy. Elite confrontation and polarization will likely continue to shape Panamanian public opinion on democracy for years to come.

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APPENDIX

Annex 1. Attitudes about democratic interruptions in Panamá (2010-2021)

Name	Values	2010	2012	2014	2016/17	2018	2021
jc10	Coup is Not Justified when Corruption is High.	73.5% (1,082)	79.9% (1,149)	67.2% (939)	67.0% (507)	65.5% (472)	57.0% (452)
	Coup is Justified when Corruption is High.	26.5% (390)	20.1% (288)	32.8% (459)	33.0% (250)	34.5% (249)	43.0% (341)
jc15a	Executive is Not Justified to govern without legislative during crisis.	91.2% (1,341)	95.8% (1,373)	79.4% (1,162)	77.2% (1,129)	74.6% (554)	71.0% (1,116)
	Executive is Justified to govern without legislative during crisis.	8.8% (129)	4.2% (59)	20.6% (302)	22.8% (334)	25.4% (189)	29.0% (455)
jc10	Coup is Not Justified when Crime is High.	25.2% (373)	84.0% (1,205)	70.9% (992)	67.1% (471)	70.2% (548)	---
	Coup is Justified when Crime is High.	74.8% (1,108)	16.0% (230)	29.1% (408)	32.9% (231)	29.8% (233)	---
jc16a	Is Not Justified for Executive to Dissolve the Supreme Court of Justice.	92.4% (1,338)	96.5% (1,379)	---	---	71.0% (535)	---
	Is Justified for Executive to Dissolve the Supreme Court of Justice.	7.6% (110)	3.5% (50)	---	---	29.0% (218)	---

* Missing values are not presented in the table; only valid percentages (SPSS) are included.

Source: AmericasBarometer.

Annex 2. Democratic Attitudes in Panamá (2012-2018)

Name (Spa.)	Values	2012	2014	2016/17	2018
disidentevotar	Approval of Government Critics' Right to Vote.	52.3% (680)	18.6% (275)	59.2% (889)	53.4% (823)
	Disapproval of Government Critics' Right to Vote.	47.7% (619)	81.4% (1,206)	40.8% (613)	46.6% (718)
disidenteprotest	Approval of Government Critics' to Peaceful Demonstrations.	52.0% (722)	70.9% (1,058)	66.5% (1,003)	63.7% (979)
	Disapproval or neutral of Government Critics' to Peaceful Demonstrations.	48.0% (666)	29.1% (435)	33.5% (505)	36.3% (558)
disidentecandidatizar	Approval of Government Critics' Right to Run for Office.	47.2% (632)	15.8% (237)	36.9% (552)	37.7% (576)
	Disapproval or neutral of Government Critics' Right to Run for Office.	52.8% (707)	84.2% (1,259)	63.1% (945)	62.3% (950)
disidentediscurso	Approval of Government Critics' Right to Make Speeches.	54.7% (733)	17.4% (260)	39.4% (588)	42.2% (650)
	Disapproval or neutral of Government Critics' Right to Make Speeches.	45.3% (607)	82.6% (1,237)	60.6% (906)	57.8% (891)

* Missing values are not presented in the table; only valid percentages (SPSS) are included.

Source: AmericasBarometer.

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Sergio García-Rendón and Jon Subinas

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