

# MILITARISM, AUTHORITARIANISM AND CORRUPTION: POST-COUP HONDURAS AND THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY

*Militarismo, autoritarismo y corrupción: Honduras pos-golpe y el declive de la democracia*

*Militarismo, autoritarismo e corrupção: Honduras pós-golpe e o declínio da democracia*

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses the Americas Barometer survey series, 2004-2021, consisting of national probability surveys representative of the voting age population to examine the evolution of democratic political culture in Honduras. As our analysis indicates, there has been significant democratic backsliding since 2009. Many of the events we trace in our analysis –the decline of rule of law, rising violence, illegitimate elections, the generalized environment of repression, endemic corruption, and economic decline– are largely the consequences of the 2009 coup and reflect the underlying structural and political conditions that help explain the unprecedented electoral victory of Xiomara Castro in 2021.

**Palabras clave:**

retroceso  
democrático;  
autoritarismo;  
Honduras;  
corrupción;  
decadencia  
económica

**Resumen**

Este artículo utiliza la serie de encuestas del Barómetro de las Américas, 2004-2021, que consiste en encuestas nacionales de probabilidad representativas de la población en edad de votar para examinar la evolución de la cultura política democrática en Honduras. Como indica nuestro análisis, desde 2009 se ha producido un importante retroceso democrático. Muchos de los acontecimientos que rastreamos en nuestro análisis –el declive del Estado de derecho, el aumento de la violencia, las elecciones ilegítimas, el ambiente generalizado de represión, la corrupción endémica y el declive económico– son en gran medida las consecuencias del golpe de Estado de 2009 y reflejan las condiciones estructurales y políticas subyacentes que ayudan a explicar la victoria electoral sin precedentes de Xiomara Castro en 2021.

**Palavras-chave:**

retrocesso  
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declínio  
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**Resumo**

Este artigo utiliza a série de pesquisas Barômetro das Américas, 2004-2021, que consiste em pesquisas de probabilidade nacionalmente representativas da população em idade de votar para examinar a evolução da cultura política democrática em Honduras. Como nossa análise indica, houve um retrocesso democrático significativo desde 2009. Muitos dos eventos que acompanhamos em nossa análise – o declínio do Estado de Direito, o aumento da violência, as eleições ilegítimas, o ambiente generalizado de repressão, a corrupção endêmica e o declínio econômico – são em grande parte as consequências do golpe de 2009 e refletem as condições estruturais e políticas subjacentes que ajudam a explicar a vitória eleitoral sem precedentes de Xiomara Castro em 2021.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, governance, political crises, insecurity, and longstanding issues of corruption, inequality, and lackluster economic performance have eroded democratic legitimacy and public trust in government in Latin America. The 2019 *Pulse of Democracy* report from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) states that “the region has settled into a malaise with respect to public views of democracy” (Castorena and Graves, 2019). Support for and satisfaction with democracy have declined since 2016 and have remained relatively low ever since. While support for democracy remained steady between 2018-2019 and 2021, support for centralizing power in the executive increased in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lupu and Zechmeister, 2021).

For the past decade, political scientists have been grappling with the backsliding of democracy in countries across the globe. While there is little consensus on the causes of democratic backsliding or the perhaps more apt “autocratization” of democracies (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019) scholars have focused on explanations ranging from political polarization to economic determinants to the capacity of state institutions to international influence (Coppedge *et al.*, 2022). Other studies

have focused on the role of leaders. In Latin America's recent past, that might have referred to military coups. As Levitsky and Ziblatt note, today's democracies are far more likely to be autocratized by democratically elected leaders (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). This frequently takes the form of leaders who present themselves as challengers to the status quo, undermining liberal democratic norms (rule of law, pluralism, tolerance, free expression) in order to consolidate power. Even well-established democracies have not been immune from this phenomenon. These efforts may have ideological appeal in some contexts, but as Applebaum notes such illiberalism is "a mechanism for holding power, and it functions happily alongside many ideologies." (Applebaum, 2020). One little explored aspect of this backsliding is the impact on support for democracy.

Honduras has been no exception to this trend. Over the past fifteen years, Honduras' backsliding has been characterized by a civilian coup, a president who eschewed the constitution to run for a second term, an extremely flawed, if not fraudulent, election, the remilitarization of security, and the capture of civilian politicians and institutions by criminal elements. What is the impact of this backsliding on citizen support for democracy?

This paper uses the LAPOP survey series consisting of national probability surveys representative of the voting age population to examine the erosion of democratic political culture in Honduras. Our analysis finds significant democratic backsliding as a result of the political, economic, and social consequences of the military coup that ousted President Manuel Zelaya in 2009.

As indicated in the introduction to the Special Issue, the underlying project used cluster analysis<sup>1</sup> to group citizens with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes, and then identify the most salient attitudinal, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics in each group. As described in the introduction, the analysis identified four distinct groups: institutionalists, presidentialists, military interventionists, and authoritarians. And focused on five key attitudes: support for democracy, opposition to military coups, opposition to executive aggrandizement, tolerance of protests and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Honduras, however, the cluster analysis was inconclusive. Beyond differences in their opposition to military coups and executive aggrandizement. We observed limited variation in the average scores for the other three attitudes across clusters and differences were not consistent across years. Additionally, while respondents in all clusters were statistically significantly different from others on a few variables in each wave, most differences were substantively small. This suggests that demographic, socioeconomic, geographic,

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1. The methodology is explained in the introduction to the Special Issue.

2. See introductory essay for a detail operationalization of each attitude.

and other characteristics examined do not meaningfully structure attitudes toward democracy in Honduras. In fact, the introduction to the Special Issue indicates the analysis for the region found “no meaningful differences in levels of support for democracy, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusions across clusters.”<sup>3</sup>

These caveats aside, we did find some recurrent statistically significant differences across all waves that are worth highlighting. First, institutionalists tended to be older than other Hondurans; the percentage of respondents in the 18-29 age bracket was lower among institutionalists than the rest of the sample. Second, institutionalists experienced less crime and corruption than other respondents; the percentage of respondents who reported having been the victim of a crime or asked to pay a bribe in the past 12 months was lower among institutionalists than the rest of the sample.

To supplement the cluster analysis, we use LAPOP data to examine aggregate-level trends in six democratic and political attitudes: satisfaction with democracy, support for democracy, support for military coups when corruption is high, tolerance for regime critics, presidential approval, and support for the president closing congress during difficult times. The main takeaways from this analysis were:

- Satisfaction with democracy reached its highest level in 2010 and has been in a steady decline since then. Support for democracy saw a dramatic increase between 2012 and 2014 but has since been on a downward trajectory.
- The percentage of Hondurans who support a military coup under conditions of high corruption reached a high of 55 % in 2008, prior to the military coup of 2009, and has remained relatively stable around 40 % since 2010.
- Responses to questions regarding political tolerance often reflect the current political context, especially dissatisfaction with and opposition to the incumbent. Not surprisingly, political tolerance increased significantly between 2012 and 2018 as opposition to President Hernández increased.
- Presidential approval declined significantly after Hernández's inauguration in 2014 amid growing dissatisfaction with corruption, violence, authoritarianism, and economic growth. At the same time, support for the president closing congress in times of difficulty increased. Along with increasing tolerance for the political rights of government critics, these trends indicate growing polarization around Hernández.

We find that public opinion has shifted significantly in recent years. Declines in satisfaction with democracy and increases in citizens' willingness to support

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3. See Special Issue Introduction.

presidential power grabs are particularly concerning. To identify how the political context has contributed to changes in attitudes, we examine how the deteriorating rule of law, rising violence, illegitimate elections, generalized repression, endemic corruption, and economic decline—all of which are largely consequences of the 2009 coup—have contributed to changes in public opinion. Many of the events we trace in our analysis reflect the underlying structural and political conditions that help explain the unprecedented electoral victory of Xiomara Castro in the November 2021 presidential elections. The contextual factors chosen for our analysis correspond also to those found by the broader project to influence democratic backsliding in the region. For example, crime victimization was associated with support for authoritarian values; governing crises reduce support for democratic attitudes; economic crises erode support for democracy; and high levels of corruption also explain declining support for democratic values. The evidence presented in this study confirms these trends for the case of Honduras.

## 2. THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN HONDURAS

Honduras' journey to democracy has not been an easy one, and consolidating democracy has been particularly challenging. As the brief historical overview below describes, socioeconomic factors, international influence, weak institutions, and a powerful, illiberal elite have been serious impediments to the consolidation of democracy in Honduras.

Honduras has long been among the poorest countries in Latin America and among the most violent. While Honduras escaped the civil wars that plagued some of its neighbors, its path to democracy has been a difficult one. Historically, political power was formally held by one of two traditional elite-controlled parties, the Liberal and National parties, with the military frequently intervening to “correct” policies it disagreed with. The military occupied the presidency almost continuously from 1963 through 1982. While a transition from military to civilian-led governments was made in the early 1980s, that resulted in nominal electoral democratization with regular elections, political contestation was dominated by the two traditional parties that controlled the state through a network of patronage and corrupt practices. Even after the transition to civilian rule, the military continued to play an outsized role in politics. Thus, democratic governance in Honduras is characterized by militarism, authoritarianism, corruption, and weak institutions.

By the time Liberal Manuel “Mel” Zelaya took office in 2006, Honduras had experienced seven consecutive democratic elections and four peaceful electoral turnovers between the traditional parties. In March 2009 President Zelaya called for a national referendum on whether to convene a constituent assembly.

Congress successfully challenged the constitutionality of the poll, which banned referenda six months prior to any election. The subsequent power struggle between Zelaya, the courts, and the armed forces ultimately resulted in a military coup on June 28, 2009. The armed forces kidnapped Zelaya, expelled him to Costa Rica, and presented Congress with a forged resignation letter, which Congress accepted. Roberto Micheletti, the president of the National Congress, became interim president for the remainder of Zelaya's term. National elections were held on schedule in November 2009 despite a wave of repression and the suspension of key constitutional freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and freedom of association.

The military coup that ousted President Zelaya marked a significant turning point in Honduran democracy and initiated a spiral of decline which saw the country immersed in 12 years of corruption, violence, and authoritarianism through the presidencies of Porfirio Lobo (2010-2014) and Juan Orlando Hernández (2014-2022) of the National Party. Legislation passed under the Lobo administration expanded militarized policing powers and created two new dedicated units. Under Hernández, the military once again became a major actor in the Honduran economy and oversaw several key government agencies. Consequently, the military is arguably in its most powerful position since the 1980s.

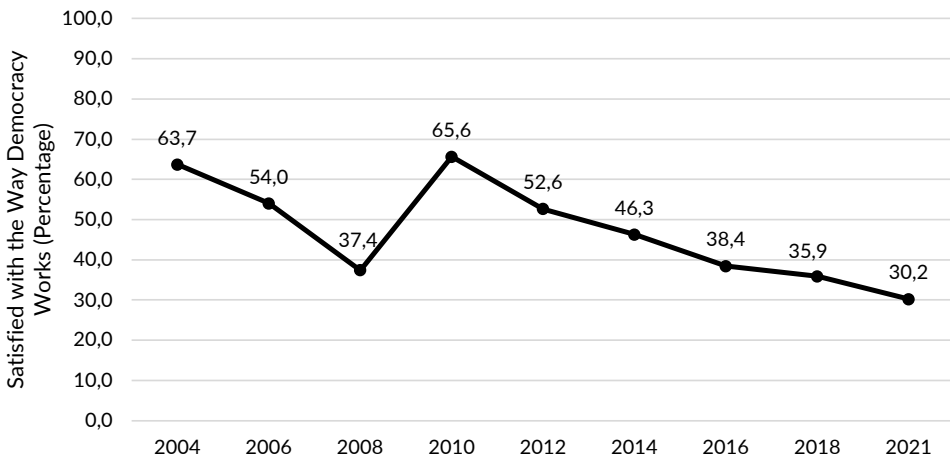
Following the coup, violence against opposition groups and civil society increased significantly. Military and police engaged in arbitrary detentions, "cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment" of anti-coup protestors, and attacks against journalists and media outlets (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2009). Journalists have routinely been threatened, intimidated, arrested, injured, or killed. According to the National Commissioner for Human Rights (CONADEH), more than 80 journalists have been murdered in the past two decades (2020). Honduras also became one of the most dangerous countries in the world for environmental activists, and defenders of indigenous and other minority rights.

At the same time, rule of law and democratic institutions weakened in the post-coup era. Lawmakers routinely subverted the rule of law and institutions to suit their own goals, erasing checks and balances, manipulating elections, and undermining public trust. Criminal networks exploited Honduras' weak governing institutions and gaps in its security architecture. Drug cartels and gangs such as MS-13 and 18th Street Gang run extortion rackets in the country's impoverished urban areas and have turned the rural areas of the Caribbean coast into a regional transit hub for drug trafficking. The post-coup environment offered drug trafficking organizations (DTO's) the opportunity to become deeply entrenched throughout the country. Soon, DTO's controlled not only territory, but had infiltrated state institutions from the mayoral level to Congress to security agencies to the presidency.

### 3. PATTERNS OF SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

The results of the 2021 Americas Barometer for Honduras reflect the weakness of democratic culture in this Central American country. The results indicate that only 30 % of Hondurans were satisfied with the way democracy works. This was the lowest level of satisfaction since the survey began in 2004 and represents a precipitous decline since the measurement peaked in 2010. Figure 1 shows that prior to the 2009 coup satisfaction with democracy was declining significantly from a high of 63.7 % in 2004, when the series began, to a low of 37 % in 2008, just prior to the coup. Ironically, the data indicates a significant increase in satisfaction with democracy post-coup –reflective perhaps of opposition to President Zelaya’s policies and a widespread perception that his ouster would in fact open possibilities for democratization. However, those hopes did not materialize and satisfaction with democracy soon declined precipitously reaching the lowest level in the series in 2021.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with Democracy<sup>4</sup>



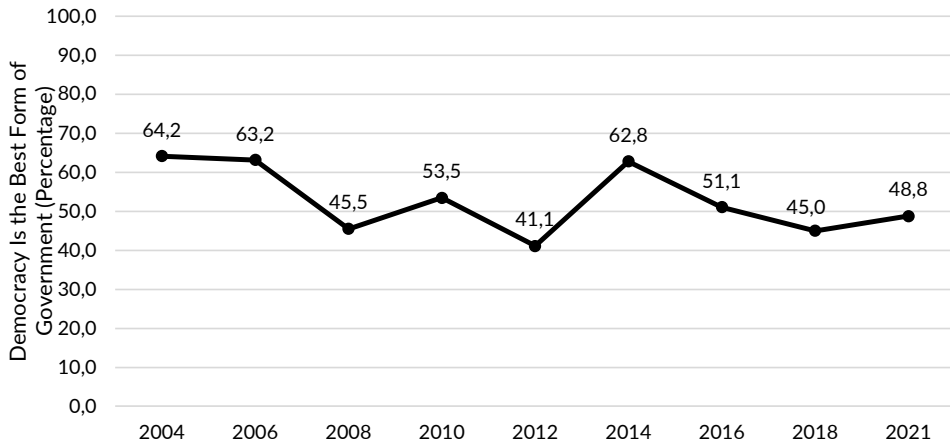
Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

By 2021, less than half of Hondurans (49 %) agreed with the proposition that, despite its problems, democracy was the best form of government, well below the regional average of 61 %. Figure 2 indicates that support for democracy has

4. PN4. In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Honduras? (% satisfied with democracy).

fluctuated from a high of 64 % in 2004 to a low of 41.1 % in 2012. Just prior to the coup there was a significant decline to 45.5 %, with an increase to 53.5 % in 2010. Support for democracy saw a dramatic increase between 2012 and 2014, but it has declined since then, with a slight increase in 2021 but well below the support exhibited at the start of the series.

Figure 2. Support for Democracy<sup>5</sup>



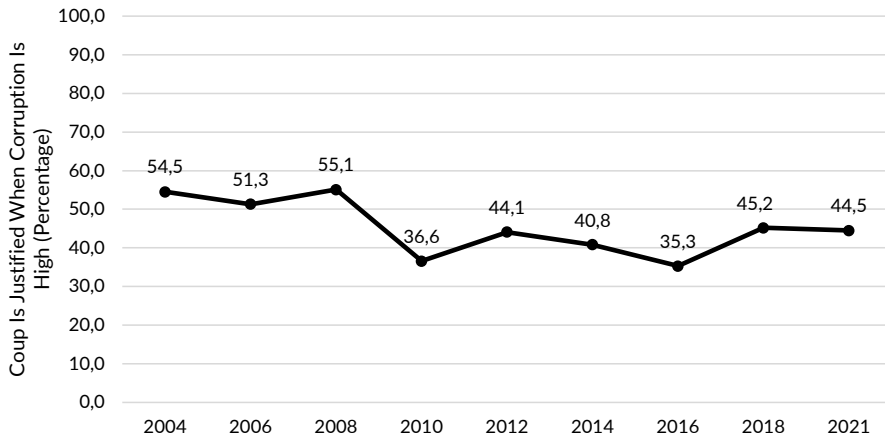
Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Nearly 45 % of Hondurans in 2021 expressed a willingness to support a military coup under conditions of high corruption. Figure 3 shows that support for a military coup under conditions of high corruption reached a high of 55 % in 2008, prior to the military coup of 2009, and then declined to 36 % in 2010 –presumably due to the effects of an actual coup. The percentage of Hondurans who support a military coup under conditions of high corruption has remained relatively stable at about 2 in 5 since 2010.

5. ING4. Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? "1" Strongly Disagree - "7" Strongly Agree Figure shows those who answered "5" through "7."

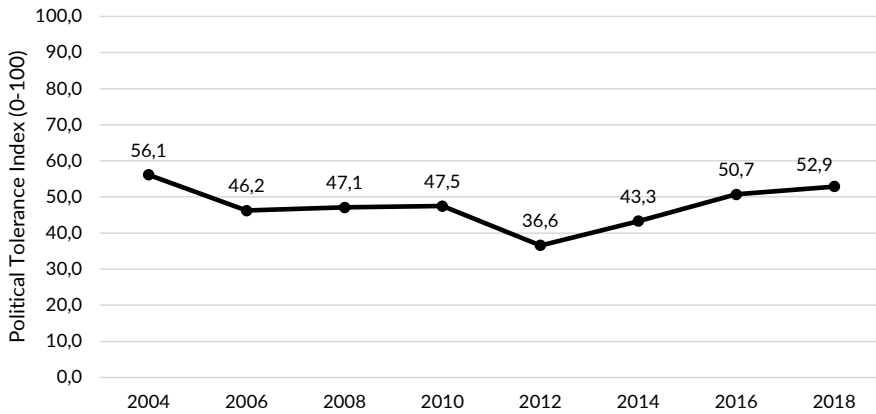


Figure 3. Coup is Justified when Corruption Levels are High<sup>6</sup>



Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Figure 4. Tolerance over Time<sup>7</sup>



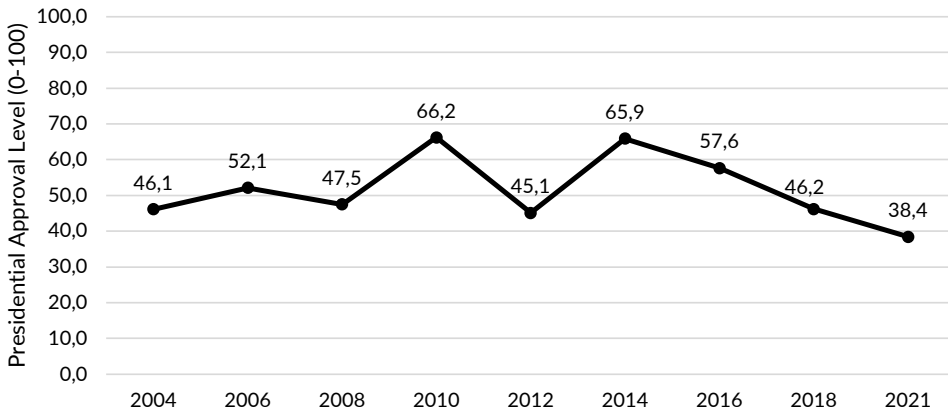
Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

6. JC13. Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion, would a military coup be justified... When there is a lot of corruption.

7. D1. There are people who only say bad things about the form of government of Honduras, not just the current government but the system of government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's right to vote? Please read me the number from the scale.

Figure 4 shows that the level of tolerance of regime critics increases significantly between 2012 and 2018. No doubt, this reflects the increasing opposition across multiple sectors of society and polarization from President Hernández's regime. The high level of tolerance for critics in 2021 could explain the success of Ms. Castro in capturing a significant majority of the population in her presidential campaign. Attitudes expressed in the LAPOP surveys manifest themselves in the context of politics as increasing dissatisfaction and opposition to the extant regime are reflected in electoral outcomes.

Figure 5. Presidential Job Approval<sup>8</sup>



Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

D2. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views? Please read me the number.

D3. Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the form of government of Honduras, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office?

D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches?

(Questions are measured on Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve. As with standard LAPOP indices, each average response to these four questions is calculated and recoded so that the resulting variable goes from 0 to 100, where 0 represents very low tolerance and 100 represents very high tolerance. The responses for each component have also been recoded from 0 to 100 for the graph. Cronbach's alpha for an additive scale of the four variables is very high (.84) and principal component analysis indicates that they measure a single dimension.

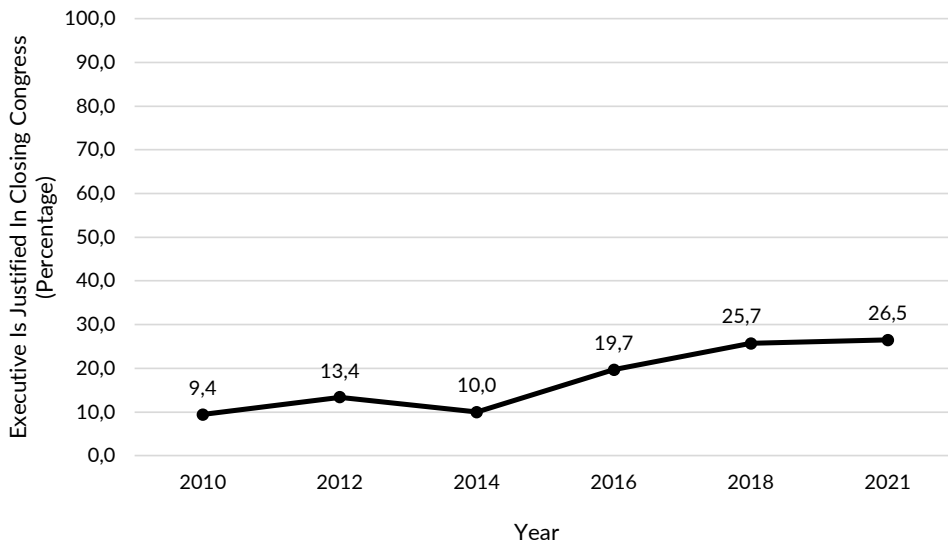
8. Speaking in general about the current government, would you say that the work that President Juan Orlando Hernández is doing is...?: [Read alternatives]

(1) Very good (2) Good (3) Neither good nor bad (regular) (4) Bad (5) Very bad (Figure shows responses recoded into a 0-100 scale).

Figure 5 shows the precipitous decline in presidential approval since 2014 –a year after Juan Orlando Hernández first came to power. Losing nearly half of the support reflects the dissatisfaction among Hondurans with the corruption, violence, authoritarianism, and economic decline perpetuated during the President Hernández’s administration.

One of the characteristics of authoritarian populism is the consolidation of executive power and the continued weakening of institutions of popular representation, such as Congress. The results presented in Figure 6 reflect a precipitous increase in the percentage of Hondurans who support the president closing Congress when the country “faces difficult times.” In the 2021 poll, 26.5 % of Hondurans approved of the closure of Congress, this figure reflects a 17 % increase from 2010 when the question was first asked. This result, together with the deterioration in satisfaction with and support for democracy, as well as the erosion in the approval of the work of the executive reflect the profound weakness in the culture of democracy in Honduras.

**Figure 6. President Justified in Closing Congress<sup>9</sup>**



Source: Authors’ elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

9. JC15A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress/Parliament and govern without Congress/Parliament?

#### 4. DETERMINANTS OF PRESIDENTIAL JOB APPROVAL

We argue that corruption, crime, economic decline, and institutional weakness led to a generalized sense of dissatisfaction with the incumbent regime that in turn contributed to the electoral victory of Xiomara Castro. While the LAPOP data does not permit a direct test of voting behavior, since no such question was included in the 2021 data, we are able to examine the factors that impact presidential job approval. Our assumption is that the decline of President Hernández's approval laid the political context within which the 2021 elections were held and thus contributed to generating an overwhelming desire for change. In order to examine the factors that impact presidential approval we ran a multivariate regression analysis with presidential job approval as the dependent variable. We test the impact of several independent variables: crime and corruption victimization, perception of insecurity, negative perceptions of both the national and personal economy, support for executive aggrandizement, satisfaction and support for democracy, and justification of a coup under conditions of high corruption.

Table 1 shows the regression coefficients. The results indicate that crime victimization, negative perceptions of the national economy, satisfaction with and support for democracy, sex and education are all statistically significant factors. The R-squared indicates that 26.8 % of the variance in presidential job approval is explained by our independent variables. As expected, respondents who are victims of crime and perceive the national economy more negatively express significantly lower approval of the incumbent president. The results presented in the introduction to the Special Issue indicate that "support for the incumbent shapes citizen support for, and satisfaction with, democracy more broadly; the more popular the incumbent, the higher the average level of support for democracy."<sup>10</sup> We know from the earlier results that in Honduras satisfaction with and support for democracy have declined significantly since 2010 and 2014 respectively. The effect of this phenomenon seems to generate the paradoxical results in which citizens who express support for and satisfaction with democracy are more likely to support the incumbent president. Given the polarizing nature of President Hernández, and the numerous political, social, and economic crises the regime generated, these findings help explain the deep democratic crisis in which the country found itself prior to the 2021 elections.

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10. Special Issue Introduction.

**Table 1. Determinants of Approval of President's Job Performance<sup>11</sup>**

Crime Victimization	-0.114** (0.0315)
Corruption Victimization	-0.015 (0.0287)
Perception of Insecurity	-0.074 (0.0365)
Negative Perception of Personal Economy	-0.072 (0.0441)
Negative Perception of National Economy	-0.205*** (0.0543)
Executive is Justified in Closing Congress	-0.055 (0.0283)
Satisfaction with Democracy	0.208*** (0.0268)
Abstract Support for Democracy Index	0.097* (3.986)
Coup is Justified when Corruption is High	-0.117** (0.0250)
Sex	0.089* (2.488)
Education	-0.129** (1.861)
Age	0.066 (0.0817)
Observations	558
R <sup>2</sup>	0.268

Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

11. Because of the limitations of the 2021 survey, this analysis uses the 2018 round. The findings are still relevant to understanding the underlying influences on the erosion of support for the extant government and thus setting the political context for the 2021 elections.

## 5. LINKING DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES TO NATIONAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

As demonstrated in the sections above, attitudes towards democracy have been in decline for more than a decade. In this section we will 1) address the contextual factors that contributed to changes in support for democracy and 2) examine the extent to which changes contributed to significant system-level political developments.

Our analysis is guided by the realities of the Honduran political system. The Honduran party system is deeply clientelistic, and tightly controlled parties are effectively elite patronage networks. This means that Honduran elections are party-centered rather than candidate-centered. While the establishment of the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE) following the 2009 coup ultimately disrupted the National-Liberal duopoly, individual candidates remain less important than party alliances. Moreover, these elite patronage networks have become deeply entwined with organized crime, using state resources (including state security apparatus) to enrich elites and suppress opponents.

As discussed in the Introduction, Honduran politics since the coup has been dominated by militarism, authoritarianism, and corruption. This environment has played a significant role in declining satisfaction and support for democracy, presidential approval ratings, coup tolerance and tolerance for regime critics. Below, we focus on four factors that we believe have affected support for democracy and other indicators: 1) high crime rates, 2) corruption, 3) illegitimate elections, and 4) economic decline and rising poverty.

## 6. HIGH CRIME

High crime can have a significant negative impact on attitudes towards democracy. Violence in Honduras exceeds epidemic levels. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers a homicide rate of 10 per 100,000 to be an epidemic. For nearly two decades, Honduras has had one of the highest homicide rates in the world. In 2012, the homicide rate was more than 90 per 100,000. In 2020, the reported homicide rate was 38 per 100,000, though homicide rates in some municipalities exceed 80 per 100,000.

Multiple actors engage in violence in Honduras, though many of them are known to collude with one another. Excluding interpersonal violence, the main perpetrators of violence in Honduras are drug trafficking organizations, transnational street gangs (*maras*), security forces, and para-statal actors, including death squads. Honduras is a major transshipment location for cocaine traveling from South America to the United States. Since 2009, there has been

a serious proliferation of drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) throughout the country. Many of these DTOs have known working relationships with the state and agents of the state, including the police, armed forces, elected politicians, and powerful business interests. Honduras is also home to two large transnational street gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang), both of which originated in Los Angeles, California in the 1980's. Drug cartels and gangs frequently overlap in territory throughout Honduras. This contributes to elevated levels of violence in various departments. Both organized crime syndicates and gang prey upon individuals and business alike, demanding extortion payments, engaging in human trafficking, participating in assault, murders, and sexual violence, and (in the case of gangs) engaging in forcible recruitment (Welsh, 2017). According to Honduras' Education Ministry, over 200,000 children dropped out of school between 2014 and 2017, many as a result of gang violence. Since 2010, more than 90 teachers have been killed (Diaz, 2019).

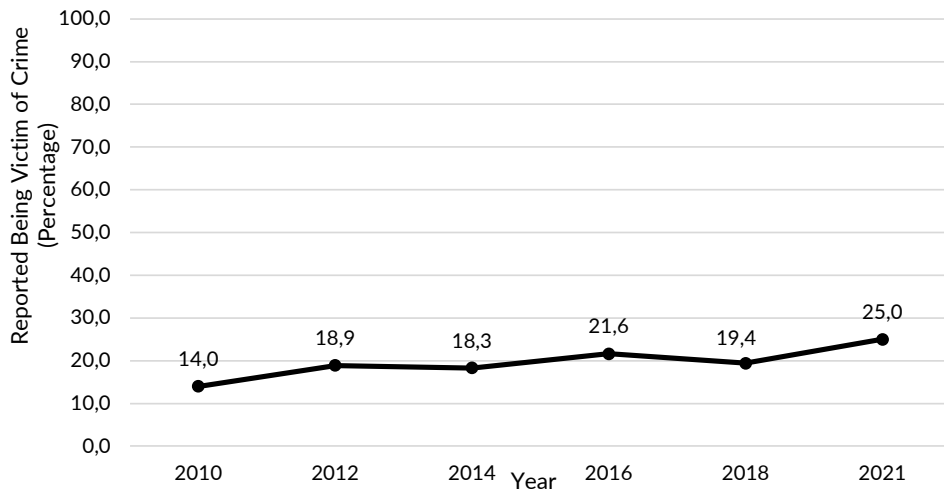
While young males make up the majority of homicide victims, violence against women and girls is a serious problem in Honduras. Women and girls are often subjected to physical and sexual violence by organized crime syndicates, gangs, intimate partners, family members, and agents of the state. Honduras' femicide rate, which refers to the murder of women, is one of the highest in the world. According to the Observatorio de derechos Humanos de las Mujeres, the femicide rate in 2018 was 8.22 per 100,000 (2019). Femicides among women aged 20-29 were notably higher than other age groups.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2009, dozens of protestors and activists were killed by state forces with impunity (Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación, 2011). Post-coup violence in Honduras is also characterized by a high level of targeted assassinations, including journalists, human rights workers, environmental activists, and land defenders. More than 120 environmental activists were killed in Honduras from 2010 to 2016 (Global Witness, 2017). Among them was Lenca indigenous leader and Goldman Environmental Prize winner Berta Cáceres. Despite the international attention surrounding her case, the killings continued. In 2019, Honduras had the highest per capita assassinations of environmental activists with 14 killings. Another 17 were killed in 2020. Since the 2009 coup, more than 60 journalists have been murdered. Between 2009 and 2017 there were 264 reported murders of LGBT+ people in Honduras, 58 % of whom were gay men and 32.5 % were trans people (Amnesty International, 2017). One study found that Honduras had the highest numbers of transgender murders per capita in the world, more than double the rate of the second highest country (TransGender Europe, 2015).

While it is not clear that this type of violence has the same impact on attitudes towards democracy that crime victimization does, targeted political violence can have a chilling effect on organizing, dissent, and political participation. It is also

indicative of weak state capacity, which can undermine public trust in institutions and system support.

**Figure 7. Crime Victimization over Time<sup>12</sup>**



Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Honduras currently has the second highest homicide rate in Latin America. Successive administrations attributed much of this violence to gangs, though it was clear that gangs were only responsible for a portion of the violence. To combat violence, politicians have adopted a “Mano Dura” approach using the police and the military. However, mano dura policies have not reduced levels of criminal violence, but they have placed a burden on Honduras’ prison system (InSight Crime, 2021). Thus, increasing human rights abuses, corruption within the police and the military, and increased dissatisfaction with the government.

As shown in Figure 7, the rate of self-reported crime victimization has increased steadily since the 2010 survey wave.<sup>13</sup> Fourteen % of Hondurans in 2010 said they were a victim of crime, rising to 25 % by 2021, making Honduras fifth among all countries surveyed in the 2021 wave. Analysis of the data indicates

12. VIC1EXT. Now, changing the subject, have you been a victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months? That is, have you been a victim of robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, violent threats, or any other type of crime in the past 12 months? (1) Yes (2) No ( % who says “yes”).

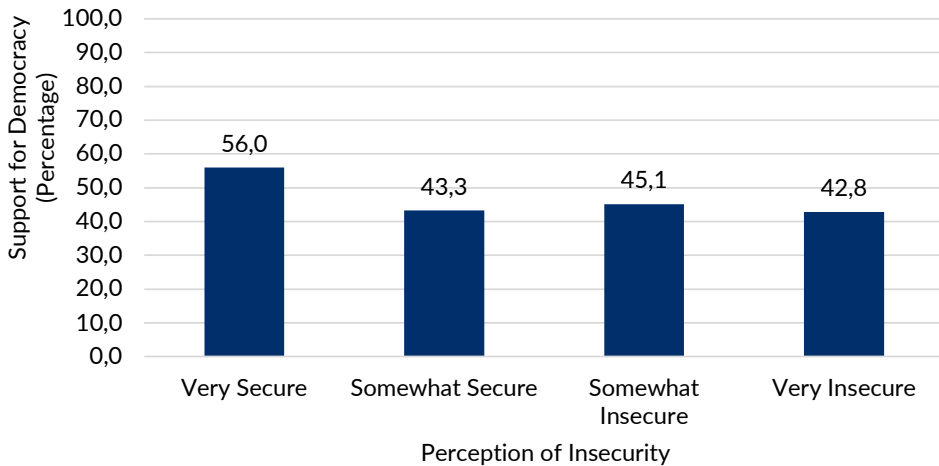
13. In 2010, the question wording for the crime victimization item was changed, thus comparisons to earlier survey waves are not possible.



that respondents living in cities with higher levels of education tend to report being victims at a higher rate than those in rural areas or with less education.

The connection between crime and support for democratic values has been extensively studied with evidence suggesting that crime victimization, but particularly perception of insecurity, are key factors in determining democratic attitudes (Pérez, 2004, 2011; Seligson, 2003, Fernandez *et al.*, 2010; Blanco *et al.*, 2013; Ceobanu *et al.*, 2011). The evidence from Honduras is mixed, while crime victimization does not seem to have a statistically significant impact on support for democracy, perception of insecurity does. Figure 8 shows the correlation between levels of perceived insecurity in respondents' neighborhood and support for democracy using 2021 data. Respondents who expressed high levels of security in their neighborhoods were significantly more likely to support democracy than Hondurans who were less secure. It is important to note that the relationship varies across survey waves with 2008 and 2010 showing increases in support for democracy for the most insecure respondents.

**Figure 8. Support for Democracy and Perception of Insecurity (2021)**



Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

## 7. CORRUPTION

Like violence, corruption in Honduras is also endemic. Links to organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, permeate Honduran state institutions, from local government to police to high-ranking politicians, including the office of the

president. Honduran officials extract benefits from both the private sector and the criminal sector, including gangs and traffickers of illicit goods, in exchange for legislation or protection. Sarah Chayes describes Honduras as a “kleptocratic network” wherein “corruption is the operating system” (Chayes, 2017).

Much of this corruption was facilitated by the deliberate weakening of democratic institutions. During its twelve years in power, and with a solid majority in Congress, the National Party strengthened its control of the country’s main institutions. In 2012, when Hernández was president of Congress, he led a successful effort to expel four of the five magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court after they quashed a security initiative launched by former president Lobo. In 2015, the same court, by then stacked with judges close to the ruling party, struck down a constitutional article limiting presidents to one term in office, arguing that it violated the candidate’s human rights. This allowed President Hernández to run for a second term in the 2017 elections. The erosion of checks and balances on executive power over the past decade – and particularly the weakening of judicial oversight– has created fertile ground in Honduras for corruption and state collusion with actors engaged in illicit activities.

In 2015 it was revealed that President Juan Orlando Hernández and high-ranking members of the National Party were implicated in an elaborate kickback scheme that drained the Social Security Institute of more than \$300 million. Some of those funds were used for Hernández’s 2013 election campaign, some went to the National Party (Wade, 2015). In response to those revelations, tens of thousands of Honduras marched in cities every Friday evening throughout the country for months. The Indignados, or outraged as the movement was called, demanded Hernández’s resignation and the creation of an anti-impunity commission similar to the one in Guatemala.

Soon, U.S. federal court began to actively pursue high-ranking members of the Honduran government on money laundering, drugs trafficking, and weapons trafficking charges. In 2017, former Investment Minister and prominent businessman Yankel Rosenthal pleaded guilty in U.S. federal court to laundering money for the Cachiros drug trafficking organization (Department of Justice, 2017). In November 2018 the president’s brother, Juan Antonio, “Tony”, Hernández, a former congressman, was arrested on drug trafficking and weapons charges in Miami. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, Hernández “bribed law enforcement officials for sensitive information to protect drug shipments and solicited large bribes from major drug traffickers (Drug Enforcement Agency, 2018). During his trial prosecutors also presented evidence that Hernández’s 2013 campaign received \$1.5 million of funding from drug proceeds, as well as a million dollars from Mexican drug kingpin, El “Chapo” Guzmán. “Tony” Hernández was convicted of drug trafficking, weapons charges, and lying to authorities in October 2019. In March 2021, he was sentenced to life in prison (Department of Justice, 2021a).

On October 26, 2019, only days after “Tony” Hernández’s conviction, Nery Lopez Sanabria, whose ledgers were used in the trial against Hernández, was brutally murdered in a maximum-security prison in Honduras. In December 2019, Lopez’s attorney was murdered. Three days after that the warden of the facility was murdered. Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez, who testified to paying bribed to President Hernández and other high-ranking officials in connection to drug trafficking, was convicted in the Southern District of New York on multiple charges, including conspiracy to traffic cocaine and arms possession, in March 2021 (Department of Justice, 2021b).

On February 14, 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice requested the extradition of former president Hernández on drug trafficking and weapons charges. Hernández was arrested the following day, just two weeks after he left office. He was extradited to the U.S. in April. His extradition was followed by that of his former police chief Juan Carlos Bonilla (El Tigre), who was accused of facilitating the cocaine trafficking into the U.S. on behalf of President Hernández (Department of Justice, 2020).

Finally, the wife of former president Porfirio Lobo, Rosa Bonilla, was convicted by a Honduras court in March 2022 (for a second time) of embezzlement of more than \$1million while her husband was president. Bonilla and Lobo had already been designated ineligible for entry to the United States for corruption and bribery from drug traffickers.

In addition to high-level corruption, police and security forces play a vital role in sustaining the country’s criminal networks. This is particularly important because citizens may feel the direct impact of the criminality of these actors, either as their immediate victims or through the failure of institutions to protect citizen security. According to Sarah Chayes, Honduran police “rarely seem to work in the interests of the ordinary population.” In addition to their relationships with gangs and drug traffickers, police also engage in low-level corruption and extortion where they extort citizens directly. Honduran security forces have been involved in the extrajudicial killing (or social cleansing) of street children, suspected gang members, student protestors, and other civilians over the past two decades (Chayes, 2017). They are also known to harass and target political opponents, journalists, human rights workers, land rights defenders, and members of the LGBT+ community.

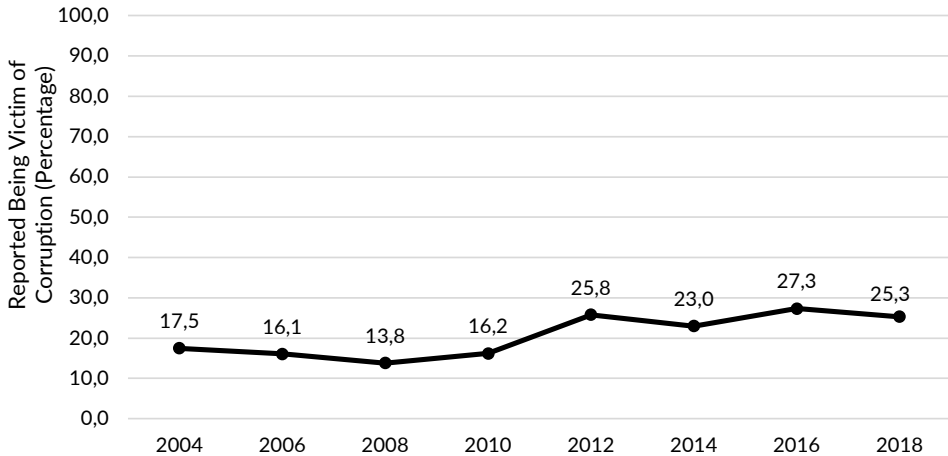
Figure 9 shows the changes in the rate of corruption victimization<sup>14</sup> across time. The graph indicates a steady increase in the number of Hondurans who

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14. “Since 2004, LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer has measured corruption victimization via an index of individuals’ experience with being asked for a bribe in a variety of institutions. If a person reports that, in the last 12 months, they were asked for a bribe by a police officer, government employee, someone at work, someone in the court system, a public health service provider, and/or by someone

say they have been asked for a bribe at least once in the previous year. The rate increased significantly between 2010 and 2012 and remained above 20 % for the rest of the series.

**Figure 9. Victimization by Corruption Over Time**



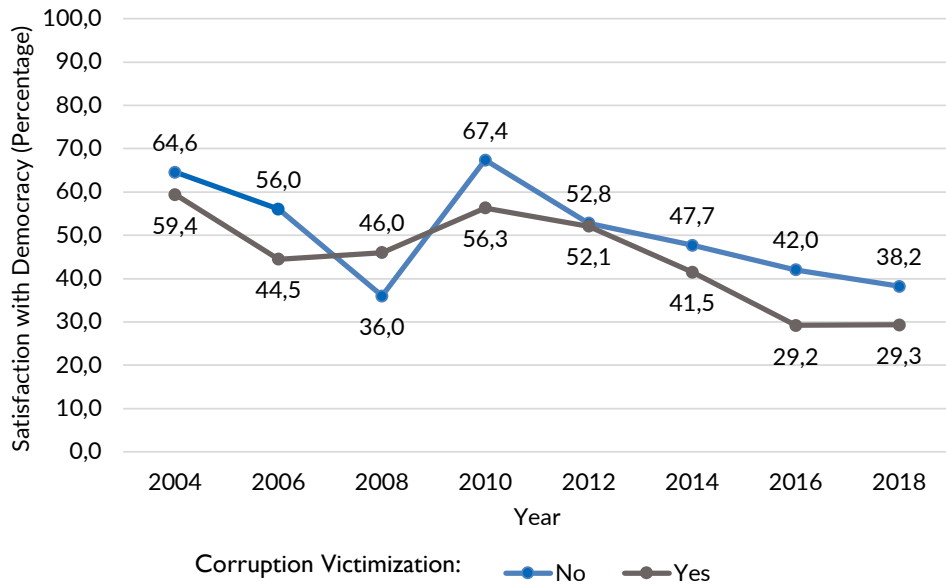
Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

While the bivariate relation between corruption victimization and support for democracy is often small and not statistically significant, corruption seems to have a significant effect on satisfaction with democracy in Honduras. Figure 10 shows the extent to which those who have been victims of corruption are more likely to express less satisfaction in the democratic system. Only in 2008 and 2012 did corruption victims express greater satisfaction, although in the latter the difference is very small. As the cases of corruption received greater attention, and President Hernández and his administration were further implicated in corruption scandals, we see (1) a decline in satisfaction with democracy (which we see in Figure 1 as well) and (2) an increased in the statistically significant difference between Hondurans that experienced corruption and those that did not on satisfaction with democracy.

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at a school - then they are categorized as being the victim of corruption." The survey items used to make the overall corruption victimization variable are: EXC2, EXC6, EXC11, EXC13, EXC14, EXC15, and EXC16. See, Claire Q. Evans, "Spotlight on Corruption Victimization in Latin America and the Caribbean," LAPOP Spotlight Series, December 2020, [https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/spotlights/Spotlight-Evans-CORVIC-eng\\_final.pdf](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/spotlights/Spotlight-Evans-CORVIC-eng_final.pdf).

Figure 10. Satisfaction with Democracy and Corruption Victimization Over Time



Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Additionally, the data demonstrates that Hondurans' satisfaction with democracy and approval of presidential performance declined as corruption allegations became more pronounced starting in the 2012 survey. Likewise, coup support under high corruption and tolerance of regime critics simultaneously increased during this period.

## 8. ILLEGITIMATE ELECTIONS

The 2009, 2013, and 2017 elections were characterized by varying degrees of irregularities, some of which were so significant that they led many to question the validity of the outcome. We believe this has an impact of citizens' appraisals of democracy.

Following the 2009 coup, Honduras was governed by an interim president who suspended a variety of constitutional rights that are essential to ensuring free and fair elections, including freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement. Regardless, the 2009 national elections were held on schedule just five months after the coup. Unsurprisingly, voter turnout was under

50 %. National Party candidate Porfirio Lobo won 56.6 % of the vote. His party also won a majority, 71 seats, in congress.

As targeted assassinations of political candidates and party activists persisted, rights groups expressed concern regarding the climate of fear and intimidation surrounding the 2013 vote. More than 20 LIBRE candidates and activists were killed in the lead up to the election, three of them the week of the election and another the week following. Nearly 70 lawyers and 29 journalists were killed during the Lobo administration, though few cases were investigated and there were only 4 convictions (Frank, 2013). In sum, there is a climate of intimidation throughout the country.

Additionally, Honduras was at the height of its homicide epidemic with national homicide rates exceeding 80 per 100,000 in 2012 and 2013. National Party candidate Juan Orlando Hernández seized upon the homicide epidemic in his campaign, promising “a soldier on every corner.” As president of congress, Hernández oversaw the expansion of militarized policing and was credited as the architect of the Military and Public Order Police (MPOP).

Hernández’s chief competitor was Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE) candidate Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, the wife of deposed president Mel Zelaya. LIBRE was formed in 2011 by a coalition of groups who opposed the coup. Thus, the two primary political parties of 2009 faced off at the ballot box. The election was marred by allegations of vote buying, intimidation, and other irregularities. Both Hernández and Castro claimed victory on election night, magnifying an already tense environment. Hernández was elected with 36.8 % of the vote, defeating Castro who won almost 29 %. LIBRE claimed that the National Party had engaged in fraud at the polling centers, citing significant discrepancies between tally sheets and the TSE results. The dispute further undermined the integrity of Honduran elections.

We do note a significant increase in support for democracy between the 2012 (41.1 %) and 2014 (62.8) surveys, as seen in Figure 2. We believe this can be attributed to two factors. First, the mobilization of voters and civil society surrounding the 2013 elections likely contributed to an increase in system support. The 2013 elections, whatever their flaws, were the first competitive elections since the 2009 coup. Voter turnout increased 9 points from 2009. Second, Hernández enjoyed a brief honeymoon period during the initial months of his presidency in 2014, which was directly linked to his new security policies (Panting, 2014). We note that his approval rating (66 %) exceeded his vote share and likely contributed to the brief increase in support for democracy.

That honeymoon period was short-lived as a result of corruption allegations (discussed above) and ongoing political machinations. In 2015 the Constitutional Court, packed with Hernández loyalists, ruled that the prohibition on presidential reelection was unconstitutional. This decision enabled Hernández to run for a

second, albeit questionable, term in 2017. Hernández faced Salvador Nasralla of the Anti-Corruption Party (PAC), who allied with LIBRE, and Luis Zelaya of the Liberal Party, among others.

When it appeared that Hernández was losing during the vote count (reported by one TSE official that Nasralla's lead was "irreversible"), it was announced that the computer system had failed, and the vote count was halted for several days. When the vote count resumed, Hernández was leading –against all statistical probability (Wade, 2017). The Supreme Electoral Tribunal delayed the announcement of the first count –in which the ruling National Party was losing by a small margin– for several hours. But Hernández's fortunes reversed during a weeklong vote count, and electoral authorities declared the president the winner several days after the balloting. The Organization of American States, which had election observers on the ground, called for a new election citing extensive irregularities including deliberate interference with the voting system. The opposition accused the governing party of fraud and called for roadblocks and protests to contest the results. The state responded with lethal force. A month of protests left 23 dead and 1,351 detained. The Honduran government declared a state of emergency and issued a curfew. Hernández was declared the winner on December 17, 2017, with 42.6 % of the vote to Nasralla's 41.4 %.

The 2017 post-electoral crisis showcased the extent of public dissatisfaction in the country. Months-long protests erupted again in May 2019, first over the privatization of health services and then over the revelations from the "Tony" Hernández trial.

Among the clusters, there is a notable increase in tolerance for regime critics following the 2013 elections. Tolerance for regime critics increased from 36.6 in 2012 to 52.9 in 2018. We attribute this increase to the growing dissatisfaction with corruption and the illegitimacy of elections. Tolerance increased alongside the growing protest movements in the country. Among the clusters, Military Interventionists had the highest level of protest participation in 2016 and 2018.

The 2021 presidential elections marked a watershed moment for Honduras. They marked the first time that a woman had won the presidency, and the first time since the 19<sup>th</sup> century that someone from outside the duopoly of the National and Liberal parties had won. The elections pitted Xiomara Castro of the LIBRE party against the mayor of Tegucigalpa and National Party standard-bearer, Nasry Asfura. Former vice president, Yani Rosenthal was the candidate of the Liberal Party.

The elections occurred under an environment of violence, intimidation, and the threat of fraud. The opposition was determined to prevent a repeat of 2017. One lesson was that a divided opposition left the door open for a National Party victory with a plurality of the vote. A divided opposition also invited further manipulation by the ruling party. In the end, the two leading opposition candidates,

Xiomara Castro, and Salvador Nasralla, agreed to form a unified opposition ticket with the former as presidential candidate and the latter as vice-president. The electoral campaign again was mired in violence with dozens of candidates and party activists killed during the campaign.

Turnout increased from 59 % in 2017 to 68 % of the electorate. In the end, a massive mobilization of opposition forces motivated by the unpopularity of President Hernández and the economic and social effects of the pandemic led to a resounding victory for Ms. Castro. Castro won about 51 % of the votes, with the National Party obtaining 36 %. The Liberal Party was relegated to third place with less than 10 %. Several minor party candidates received the remaining votes.

## 9. ECONOMIC DECLINE

Economic performance has an important effect on democratic attitudes and public opinion in Honduras. Satisfaction with democracy, support for democracy, and presidential approval ratings deteriorated as the Honduran economy experienced difficulties following the 2009 coup.

During the Zelaya administration (2006–2009), the government expanded social programs, including low interest loans, school fee abolition, and free school lunches; increased public sector wages; and reduced oil import costs through an agreement with Petrocaribe (Ruhl, 2018). This combination of policies marked a departure from the neoliberal economic policies that had persisted since the 1990s and contributed to a 6.6 % increase in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006 and a 6.3 % increase in 2007. Perhaps more importantly, Zelaya's policies contributed to a reduction in poverty rates, which remained below 60 % between 2006 and 2009.

The Lobo and Hernández administrations sought a return to neoliberal economic policies by offering new incentives for foreign investment and reducing public expenditures. The 2011 “Honduras Is Open for Business” conference was aimed at attracting new investment in the post-coup economy. Subsequent legislation offered new protections to investors and new tax benefits. At the same time, the government began to pursue privatization in the education and health sectors, which resulted in widespread student protests in 2015. The police responded with excessive force, killing four students, some as young as 13. Government expenditures on health and education declined from 21 % in 2013 to 17 % in 2017. Protesters again took to the streets between April and June 2019, when trade unions mobilized in response to reforms enacted by Congress that would lead to mass privatization and layoffs in the health and education sectors.



Thus, economic policy proposals have generated multiple, prolonged protests. We note that these protests have coincided with growing political tolerance.

Poverty increased after the 2008 global recession and 2009 coup, despite continued GDP growth. In 2009, 58.8 % of households lived in poverty; by 2012 that number had increased to 66.5 % (Montalvo, 2019). Poverty trended downward for the remainder of the decade, dipping below 60 % in 2019. However, in 2020, following COVID-19 and two back-to-back hurricanes, poverty increased to over 70 % of the population. Honduran migration, which jumped sharply from 2018 to 2019 after growing steadily since 2012, increased significantly from 2020 to 2021 before declining somewhat in 2022. The economic impact of COVID-19 exacerbated poverty and pre-existing food insecurity which, along with violence and corruption, was a major driver of migration (Bermeo and Leblang, 2021). Results from the 2021 AmericasBarometer show that intentions to migrate reached their highest rate in the series, with more than half (54 %) saying they intended to live or work abroad. More than half (55 %) identified lack of economic opportunities as the most important reason for intending to migrate. Food insecurity, specifically, is a key motivating factor for having intentions to emigrate (Perez *et al.*, 2021).

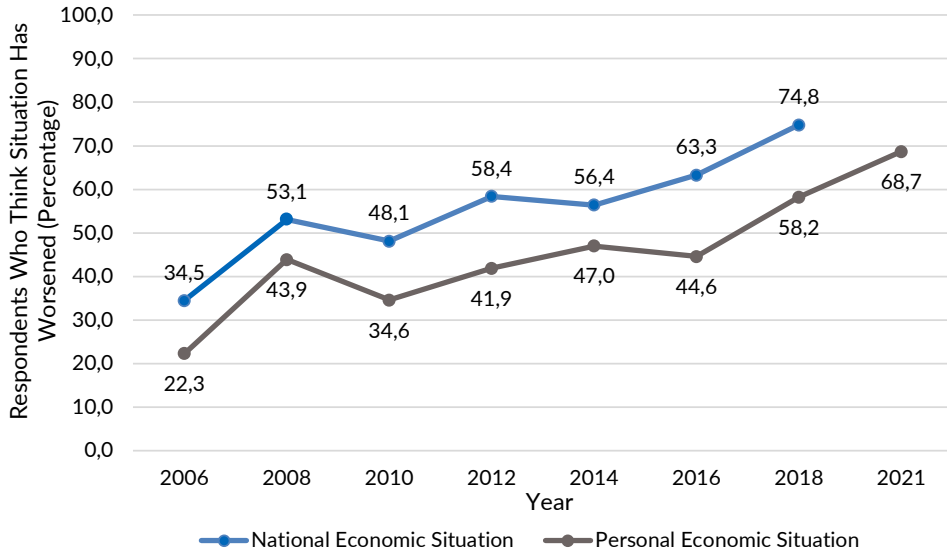
The AmericasBarometer data demonstrated this economic deterioration. The number of Hondurans who said their family income did not cover basic needs increased significantly from 53.1 % in 2012 to 71 % in 2014 and 75.1 % in 2018. By 2018, economic concerns had replaced security as the most serious problem confronting the country, according to respondents. When asked whether the national economy has worsened, improved, or remained the same, Hondurans were increasingly likely to say that it had gotten worse.<sup>15</sup> Figure 11 depicts the steady, significant increase in negative appraisals of the national economy. In 2010, 48.1 % said it had gotten worse; in 2018, 74.8 % said the same, and this question was not asked in 2021. Figure 11 also shows that Hondurans increasingly felt that their personal economic situation had deteriorated in the past year, rising from 34.6 % in 2010 to 58.2 % in 2018 and 68.7 % in 2021.<sup>16</sup>

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15. The survey question used is SOCT2. "Do you believe the current economic situation in the country is improved, the same or worse than 12 months ago?" The graph shows the percentage of respondents who indicated that the national economy was worse than 12 months ago.

16. The survey question used is IDIO2. "Do you believe that your own personal economic situation is better, same, or worse than 12 months ago?" The graph shows the percentage of respondents who indicated that their personal economic situation was worse than 12 months ago.

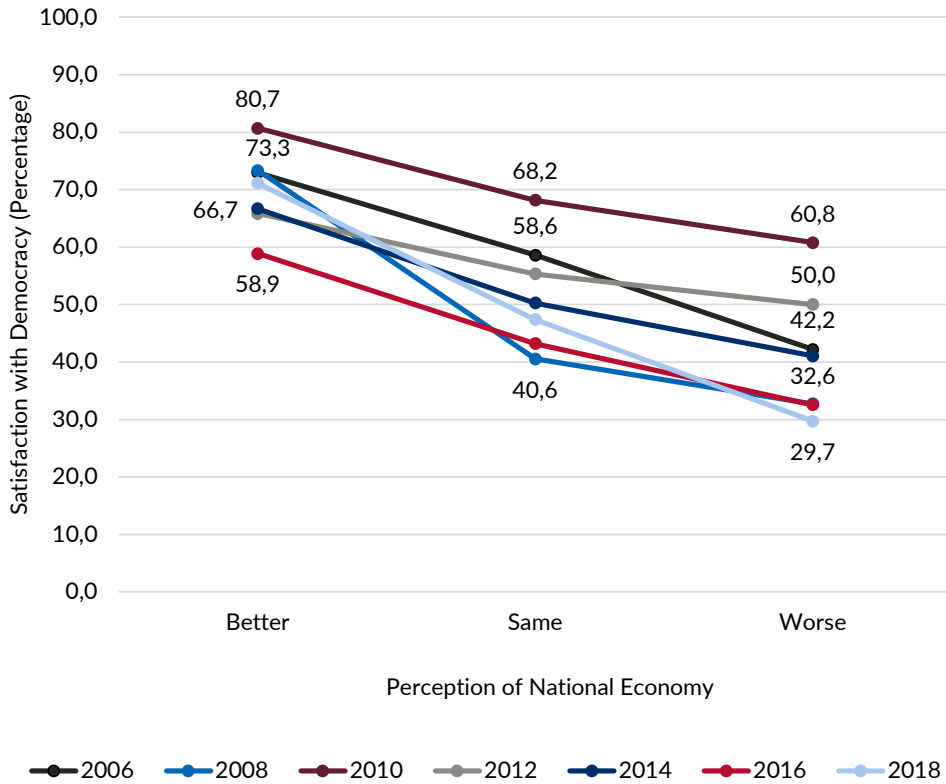
**Figure 11. percentage of Hondurans Who Think the Economic Situation Has Worsened in the Previous 12 Months**



Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

Figure 12 illustrates the connection between satisfaction with democracy and evaluations of the national economy. It shows that satisfaction with how democracy is working declined significantly as the evaluation of the national economy deteriorates. This pattern holds for every year surveyed. For example, in 2018, there was a 40-point difference in democratic satisfaction between respondents who perceived an improving economy and those who believed the economy is deteriorating. In analyses not reported here, we found that personal economic situation evaluations were similarly related to satisfaction with democracy. We found similar results for support for democracy and presidential job approval. In brief, the survey evidence shows a clear connection between economic perceptions and support for the political regime.

**Figure 12. Satisfaction with Democracy by Perception of National Economy Over Time**



Source: Authors' elaboration using AmericasBarometer data, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Countries throughout Latin America have experienced democratic backsliding in the past decades. For most of these countries, the main actors who have contributed to this erosion have been democratically elected politicians. Illiberal elites from across the political spectrum have undermined democratic norms and rule of law in order to protect or promote their own interests. Whether using crime as a cover for militarism in El Salvador or México or seeking to extend their time in office as in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela to name a few, or to undermine trust in elections as in Brazil or Guatemala, elected officials have

routinely undermined democracy in the region –and citizen opinion has followed suit. Honduras is no exception to these trends.

Since the 2009 coup, Honduran politics has been mired in militarism, violence, and corruption. Within a few years, Honduras had become a narco-state. Elected officials from the presidency down to local mayor's offices became entrenched with criminal organizations. This is the context within which one must understand patterns of support for democracy within the country.

The erosion of democratic institutions continued after the coup and accelerated significantly in 2012. During his tenure, President Hernández effectively erased checks and balances on state power by exerting growing influence over the judiciary and electoral institutions and appointing intimate allies as high-level state officials. The net effect has been to heighten polarization, increase public distrust of political elites and fuel recurrent tides of unrest. Lacking trust in elections and with few other means to influence policy, demonstrations became vehicles for expressing anti-government sentiments. Unsurprisingly, satisfaction with democracy plummeted while coup and protest tolerance increased.

The deterioration in executive approval in Honduras has been dizzying since 2014, the first year of President Juan Orlando Hernández's administration. The results of the poll in 2021 reflect the lowest approval in the work of the executive since the series began and could help us understand part of the electoral results of November 28, 2021, when opposition leader Xiomara Castro won the presidential elections. The decline in perceptions of President Hernández's work reflects the economic, political, and social deterioration that the last four years of his presidency represented, and especially the aftermath of the pandemic.

Years of organizing and growing political acumen resulted in a profound shift in the 2021 elections, clearly a referendum on the corruption and mismanagement of the Hernández years. The 2021 elections presented Honduras a real opportunity to shed the legacy of authoritarianism, militarism, violence, and corruption that have plagued the country for decades. Though early in her presidency, Castro will not easily change the structural deficiencies that have historically characterized Honduran political culture. Indeed, the Castro administration has itself been plagued by ongoing structural violence and corruption. The consequences of that for popular support for democracy could be dire as Honduras enters its next critical juncture.

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## MILITARISM, AUTHORITARIANISM AND CORRUPTION: POST-COUP HONDURAS AND THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY

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