THE RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES UNDER DIFFICULT CONDITIONS. THE CASE OF GUATEMALA 2012-2021

La resiliencia de los valores democráticos bajo condiciones difíciles. El caso de Guatemala 2012-2021

A resiliência de valores democráticos sob condições difíceis. O caso da Guatemala 2012-2021

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Keywords:
democratic attitudes; satisfaction with democracy; cluster analysis; Guatemala

Abstract

This article describes the evolution of democratic attitudes in Guatemala between 2012 and 2021 and identifies, at the political system level, the contextual factors that have contributed to changes in attitudes over time. For this purpose, we trace the linkages between recent political, economic, and social development indicators/trends and public opinion data. Based on cluster analysis of nationally representative survey data, we group of citizens with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes. Those "institutionalists", who express consistent support for democratic institutions, comprise the largest share of respondents in all the examined years, although that share decreases in the more recent surveys. The research sustains that democratic values among Guatemalans are resistant despite the establishment's attempts to hinder anti-corruption processes. Civic mobilization demanding accountability, justice, and respect of electoral results confirm this democratic resilience, despite the institutional setbacks.

Palabras clave:
actitudes democráticas; satisfacción con la democracia; análisis de clusters; Guatemala

Resumen

Este artículo describe la evolución de las actitudes democráticas en Guatemala entre el 2012 y el 2021 e identifica, al nivel del sistema político, los factores contextuales que han contribuido a los cambios actitudinales en el tiempo. Para este propósito, se analizan los vínculos entre el desarrollo político, económico y social reciente y datos de opinión pública. En base a "*cluster* análisis" de datos de encuestas representativas a nivel nacional, agrupamos a los ciudadanos según distintos patrones de actitudes democráticas. Aquellos "institucionalistas", quienes expresan apoyo consistente con las instituciones democráticas, conforman la proporción más grande de entrevistados en todos los años, aunque con una caída en las encuestas más recientes. Se considera que los valores democráticos entre los guatemaltecos son resistentes a pesar de los intentos del *establishment* de obstaculizar procesos anti-corrupción. Movilizaciones cívicas demandando rendición de cuentas, justicia y respeto a los resultados electorales evidencian esta reserva democrática, a pesar de los retrocesos en materia institucional.

Palavras-chave:
atitudes democráticas; satisfação com a democracia; análise de cluster; Guatemala

Resumo

Este artigo descreve a evolução das atitudes democráticas na Guatemala entre 2012 e 2021 e identifica, no sistema político, os fatores contextuais que contribuíram para as mudanças atitudinais ao longo do tempo. Para tanto, são analisados os vínculos entre desenvolvimento político, económico e social e dados de opinião pública. Com base na análise de cluster de dados de pesquisas de opinião pública representativas a nível nacional, agrupamos os cidadãos de acordo com diferentes padrões de atitudes democráticas. Os "institucionalistas", que expressam um apoio consistente às instituições democráticas, constituem a maior proporção de entrevistados em todos os anos, embora tenha ocorrido uma queda nas pesquisas de opinião pública mais recentes. Os valores democráticos entre os guatemaltecos são vistos como resistentes, apesar das tentativas do establishment de obstaculizar os processos anti-corrupção. As mobilizações cívicas que exigem prestação de contas, justiça e respeito aos resultados eleitorais evidenciam esta reserva democrática, apesar dos retrocessos em matéria institucional.

1. INTRODUCTION*

Many recent reports on Guatemala's political regime written in the last years have alerted about a democratic backsliding (e. g. Stuenkel, 2023), that is a state-led deterioration of political institutions that sustain democracy (Bermeo, 2016).

Relevant progress in the fight against high-level corruption (of the type that, for example, led to the incarceration of former president Otto Pérez Molina in 2015), were hampered by the counter offensive of the criminal oligarchy that has controlled Guatemalan politics since the 1996 Peace Agreements established after the civil war (Schwartz & Isaacs, 2023). In the latest electoral process, this criminal-oligarchic elite attempted to continue ruling the country by manipulating the supply of presidential candidates. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) and the attorney-general's office (*Ministerio Público* – MP), along with the courts, established arbitrary sanctions to candidates that did not align with the interests of the traditional elites, presumably with the consent of the incumbent president Alejandro Giammattei. National and international pessimism had already spread when, surprisingly, a social-democrat and apparently inconsequential candidacy grew from 2.9 % of voting intention in the last polls before first-round election, (Meléndez & Perelló, 2023) up to winning the presidency in a ballotage by a landslide (60.9 % of the valid vote). Despite constant and varied reactions of corrupted elites to impede Bernardo Arevalo's triumph, the majoritarian support behind this candidacy made victory inevitable. How is it possible that, under a corrupt and authoritarian clique governing the country by replicating wartime institutions designed to undermine the formal functions of the state in favor of corrupt elites (Schwartz, 2022), and considering a weak party system, a progressive anti-establishment and new political party came to power despite unfair and uncompetitive elections?

Part of the explanation of these surprising electoral results points to the resilience of democratic values in a significant share of Guatemalans. Guatemala's political culture has been shaped by the legacies of authoritarian rule. In comparison to other Latin American countries, Guatemala's public opinion stands out by showing higher levels of trust in the Armed Forces, low interest on and scarce knowledge of politics, and low levels of participation in political parties (Azpuru, 2023). However, during the period under study (2012-2019), around half of the population classifies as ideal democrats sharing full opposition to military coups and presidential aggrandizement (Introduction to the special issue). The existing assessments of democratic backsliding in Guatemala have focused on the role of state actors but has underestimated the importance of political culture characteristics in society as a resource for confronting backsliding and for democratic resilience. When the Guatemalan citizenry found specific political opportunities for expressing their strong democratic values (e. g. backing judicial processes against corrupt politicians or voting in favor of democratic candidates), their democratic commitment becomes clearer to political observers.

The purpose of this paper is to show some evidence about long-standing political culture characteristics of Guatemalan society than can help explain why, under certain conditions, the attempts of corrupt and authoritarian elites to control

power do not succeed. Social protest manifestations (2015 citizens' unrest backing anti-corruption fighting) and massive voting for anti-establishment candidates (2023 Arévalo's surprising election) are a couple of instances of democratic resistance from below in a political context dominated by corrupt elites. These two events are far from "surprising" and might be better understood as manifestations of Guatemalans' civic culture triggered by political opportunities. Based on cluster analysis of public opinion data, this paper explores the democratic demand side of Guatemalan society in the last decade, and how these shared values can be positively employed to oppose democratic backsliding.

2. CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Guatemala's political culture has been shaped by the legacies of authoritarian rule. Leftist political organizations were banned for long periods until the 1996 peace agreement, and the political parties that have competed under democratic rules since then mostly represent elite interests (Gálvez, 2000). In a context of post-conflict reconstruction, the integration of democratically organized communities did not reach ideal standards (Sieder, 2007). To mobilize the electorate, political parties used to hire political entrepreneurs and brokers who rely on vote buying and intimidation tactics to secure electoral support (Gonzáles-Ocantos *et al.*, 2020). Not surprisingly, international organizations tend to refer to Guatemala as a "corporate mafia state" built on a coalition of traditional oligarchs, police and military officials, and common criminals (Amnesty International, 2002). Specially, in the last decades, a "criminal oligarchy" –a power concentration derived from illicit and licit wealth– has grown stronger (Schwartz & Isaacs, 2023) through the use of civil war legacies that designed the "wrong kind" of political institutions to undermine the formal functions of the state, directing them in favor of private interests (Schwartz, 2022).

When it comes to the political regime, liberal democratic indicators showed a positive increased since the democratization process started in 1986 until 2015, when they decayed rapidly (V-Dem, 2023). In the last years, regarding the political system, Guatemala can be characterized as a democracy where informal political institutions often trump formal institutions and allow corrupt powers to dominate, civil society is fragmented, and the state is generally weak. Guatemala's party system exhibits high levels of electoral volatility, highly personalized parties, and declining legitimacy of political parties and elections (Sánchez, 2008). The generalized disillusionment with political institutions has left Guatemala as a potential case for the rise of populism, the style that has characterized recent presidents like Jimmy Morales (Althoff, 2019) and political leaders like Carlos Pineda (Meléndez-Sánchez & Gamboa, 2023).

Under these structural and institutional conditions, upholding democratic values has been difficult. However, since the early 2010s, the period under study, two developments were key to challenge the criminal oligarchy control-schema and gave optimism to democratic forces, one that is probably comparable to the one experienced during the signing of the peace accords in 1996. First, a series of trials related to human-rights violations committed during the civil war by members of the army, that brought dictator Efraín Ríos Montt and other members of the high-ranked military rankings to national court. Actually, the specialized literature on post-transitional justice has shown the positive role played by Guatemalan High Courts in the prosecution of Human Rights violations and other armed-conflict crimes years after they were committed and apparently sealed by the elites (Gutiérrez, 2015). Second, the increasing recent judicialization of Guatemalan politics, with trials of corrupt high-ranking politicians, that despite the transition from an authoritarian rule to democratic standards, took advantage of their access to power to set up corruption rings. The latter case, that was accompanied by a wave of citizens' public demonstrations in favor of the process, merits some explanation.

The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (*Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala*, CICIG) was created in 2007 at the request of the Guatemalan government and with the support of the United Nations. CICIG helped launch over 200 investigations into hundreds of government officials and more than 30 criminal organizations. Its greatest impact was perhaps achieved through the corruption charges against then-president Otto Pérez-Molina in 2015, who subsequently resigned and is currently under arrest.

One of the major consequences of the anti-corruption drive was an unprecedented civic mobilization of Guatemalans demanding accountability and justice. In 2015, hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans took to the streets to protest impunity and violence. During approximately twenty weeks, people demonstrated as individuals mobilizing against corruption rather than as representatives of their social organizations, which explains the non-violent tone that made participation increase (Bennet, 2016). These demonstrations took place simultaneously with similar civic movements in El Salvador and Honduras and were framed as a "democratic spring" in Central America (e. g. Swchwartz & Isaacs, 2023). Although the CICIG's work received social support, it also provoked its own opposition. According to personal interviews conducted to United Nations officials, CICIG had the capacity to "polarize" Guatemala[1]. Political parties of the establishment –not benefited from CICIG's investigations– and their followers attacked the CICIG's

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1. Personal interviews conducted to two former United Nations' officials in Guatemala City during the first week of August 2023.

prestige by stigmatizing it as partisan. The then-president Jimmy Morales did not renew the CICIG's mandate in 2019, stalling the advances of an accountability shock to a political system characterized by rampant corruption and abuse of power. Under Giammattei's tenure, MP lawyers associated with the CICIG were fired, consolidating a severe setback on the fight against corruption. However, the citizens' defense of the CICIG had demonstrated the existence of solid democratic forces among Guatemalans despite the authoritarian and corrupted manipulations of the elites.

This study describes the continuities and fluctuations of democratic attitudes in Guatemala between 2012 and 2021 and identifies the system-level, contextual factors that have allowed to expose publicly the democratic resilience present at the individual-level. To describe the trends of democratic attitudes, this research draws on National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) cluster analysis, which identifies groups of citizens with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes in each of the five waves of the Americas Barometer data, a methodology described in the introduction to this special issue. To enrich the analysis, we also examine the evolution of public opinion on specific issues like satisfaction with democracy and presidential approval. To identify the contextual factors that have contributed to bring out these attitudes, we trace the linkages between recent political, economic, and social developments and public opinion.

Three main findings emerge from the cluster analysis and additional examination of survey data. First, institutionalists, who express consistent support for democratic institutions (and are opponents to coups and executive aggrandizement), comprise the largest share of respondents in all years, albeit with a decline in more recent surveys. Second, support for democracy is moderate and stable in all clusters during the period under study, while support for inclusion and tolerance are lower. Third, these data show that as the level of democracy declined in Guatemala, support for democracy also waned. However, the support for democracy in Guatemala in the period under study (2012-2021) is resilient despite democratic setbacks at the regime level and citizens' disillusionment operated by the legitimation of impunity in events such as the dissolution of CICIG in 2019.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we analyze the evolution of support for democracy and other democratic attitudes using NORC's cluster analysis. In addition to describing the relative size of clusters over time, we examine the evolution of specific democratic attitudes across clusters as well as the clusters' salient socioeconomic characteristics. In the following section, we examine additional public opinion data on support for and satisfaction with democracy to further document and explain the recent deterioration of the political institutions in the country. The final section summarizes the main findings and describes some consequences of recent events on trust in political institutions.

3. CLUSTER ANALYSIS: METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The empirical public opinion evidence of this article follows NORC's methodology for cluster analysis (see Introduction) to classify Guatemalans into groups or "clusters" with distinct attitudinal profiles. The aim is to maximize similarity within each cluster while maximizing dissimilarity between clusters. As explained in the introduction to this special issue, 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. This cluster analysis used the five democratic attitudes to generate clusters explained in the introduction of this special issue: support for democracy, opposition to military coups, opposition to executive aggrandizement, and tolerance of protest and regime critics. NORC's methodology groups into four families that share a set of defining characteristics: institutionalists (including institutionalist and inclusionary institutionalists), military interventionists, presidentialists, and authoritarians[2]. The introduction of the special issue provides more detailed information regarding the study's methodology.

A) Cluster Shares Over Time In Guatemala

Figure 1 shows the relative size of these cluster families in Guatemala from 2012 to 2019. Institutionalists make up the largest group during the period under study (53.9 percent in 2012, 56.8 percent in 2014, 42.5 percent in 2017, and 47.8 percent in 2019). While this cluster is also the largest overall in the region (53 % in 2012, 53.1 % in 2014, 52.3 % in 2016/2017, and 49.3 % in 2018/2019), there are important features that make it more relevant for understanding Guatemala. The institutionalist cluster's predominance is one of the central features of contemporary Guatemalan politics despite elite-level events that have failed to fulfill the democratic promises made by the anti-corruption advances. The citizen protests' wave in 2015 –an anti-corruption mobilization triggered by CICIG's investigations– was interpreted as a new era of citizen accountability and an important sign of progress in a country taken over by corruption rings (Beltrán, 2016). Disappointment with the impunity backlash, and the subsequent dissolution of CICIG, may have contributed to a decline in support for democratic institutions and to the decrease of the share of the institutionalist cluster to below 50 percent of the population between 2014 and 2017 (below the Latin America standards). That being said, it remains significantly higher than the corresponding shares of

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2. The following percentages of individuals remained unclustered: 1.8 % (in 2012), 5.5 % (in 2014), 6.7 % (in 2017), and 6.8 % (in 2019).

military interventionists. This should be understood as evidence of a democratic commitment among Guatemalans.

Figure 1. Evolution of Cluster Families, 2012-2019
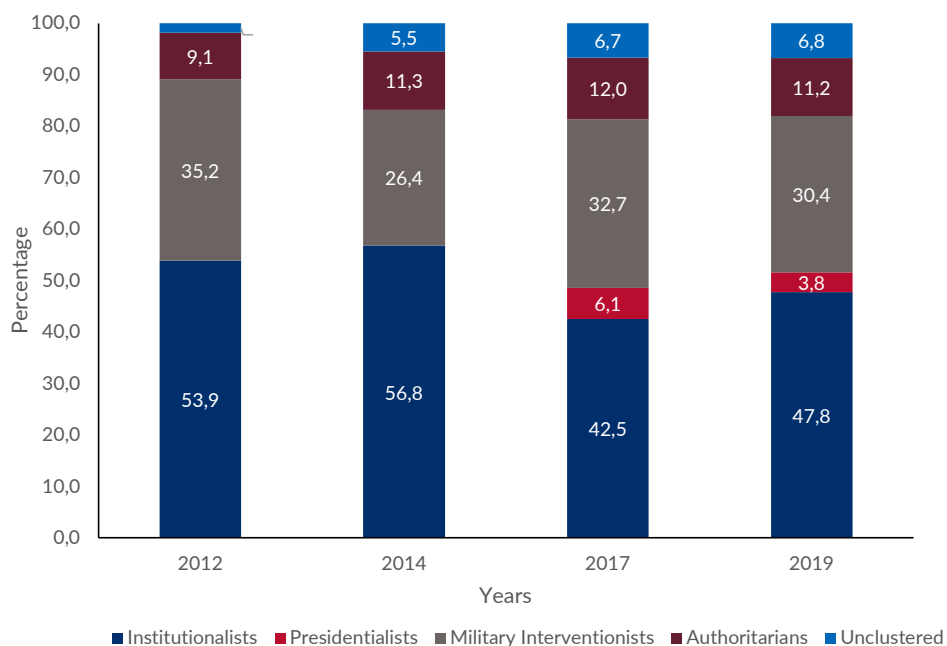
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

Military interventionists –those individuals that exhibit less than full opposition to military coups but full opposition to executive aggrandizement– made up around one-third of the population in the 2012-2019 period. In 2012, 35.2 percent of the sample was grouped into this category. Although this percentage fell to 26.4 two years later, it reached 32.7 in 2017 and 30.4 in 2019. This confirms the persistence of demand for military "mano dura" as well. Although a major variation within this cluster from 2014 and 2017 (more than 6-point increase) might be presumably tied to a reaction towards impunity regarding the corruption crimes revealed by CICIG. A hypothetical reasoning at the individual level could have been that if democratic elected political leaders were not willing to secure anti-corruption processes, military interventions might. Although support for mano dura used to be linked to insecurity or crime victimization in Guatemala (e. g. Azpuru & Zeichmeister, 2014), we cannot rule out that this specific noticeable increase could have a relationship with citizens' disappointment with

civilian rulers, especially since this cluster also expresses full opposition to executive aggrandizement.

Authoritarians –those individuals characterized by full opposition to both military coups and executive aggrandizement– remained stable at between 9.1 and 12.0 percent of the population during the 2012-2019 period. While institutionalists and military interventionists have fluctuated more due to advances and setbacks on anti-corruption measures, support for more extensive authoritarian erosion appears untouched by any of these events. Finally, presidentialists –those individuals characterized by less full opposition to executive aggrandizement but full opposition to military coups– were first identified as a distinct group in 2017 when they comprised 6.1 percent of the sample and fell to 3.8 percent in 2019. Perhaps Jimmy Morales' refusal to renew CICIG's mandate for another four-year period might have decreased the group of Guatemalans not fully opposed to executive aggrandizement.

B) Trends In Democratic Attitudes Across Clusters

This section describes the evolution of each cluster's average democratic attitudes scores. It focuses on support for democracy, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion. Scores range from zero to one, with higher values indicating more democratic attitudes. Opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement are not discussed because their averages do not vary within clusters[3].

Figure 2 plots the evolution of average support for democracy across clusters. It shows that levels of support for democracy among institutionalists were medium-to-high and similar to those in other clusters. Military interventionists and presidentialists displayed considerable support for democracy despite their respective support of military coups and executive aggrandizement. Changes in average scores for these clusters followed the general trend. Authoritarians also exhibited relatively high levels of support for democracy, but their evolution was different. Average support for democracy fluctuated in accordance with national

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3. As discussed above, scores for opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement are the defining characteristics of the various clusters. Institutionalists have full opposition to coups and full opposition to executive aggrandizement, and corresponding values of one for both attitudes. Military interventionists have no opposition to coups and full opposition to executive aggrandizement, and corresponding values of zero and one. Presidentialists have full opposition to coups and no opposition to executive aggrandizement, and corresponding values of one and zero. Authoritarians have no opposition to coups and no opposition to executive aggrandizement, and corresponding values of zero for both attitudes.

trends from 2012 to 2017 but deviated in 2019. While support for democracy among the rest of the clusters dropped from 2017 to 2019 (0.60 to 0.57 among institutionalists, 0.58 to 0.57 among military interventionists, 0.63 to 0.55 among presidentialists), it increased from 0.52 to 0.63 among authoritarians.

**Figure 2. Evolution of Support for Democracy by Cluster Family**
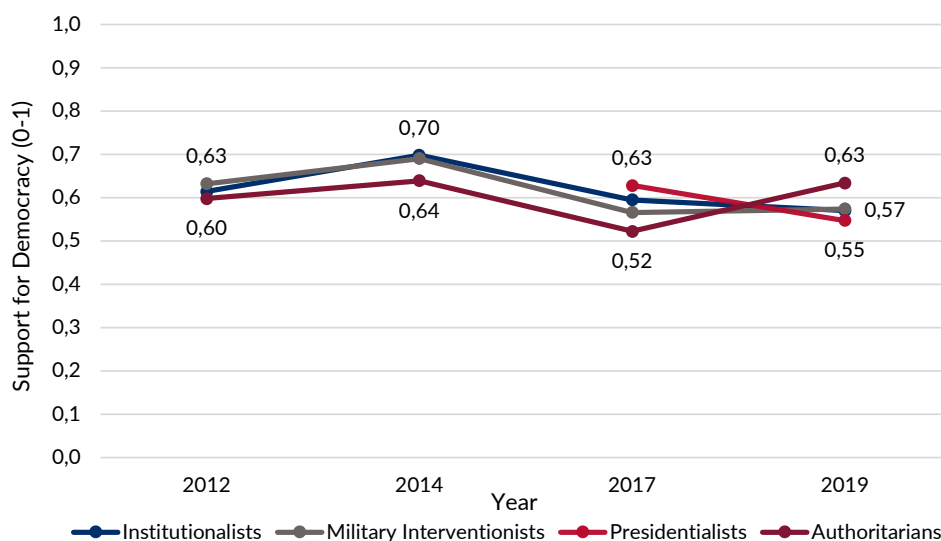
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

Figure 3 shows that average support in favor of minorities (such as homosexuals) in the recognition of their political participation rights, a topic in which Guatemala shows the lowest support in the Americas (Rodríguez, 2021). The trends are rather similar across clusters between 2012 and 2019 (reduction of the support between 2012 and 2014, increase between 2014 and 2017, and stabilization between 2017 and 2019), with the exception of 2019's drop (from 0.30 to 0.26) among authoritarians. For previous research on this topic in Guatemala (e. g. Azpuru & Zeichmeister, 2014), we know that the two major variables that explain positions in favor of homosexuals' participation in politics are religiosity and education, but these factors have not changed dramatically in the period under study according to LAPOP's data (Rodríguez, 2021). It is important to mention that during the period of analysis, Jimmy Morales –an evangelical comedian connected with Christian networks, media outlets and churches– emerged as a political figure, first, and was later elected president, trying to politically capitalize a social conservative agenda including his opposition to LGTB rights (Althoff, 2019). His

right-wing populist character might have taken advantage of the weak support for democratic inclusion of minorities shown for the period under study.

Figure 3. Evolution of Support for Democratic Inclusion by Cluster Family
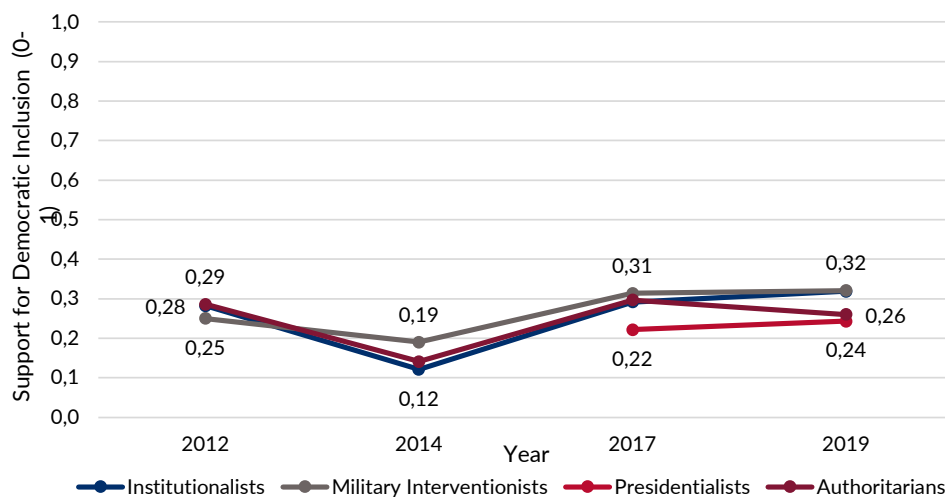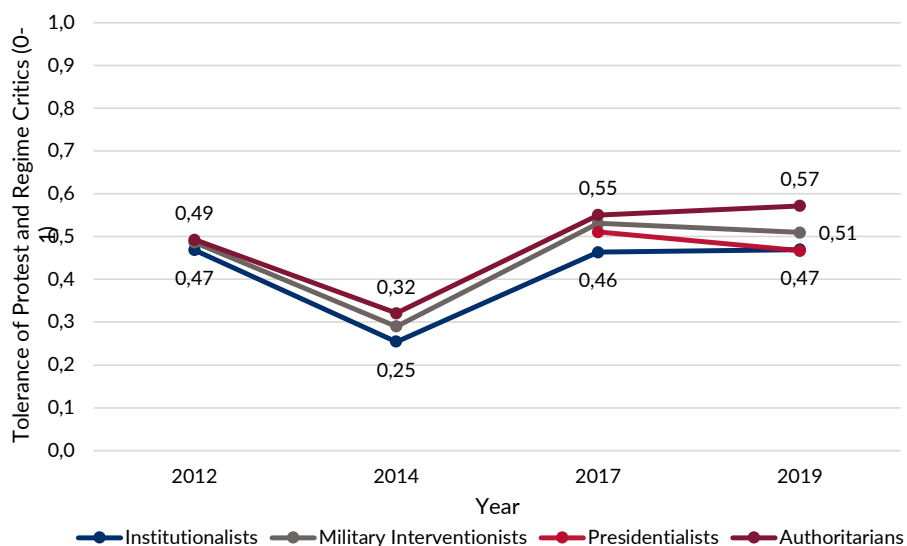

Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

Figure 4 shows the evolution of average scores for tolerance of protests of individuals that criticize the regime across clusters. We observe a dramatic increase between 2014 and 2017 across clusters (institutionalists from 0.25 to 0.46, military interventionists from 0.30 to 0.52, and authoritarians from 0.32 to 0.55) and relative stability thereafter (institutionalists from 0.46 to 0.47, military interventionists from 0.52 to 0.51, and authoritarians from 0.55 to 0.57), except for a decrease among presidentialists (from 0.51 to 0.47). As noted earlier, Guatemala's democratic spring occurred when CICIG's investigations gained public notoriety. Thousands of Guatemalans participated in demonstrations against the political establishment, not only criticizing the Pérez-Molina government but demanding accountability and justice. These events likely shaped the tolerance for protests and regime critics across all clusters. By 2014, the Attorney's General Office and CICIG had brought charges against judges that issued "illegal judicial decisions" to protect criminal networks and corrupt officials (Batz, 2022). By then, the initial manifestations of the Guatemalan democratic spring were gaining public attention, which was reflected in the attitudinal changes of individuals. A noticeably characteristic of Guatemalan protests is that the anti-corruption rethoric (at least in this cycle of protests) included both progressive and conservative civil society

groups, ranging from human rights movements to religious, anti-abortion and anti-LGTB agendas (Pereyra *et al.*, 2023) which manifest its powerful impact on the national political process. Even the effect of anti-corruption claims at the national level have had an impact on how organized younger generations –specially in Mayan communities– have challenged the political culture of impunity at the level of municipal governments (Burrell *et al.*, 2020).

Figure 4. Evolution of Tolerance of Protest of Regime Critics by Cluster Family

Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

C) Cluster Characteristics

NORC's cluster analysis for Guatemala identified the demographic, socio-economic, 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 (the belief that politicians respond to citizens' preferences), and political participation. There are few stable patterns across clusters in all waves, and the differences among clusters are substantially small. These caveats aside, there are some interesting differences to focus on.

Differences among clusters are not merely a matter of democratic values; structural factors might have an impact on their configuration. Accordingly, it is necessary to analyze income and education as indicators of the clusters' socioeconomic status. Regarding income, Figure 5 shows the evolution of the percentage of respondents at the bottom, poorest wealth quintile (Panel A) and the top, richest wealth quintile (Panel B) across clusters in Guatemala. First, the percentage of institutionalists in the poorest quintile declined from 25.0 to 20.3 between 2012 and 2019 (although with a temporary increase to 27.1 in 2014), while the percentage of institutionalists in the richest quintile increased from 10.3 to 22.3. In contrast, the percentage of authoritarians in the poorest quintile increased from 12.5 to 23.0. Two contradictory trends in two opposed groups in terms of wealth. Second, the share of authoritarians in the poorest quintile (Panel A) increased steadily from 12.5 in 2012 to 23.0 % in 2019. Again, in the richest quintile, a reversed trend is found: the percentage of authoritarians declined from 27.5 to 10.7 in the same period. The economic patterns are less clear for military interventionists and presidentialists[4]. Also, presidentialists follow a similar pattern to the authoritarians: an increase among the poorest (from 15.2 % in 2017 to 22.0 % in 2019) and a decreased among the richest (from 21.7 % in 2017 to 13.3 % in 2019). While among the poorest quintile, Institutionalist resist, Authoritarians (and Presidentialists) grow along the period. Among the richest quintile, Institutionalist gain terrain, while Authoritarians (and Presidentialists) decrease. Although more systematized information is needed, the patterns show a relationship between democratic values and wealth income that should be explored in further research. As a plausible consequence, the increase in democratic values among the elites can explain why the corrupted oligarchies cannot continue abusing arbitrary measures regarding the fate of the political regime.

Figure 6 shows the evolution of the average years of schooling across clusters, which reflects a slight upward trend. There are clear, noteworthy trends for institutionalists and military interventionists, with Guatemalans in both clusters becoming more educated over time. Among institutionalists, the average number of school years increased from 6.8 in 2012 and 6.1 in 2014 to 8.5 in 2017 and 8.5 in 2019. Among military interventionists, the average number of school years increased from 7.0 in 2012 and 6.5 in 2014 to 8.0 in 2017 and 8.3 in 2019. Since 2014, Authoritarians remain the least educated cluster. Presidentialists also decline from 7.6 in 2017 to 7.2 in 2019 and, also, remain the least educated group. Since 2017, Institutionalists are noticeable as the most educated cluster.

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4. Military interventionists, in the poorest quintile, passed from 15.5 % in 2012, to 20.3 % in 2014, to 20.0 % in 2016, and went back to 15.5 % in 2019 (Panel A). In the richest quintile, this group increased from 13.5 % in 2012 to 20.0 % in 2014, to 20.2 % in 2017 and 21.7 % in 2019 (Panel B).

Figure 5. Evolution of Percentage of Clusters in Poorest and Wealthiest Quintiles
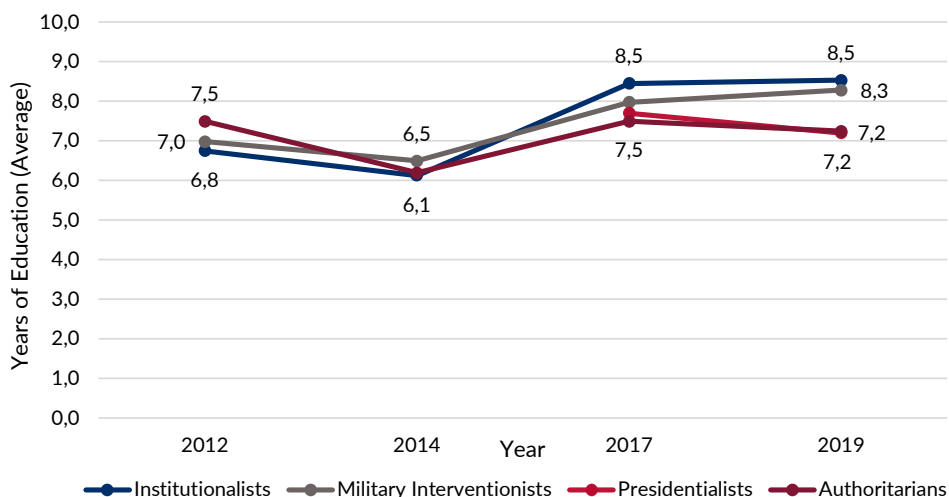
Panel A. Wealth Index Quintile: Poorest
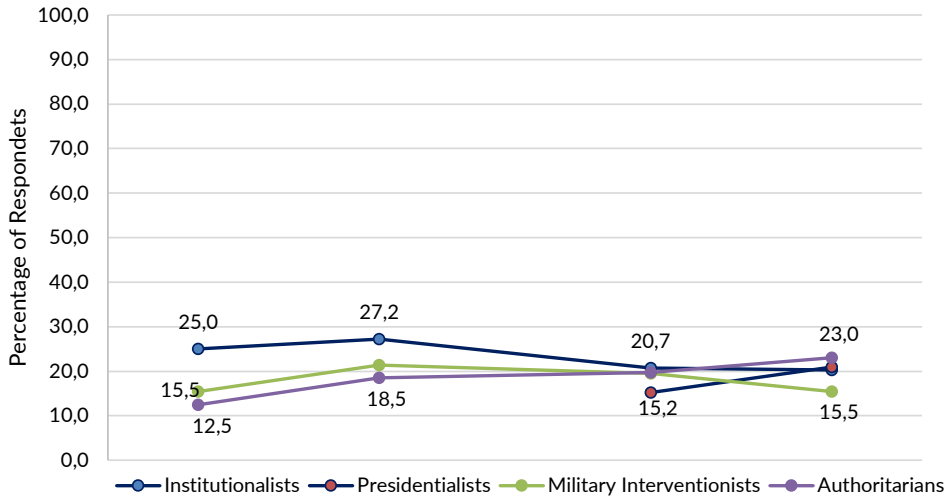
Panel B: Wealth Index Quintile: Richest
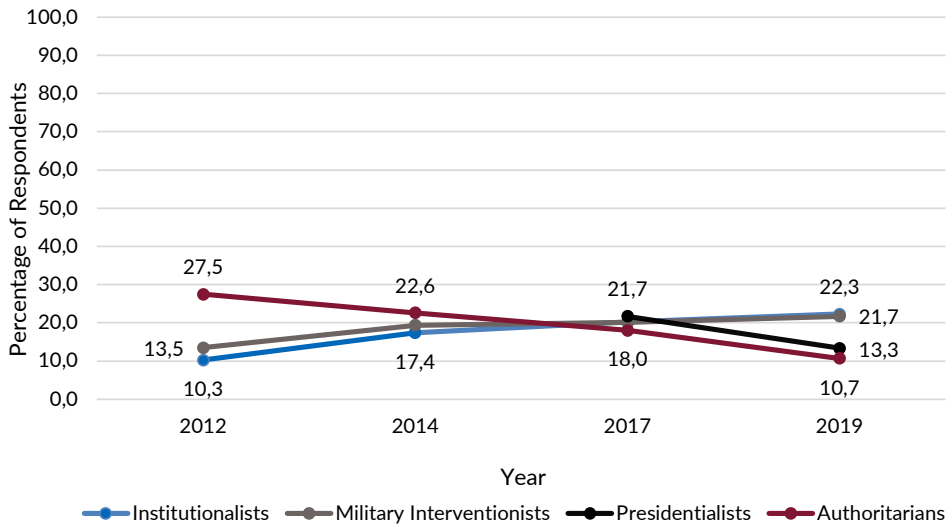
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

Figure 6. Evolution of Averages of Years of Education by Clusters

Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

4. UNDERSTANDING CHANGE IN SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

In this section we examine changes over time in satisfaction with democracy between 2004 and 2021. While the cluster analysis sheds light on changes in democratic attitudes in Guatemala, additional analysis of satisfaction with democracy allows for a clearer understanding of the factors shaping Guatemalan's views about democracy. To assess levels of satisfaction with democracy, the Americas Barometer asks: "In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?" In Figure 7, we plot the percentage of respondents who say they are either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the functioning of democracy in Guatemala. We also plot the percentage of Guatemalans who approve of the executive because of the incumbent's performance. We also show the incumbent in power at the time of each survey wave.

On the one hand, satisfaction with democracy reached its highest levels –in the period under analysis– following the electoral defeat of former dictator Rios Montt in 2003 (50-51 % in 2004 and 2006, respectively) and the citizen mobilization related to the anti-corruption investigations of CICIG during the 2015 democratic spring (55 % in 2017). On the other hand, periods of low satisfaction

with democracy (39 % in 2008, and 24 % in 2012) come after the end of the tenures of Berger and Colom respectively, both of whom had poor approval ratings before leaving power (Berger 18 % in 2006, and Colom 22 %). The disillusionment with these two presidents (that might have been affected, among other factors, the dissatisfaction with democracy) comes in hand with moderate expectations of their substitutes. Colom in 2008 and Pérez Molina in 2012 started with 32 and 33 % of approval respectively, but with a declining satisfaction with democracy. We can identify a pattern between 2004 and 2012: Presidents start their administrations with their corresponding higher ratings ("honeymoons") but leave office with mediocre levels of approval. Disappointment with leaving rulers tend to decrease -among other factors- democratic support during these years[5].

We want to detail the reasons why citizens' disappointments with Berger and Colom, respectively, might have contributed to a decrease in democratic satisfaction after their respective tenures. Oscar Berger was elected in 2003 through a broad political platform (the Great National Alliance) as a democratic alternative to Montt's political legacy, the Christian right-wing conservative Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG). During the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), previous administrations committed human rights abuses, massacres, and other crimes. Therefore, Berger's administration was expected, among other issues, to implement transitional justice mechanisms, reform the army, and recognize the state's responsibility for war crimes, but his administration turned out to be conservative in comparison to those expectations. Although his government attempted to develop a national reconciliation process, and agreed to the creation of CICIG, it did not necessarily meet the majoritarian hopes. Also, a state with weak capacities (in terms of resources and infrastructure) has had serious problems in delivering public goods which also contributed to the citizenship's disappointment (Sánchez, 2023). The sum of these factors added to the deterioration of hopes. Accordingly, Berger's approval ratings fell from 38 percent in 2004 to 18 percent in 2006.

Alvaro Colom's administration (2008-2012) was disappointing to the leftist camp that had elected him as the first left-wing president in 53 years. Originally elected with 53 percent of valid votes in 2007, his approval ratings dropped from 32 to 22 percent from 2008 to 2010. Although the government of Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) (Colom's party) did not challenge the democratic political regime, the then-president was involved in apparent crimes of embezzlement of public funds and fraud in the purchase and subsidy of buses for a transportation system implemented during his term. These issues were investigated by

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5. In Guatemala, Americas' Barometer surveys were consistently conducted during the first months of the year (February 2008, January-March 2010, March-April 2012, April-May2014, February-May 2017, and January-March 2019) reflecting the periods of presidential "honey moons" in those years were new presidents took office (for example, Colom in 2008, and Pérez Molina in 2012).

Figure 7. Satisfaction with the Functioning of Democracy and Executive Approval, 2004–2021
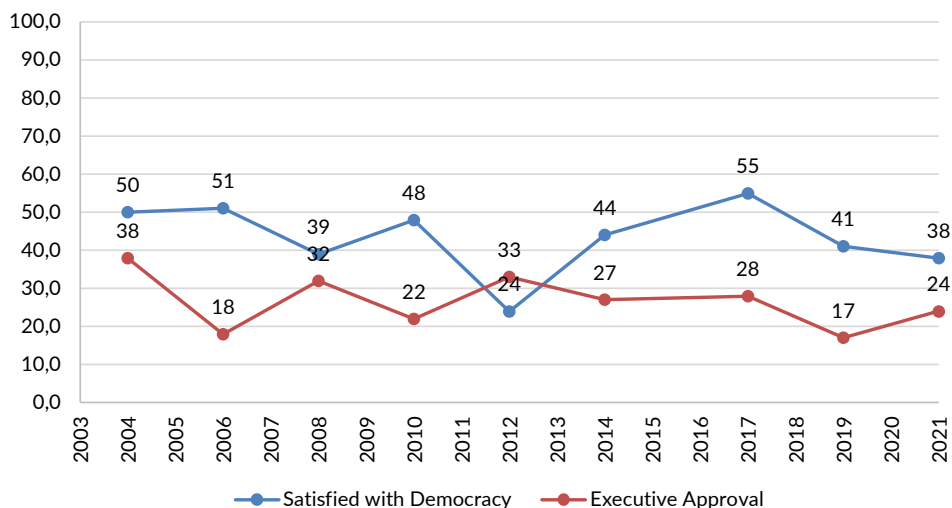
Note: "Satisfied with Democracy" is defined as the sum of the percentages of "Very Satisfied" and "Satisfied" responses.

Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

the Attorney General Office and CICIG[6]. However, levels of satisfaction with democracy remained high (48 percent in 2010) probably due to the intensive social programs implemented with clientelistic criteria. Emblematic social programs, actually, reinforced long-standing forms of exclusionary citizenship (Dotson 2014). These policies did not help sustainhigh levels of popularity for Colom nor for Sandra Torres, Colom's wife and First Lady, who had intentions to follow her husband in the presidency. The Constitutional Court ultimately banned her from running in the following election.

From 2012 onwards, this previously detailed pattern changed. The evolution of satisfaction with democracy took a dynamic much more independent from the performance of the presidents and more associated with the fight against corruption. This period is characterized by the increasing visibility of CICIG's in revealing the association between mafias and political elites, and the corresponding

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6. BBC Mundo 2018. "El expresidente de Guatemala Álvaro Colom será enjuiciado por cargos de corrupción en el plan de modernización del transporte público". https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-43254025.

consequences on presidential instability and the politicization of this institution's performance.

Former general Pérez-Molina and his personalistic party (Patriotic Party) won the 2011 general elections but did not finish his tenure due to corruption scandals. An important point of his campaign was to offer 'mano dura' to fight crime. International prosecutors sponsored by the United Nations through CICIG along with the Attorney General's Office in Guatemala (Ministerio Público–MP) investigated Pérez-Molina's participation in a corruption ring called "La Línea", which was made public in September of 2015. As a result, he had to resign from the Presidency in 2015 amid intense social protests. After the interim tenure of Alejandro Maldonado (September 2015-January 2016), and likely influenced by the Guatemalan democratic spring provoked by CICIG's investigations and corruption trials, satisfaction with democracy reached a peak of 55 percent in 2017. Obviously, some other factors might have intervened in this rise, but noticeable the anti-corruption public manifestations were an event associated with democratic sensibilities among Guatemalans.

Levels of satisfaction with democracy went up from 24 % in 2012 (the lowest in the period under study) to 44 % in 2014 and 55 % in 2017, in the same period in which the CICIG-and the MP's office made important advances. This process –that ended in 2019 when then-president Morales refused to renew the CICIG's mandate– was supported by active citizens' mobilization which, in turn, had positively influenced optimism toward democracy among Guatemalans. A nationally representative survey conducted in mid-2016 indicated that 66.7 % of Guatemalans considered that the objectives of the social protests held the year before were achieved. Also, most Guatemalans noticed a cultural change, since 84.7 % considered that after the protests there was more availability to organize and protest, and 78.2 % that people had lost fear to protest (Donis 2016)[7.] Optimism was overwhelming. According to the same source, 83 % of Guatemalans was willing to protest in favor of CICIG and MP, 8 points higher that the share of individuals willing to protest for demanding public goods (Donis 2016).

However, the authoritarian counteroffensive perpetrated by the criminal oligarchy (Schwartz & Isaac 2023) rapidly spread pessimism among the Guatemalan citizenship. The governments of President Jimmy Morales (2016-2020), a former comedian and political outsider, and Alejandro Giammattei (2020-), a perennial presidential candidate who was elected after his fourth attempt, have been poorly regarded by citizens (17.3 percent approval in 2019 and 24.1 percent in 2021, respectively). Morales was investigated for irregularities during his electoral

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7. In the same survey, 41.2 % of people interviewed considered that the main reason of the protest was to "fight against corruption", followed by "the resignation of Otto Pérez Molina". (Donis, J. 2016).

campaign and was involved in corruption scandals (Batz, 2022). Giammattei has also been investigated for irregular campaign financing, among other charges (Kitroeff, 2021). An aura of corruption has covered the last two administrations, which is reflected in the declining trend seen in their approval ratings, and in the political system in general (including legislative and courts), which might have also contributed to the fading satisfaction with democracy.

Other variables that might have potentially impacted on presidential approval ratings and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy are inflation, poverty, unemployment, or crime rates. We do not count with the systematic data to test these variables' influence on democratic satisfaction, so we cannot confirm or discard their impact. But we have developed a reasonable idea regarding how political corruption appears to be one of the driving factors behind the levels of satisfaction with democracy in Guatemala. Before the anti-corruption protests of 2015, levels of satisfaction to democracy in the country were below the regional average (44 % vs 52 % in 2014), but this share surpassed the regional average after the social unrest (55 % vs 41 % in 2017). However, after the oligarchic elite's counteroffensive, the corresponding percentage decreased to the regional levels and remained the same (41 % in 2019) (Castonera & Rosario, 2021). This comparison with regional trends reinforces the argument in favor of the impact of social protests on the peak of democratic satisfaction.

5. CONCLUSION

This article uses cluster analysis and additional survey results to examine trends in democratic attitudes in Guatemala. It shows that while institutionalists, who oppose both executive aggrandizement and military intervention in politics, constitute the largest group throughout the period under study –as in the rest of Latin America. But, although the size of this cluster and the support for democracy have declined in recent years, these indicators reveal the resilience of a democratic commitment among Guatemalans during episodes of harsh democratic backsliding at the regime level. This commitment is expressed when political opportunity allows. The recent election of Bernardo Arévalo (Movimiento Semilla) as president –via a ballotage held in August 20th 2023– and the following defense of this electoral results are excellent examples of the match between democratic demand and democratic supply, despite the attempts of predominant members of the establishment to block his election and access to power.

The article relates these trends to domestic political events, focusing on Guatemala's anti-corruption efforts. Citizen mobilization against corrupt politicians temporarily bolstered –among other factors– democratic values. However, when impunity prevailed, disappointment with democracy grew. Most Guatemalans

have fluctuated between institutionalists and military interventionists, reflecting the country's uneven progress toward democracy, evidence that goes in line with those who claim the weakness of democratic values in the country (e. g. Azpuru, 2023). Actually, in this context, conservative and "mano dura" values contribute to support for military intervention as a valid alternative[8]. Structural factors, such as economic and social inequality, have hindered the growth of more liberal values and democratic beliefs. We do not deny the fact that Guatemala's democratic political culture is weak (especially compared to others in the region), but it has enough resistance to support anti-corruption processes and back democratic projects in specific critical junctures. Even anti-establishment electoral movements that use to represent authoritarian or illiberal agendas in other countries of the region (Meléndez, 2022), in Guatemala can embody democratic hopes, like the case of Movimiento Semilla.

Before concluding, it is worthy to briefly discuss the implications of recent political events on support for domestic political institutions. CICIG's investigations triggered citizen protests that positively affected democratic values: the institutionalist cluster along with this judicial process, and tolerance of protest of regime critics increased, even among authoritarians and military interventionists. However, the demand for accountability has also had negative consequences for institutional legitimacy. The level of distrust toward elections and political parties has increased in recent years, even before the 2023 general elections that had irregular exclusions of presidential candidates by the electoral authorities. Distrust of political parties reached 71 % in 2019 and distrust of elections reached 53 percent in 2021. Distrust toward the three branches of government is correlated, suggesting that the public views political institutions as lacking credibility in general, rather than limiting these perceptions to parties and elections. Distrust of the legislature tended to be higher than distrust of the other two branches from 2004 until 2017. However, political scandals involving Presidents Morales and Giammattei have affected the executive's credibility as well. In the last two surveys analyzed, distrust of the executive reached its highest level in the time span analyzed (63 % in 2019 and 62 % in 2021).

Meanwhile, the institutions of electoral democracy have been eroded by the latest incumbents, which have had a negative effect on the levels of support to democracy. To justify this argument, we consider the evolution of the Electoral Democracy Index (V-Dem) for the same period of analysis under study. This index captures at least four issues corresponding to the electoral dimensions of representative democracy: rulers are responsive to citizens based on the electoral

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8. Guatemala ranks among the four highest tolerance to a "self-coup", after El Salvador, Perú and Haiti. 38 % of respondents would justify a president ruling without a parliament (Castonera & Rosario, 2021).

competition mandate, freedom of operation for political and civic society organizations, free and clean elections, and elections that affect the composition of the chief executive of the country.

Figure 8 illustrates the changes in levels of support for democracy in Guatemala from 2004 to 2021 and the evolution of the Electoral Democracy Index from V-dem for the same period. The comparison between public opinion data and the evolution of indicators of electoral democracy shows a shared pattern: stability above the midpoint (50 % for public opinion data and 0.5 for the 0-1 electoral democracy index) from 2004 until 2017. From 2017 through 2021, simultaneous to the revelation of corruption scandals by the CICIG, both indicators drop, especially support for democracy. Although support for democracy in Guatemala hovered mostly around 50 % until 2017, it has since decreased substantially. In fact, the last categorization of V-Dem (2022), Guatemala is considered an electoral autocracy.

Figure 8. Support for Democracy and Electoral Democracy Index, 2004–2021
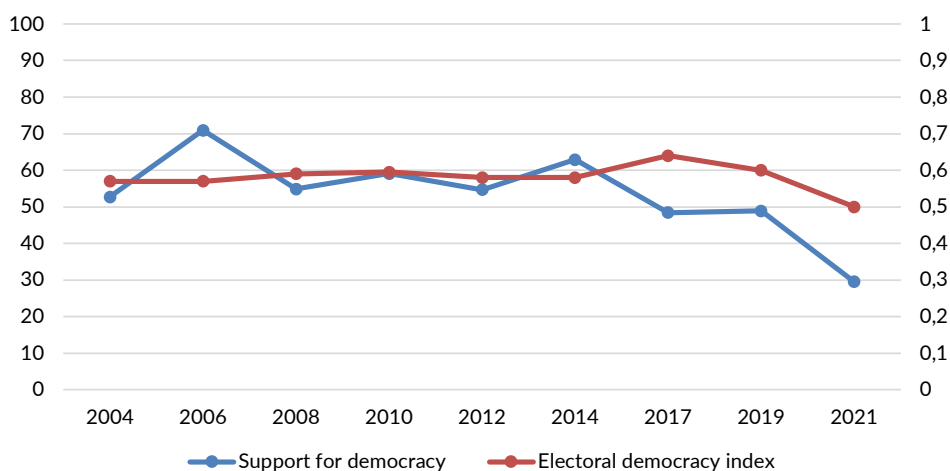
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

In sum, the Guatemalan "democratic spring" is an example of the resilience of democratic values among an important share of citizens that can be fundamental for strengthening democratic processes initiated at the elite level (like CICIG's anti-corruption investigations or pro-democratic presidential candidates), even in face of the attempts of criminal oligarchies to hamper them. The civic defense of the results of legitimate elections after the victory of Arévalo from a systematic attempt of prosecutors and judges to subvert these elections should be consider as a new examplar of the activation of this democratic strength. In October 2023, indigenous movements, social organizations and thousands of individuals

mobilized throughout the country, and blocked roads in almost a third of the municipalities as part of a general strike in defense of democracy (Meléndez-Sánchez & Gamboa, 2023). This kind of extraordinary civic reactions should be considered as an obstacle to authoritarian projects and prevents (at least temporarily) the consolidation of authoritarian rulers like those in Venezuela or Nicaragua, or at least respond to democratic backsliding steps performed from the top. This democratic resilience, however, coexists with increasing distrust in political institutions, parties, and elections, critical institutions for liberal democracy that tend to be controlled by a corrupt establishment.

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ANNEX 1. 2012-2021. CLUSTER RESULTS

The bar graphs below present the main results of the cluster analysis. There is one bar graph per wave studied: 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2021. The bars indicate the average scores for the attitudes in each cluster. All attitude scores range from zero (least democratic) to one (most democratic). The percentages next to each cluster label in the legend indicate the share of respondents that was classified into the cluster. Thus, the graphs allow for comparing the clusters in terms of their democratic attitudes and their relative size.

Institutionalists make up just over half the share of the sample (53.9 %), more than five times that of authoritarians (9.1 %), and 18.9 percentual points over military interventionists. Support for democracy is remarkably similar across the three clusters, just above the 0.6 mark. Tolerance for protests and regime critics is just below the 0.50 mark for all clusters. Lastly, support for democratic inclusion only reaches less than one third of its maximum potential score (Figure A1.1).

Figure A1.1. 2012 Cluster Results
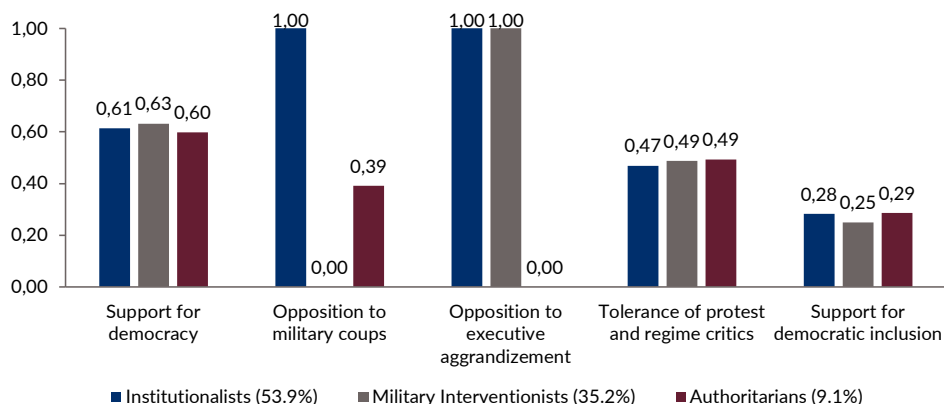
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

Compared to 2012, the distribution of shares changes in 2014. Institutionalists and authoritarians remain somewhat stable, but the share of military interventionists drops by 8.8 percentual points. Support for democracy increases slightly across clusters, but tolerance for protests and critics decrease significantly in all groups, as does support for democratic inclusion (Figure A1.2).

Figure A1.2. 2014 Cluster Results
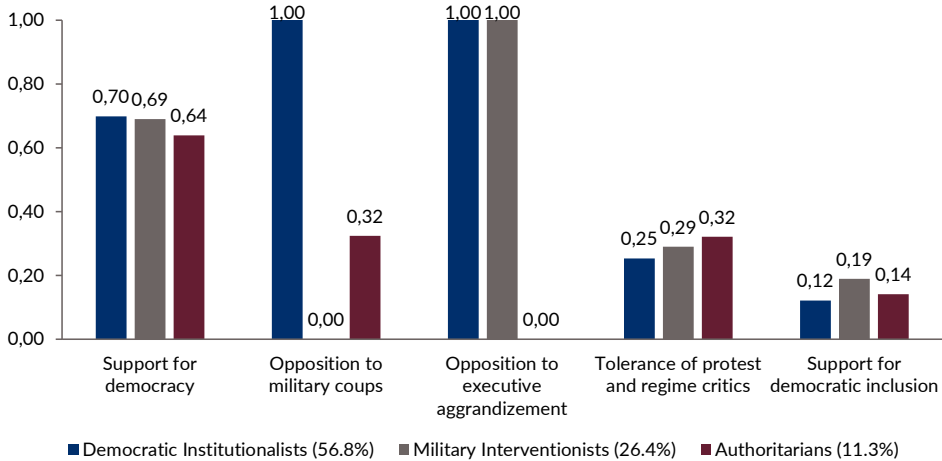
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

Regarding 2017, the overall share of institutionalists drops by 14.3 points and military interventionists rise by 6.3 points. Support for democracy decreases across clusters while tolerance for protests increases in all groups. A new cluster of Presidentialists was included in the analysis for the first time. Support for democratic inclusion recovers similar levels to those of 2012.

Figure A1.3. 2017 Cluster Results
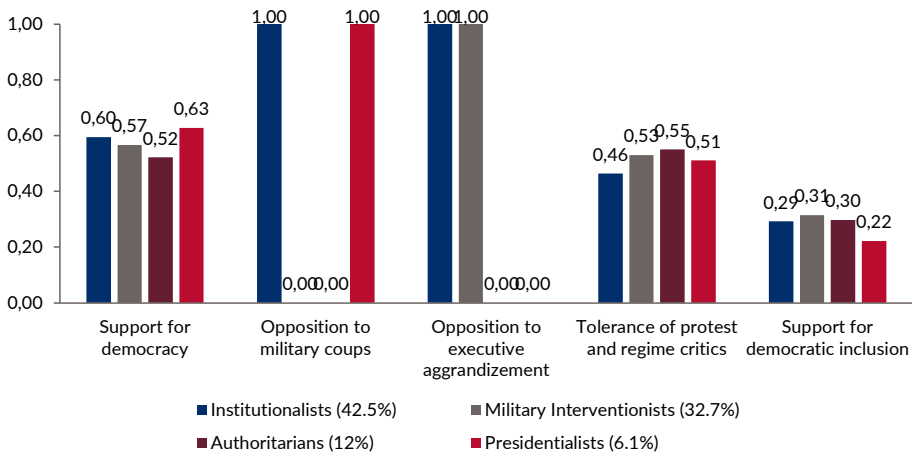
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

In 2019, institutionalists regain 5.3 percentual points of their previously meas-ured share (albeit still below their 2012 level of 56 % of the total share) and presi-dentialists lose ground. Tolerance for protests and support for democratic inclu-sion remain stable across clusters.
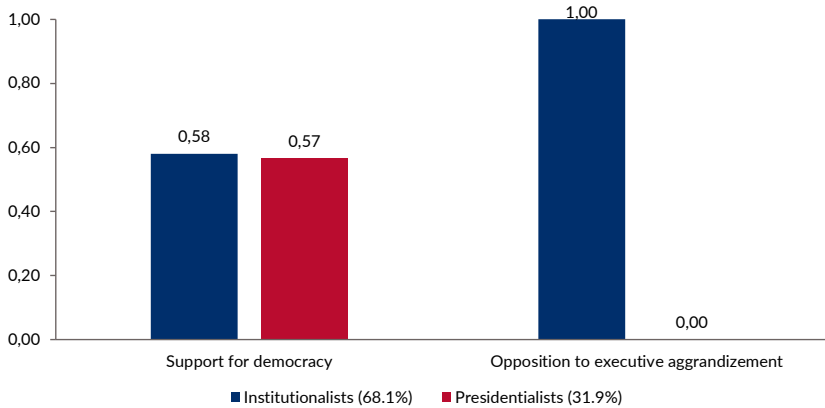
Figure A1.4. 2019 Cluster Results
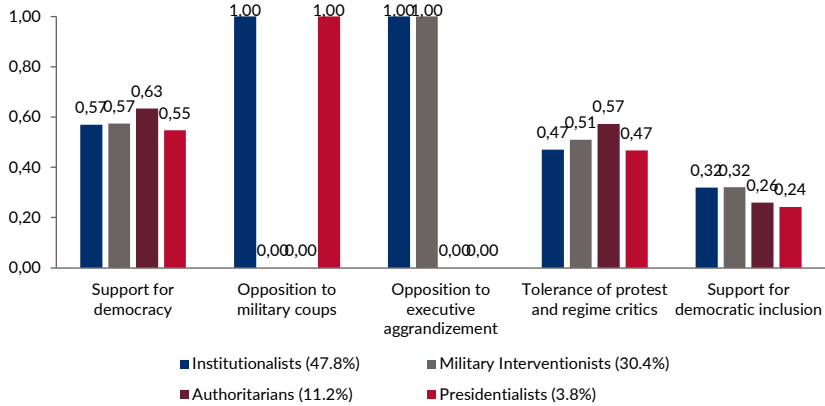
Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

Finaly, in 2021, Institutionalists become clearly dominant with 68.1 %, more than doubling the share of those categorized as presidentialists. Support for de-mocracy reaches similar percentages in both groups.

Figure A1.5. 2021 Cluster Results

Source: LAPOP Lab. 2023.

THE RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRATIC VALUES UNDER DIFFICULT CONDITIONS. THE CASE OF GUATEMALA 2012-2021

Carlos Meléndez

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