Liberal Democratic Support in Contemporary Brazil: A Descriptive Exploration

Apoyo a la democracia liberal en el Brasil contemporáneo: Un estudio exploratorio descriptivo

Apoio à democracia liberal no Brasil contemporâneo: Um estudo exploratório descritivo

RYAN E. CARLIN 🄳 rcarlin@gsu.edu [1]
MÁRIO FUKS 🄳 mariofuks@gmail.com [2]
EDNALDO RIBEIRO 🄳 earibeiro@uem.br [3]

[1] Georgia State University
[2] Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais
[3] Universidade Estadual de Maringá

Abstract
How do democratic attitudes map onto politic-economic context? We examine this question with a decade's worth of high-quality data on public opinion and democratic quality in Brazil. From this empirical foundation, we analyze the observable implications of four theoretical perspectives – democratic culture, performance-based instrumentality, winners' consent, and thermostatic dynamics. Our results suggest that during the periods of economic boom and bust, instrumental performance-based perspectives appear moste valid. But during the recent era of democratic backsliding, the evidence is more compatible with two models: one in which supporters of the incumbent tolerate the

erosion of civil liberties and political rights, and another model that predicts an attitudinal backlash against falling levels of democracy during the final years of the Bolsonaro government. These conclusions are tentative. More data is required to substantiate them and more rigorously test their empirical expectations.

Palabras clave:
apoyo a la democracia; Brasil; cluster análisis; opinión pública

Resumen

¿Cómo es que las actitudes democráticas se relacionan con el contexto político y económico? Examinamos esta pregunta con base en datos de una década sobre la opinión pública y la calidad democrática en Brasil. A partir de esta base empírica, analizamos las implicaciones observadas de tres modelos teóricos: el instrumental basado en el desempeño del gobierno, el consentimiento de los vencedores y la dinámica termostática. Nuestros resultados sugieren que, durante los períodos de expansión y crisis económica, una perspectiva instrumental basada en el desempeño parece más válida. Pero durante una época reciente de retroceso democrático, las evidencias son más compatibles con los otros dos modelos: 1) los partidarios del Gobierno toleran la erosión de las libertades civiles y los derechos políticos, 2) una reacción negativa a la caída de los niveles de democracia en los últimos años contra el gobierno de Bolsonaro. Estas conclusiones son provisionales, pero son necesarios más datos para fundamentar y probar con mayor rigor según sus expectativas empíricas.

Palavras-chave:
apoio à democracia; Brasil; análise de cluster; opinião pública

Resumo

Como é que as atitudes democráticas se relacionam com o contexto político e econômico? Examinamos esta questão com base em dados de uma década sobre a opinião pública e a qualidade democrática no Brasil. A partir desta base empírica, analisamos as implicações observáveis de três modelos teóricos – o instrumental baseado no desempenho do governo, o do consentimento dos vencedores e o da dinâmica termostática. Os nossos resultados sugerem que durante os períodos de expansão e crise econômica, a perspectiva instrumental baseadas no desempenho parece mais válida. Mas durante a recente era de retrocesso democrático, as evidências são mais compatíveis com os outros dois modelos: 1) apoiadores do governante toleram a erosão das liberdades civis e dos direitos políticos, 2) a reação negativa à queda dos níveis de democracia nos últimos anos do governo Bolsonaro. Estas conclusões são provisórias, pois são necessários mais dados para os fundamentar e testar com mais rigor as suas expectativas empíricas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Democracies require mass support to thrive. Many theories connect democratic support and politic-economic context, but firm conclusions are difficult to draw. This study seeks to describe the levels and dynamics of democratic attitudes over the last ten years in Brazil and toexamine how well they conform to expectations derived from three analytic perspectives seeking to understand democratic support: 1) an "instrumental" perspective focusing on

whether democracy delivers desirable outcomes like sustained economic progress, political stability, and public safety; 2) a "winners' consent'' perspective focusing on citizens' preferences regarding who is in power; and 3) a "thermostatic" perspective, focusing on the advancement and erosion of the rights of political minorities. Data limitations preclude us from conducting rigorous tests of these competing analytic perspectives and, thus, from making any strong overarching claims about what drives democratic public opinion in Brazil. Nevertheless, our case study can help assess the leverage these analytic perspectives bring to the debate by uncovering evidence that corroborates or refutes them.

We begin this exploratory exercise by showing how various indicators of democratic support vary over five waves of the AmericasBarometer from 2012 to 2019. Next, we inspect these dynamics more deeply by decomposing the Brazilian public into distinct profiles of democratic support derived inductively via cluster analysis. Then we analyze potential connections between Brazilians' shifting support for liberal democracy and Brazil's shifting political-economic context. Results are broadly consistent with the notion that democratic support leads to more favorable context for democracy, while highlighting new theoretical wrinkles and key areas for future exploration.

2. LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL: ATTITUDINAL INDICATORS

Like the other case studies in this special issue, we examine the following five sets of attitudes[1:]

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

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1. For details about the variables, see Appendix A.

These attitudinal categories were chosen based on two criteria. First, they reflect support for a liberal form of democracy, in which elections determine who governs, citizens enjoy free speech, and political rights are broadly inclusive. Second, items tapping these categories were available on the AmericasBarometer from 2012 to 2019, permitting articles in this special issue to compare across Latin America and the Caribbean. Whatever defects these items have must be weighed against these benefits.

### Figure 1. Support for Democracy, Brazil, 2012–2019
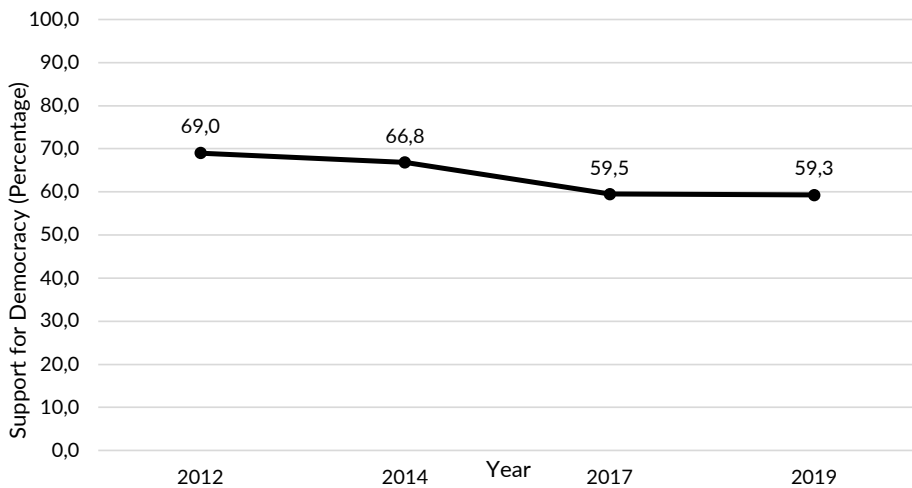
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Note: The original seven-point scale was recoded so that points 5, 6, and 7 represent those who support democracy.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of support for democracy between 2012 and 2019. Brazilians started the 2010's with strong aggregate support for democracy: almost 70 percent of Brazilians supported democracy in the abstract in 2012. From there, stated democratic support declined before leveling off in 2019, 10 percentage points below its 2012 level (59.3 percent).

The percentage of Brazilians who opposed military coups varied over time (Figure 2). Under circumstances of both high corruption and high crime, Brazilians' opposition to military intervention dropped by roughly 15 percentage points between 2012 and 2014 before returning to previous levels in 2017 and 2019. Some-what similarly, the percentage of Brazilians who opposed executive aggrandizement fell dramatically in 2014 and improved somewhat in 2017, only to sag there-after (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Opposition to Military Coups, Brazil, 2012–2019
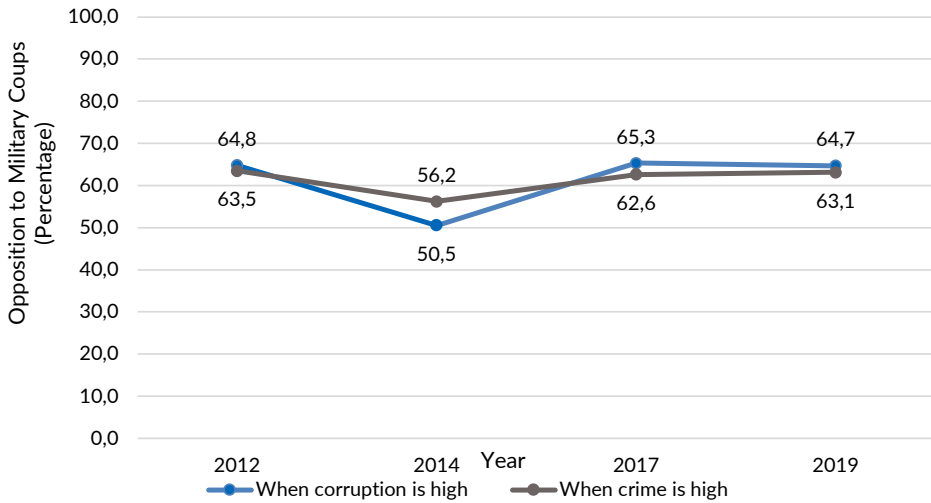
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Figure 3. Opposition to Executive Governing without Legislature, Brazil, 2012–2019
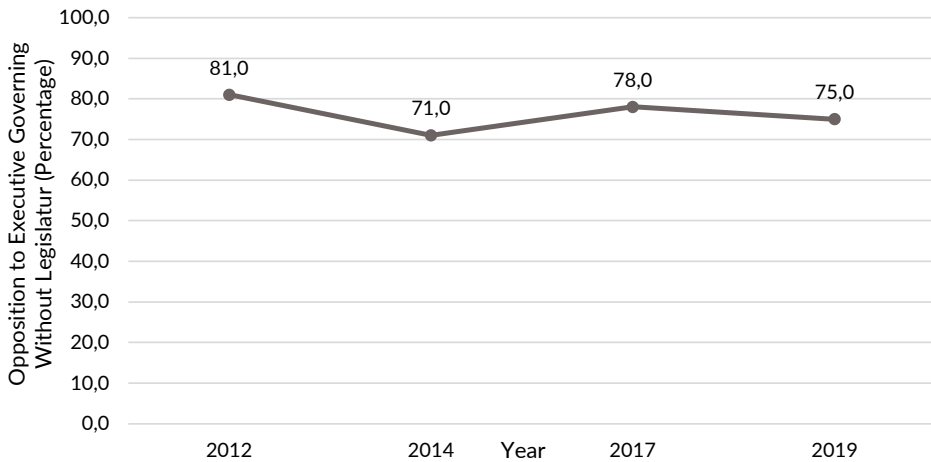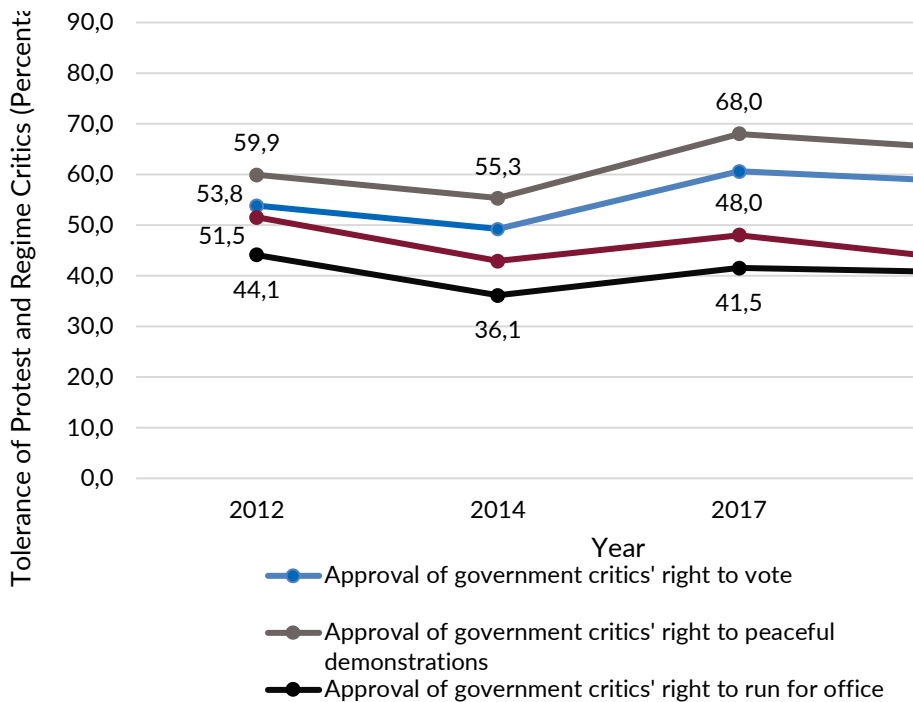

Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

The dynamics of mass opposition to executive aggrandizement (Figure 3) mirror those of opposition to military coups under high corruption. Namely,

Brazilians' opposition to the executive governing without the Legislature fell dramatically in 2014, recuperated in 2016, only to sag thereafter.

The percentage of Brazilians who approved of the political rights and civil liberties of regime critics was generally high. However, approval of regime critics' right to run for office was low relative to the other rights depicted, whereas support for their right to peacefully demonstration was relatively high. All five indicators followed the same trend in this period, with support falling between 2012 and 2014, rising by 2017, and declining modestly again by 2019 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Tolerance of Protest and Regime Critics, Brazil, 2012–2019

Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

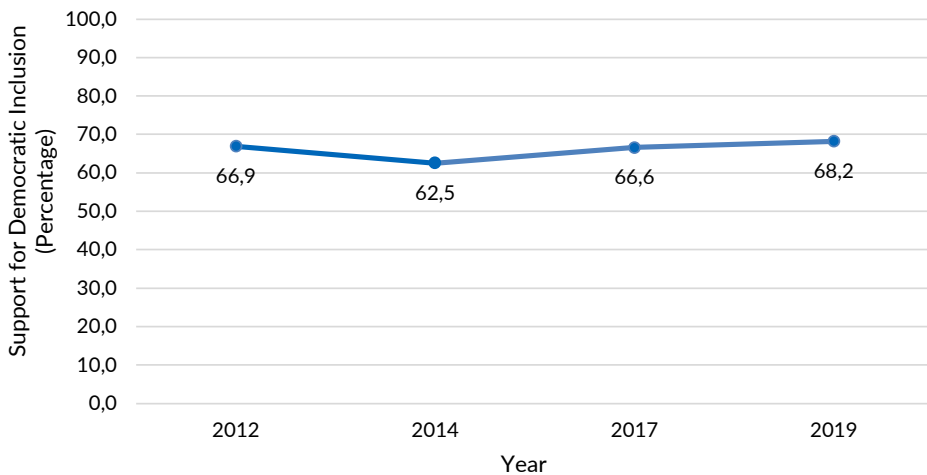*Note:* The original 10-point scale was recoded so that points 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 represent those who approve.

Tolerance of the political rights and civil liberties of regime critics has been generally high in Brazil (see Figure 5). Approval of regime critics running for public office is low relative to the other rights depicted, whereas support for protest rights is relatively high. All five indicators exhibited S-shaped

variation in this period, with support falling in 2014, rising in 2016, and falling again by 2018.

Like the other indicators, the percentage of Brazilians who supported democratic inclusion fell from 2012 to 2014 (Figure 5). However, it has climbed steadily since then. Importantly, in any given survey year, about two in every three respondents approved of homosexuals' right to run for office.

Figure 5. Support for Democratic Inclusion, Brazil, 2012–2019

Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Note: In the variable on homosexual' rights, the original seven-point scale was re-coded so that points 5, 6, and 7 represent those who approve. In the variable about political leaders, the percentages of "disagree" and "strongly disagree" were added.

3. DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDE PROFILES IN BRAZIL, 2012–2019

The preceding section provided a time-lapse picture of five attitudinal dimensions of liberal democracy in Brazil. We now turn to a more sophisticated analysis of the profiles of democratic support at large. Liberal democrats should, by definition, hold broadly liberal orientations on all five dimensions. Yet, individuals may hold liberal orientations to only some, or even none, of those dimensions.

Recognizing this possibility, we employ cluster analysis to identify the most dominant democratic attitudinal profiles among the Brazilians. The aim of this method is to maximize attitudinal similarity within each cluster while maximizing attitudinal dissimilarity between clusters. In doing so, we allow

the survey data to "speak" for itself without making assumptions in advance about how to group citi-zens' attitudes (e. g., Schedler and Sarsfield, 2007; Carlin, 2011; Carlin and Singer, 2011). The introduction to this special issue provides detailed information regarding the study's methodology as well as a set of validation tests.[2] We follow this approach for four biennial waves (2012, 2014, 2017, 2019) of the AmericasBarometer conducted in Brazil. Our cluster analysis included the five democratic attitudes discussed in the preceding section: support for democracy, opposition to military coups, opposition to executive ag-grandizement, tolerance for protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusions.

Questions measuring all five attitudes were available in the first four survey waves (2012, 2014, 2017, and 2019). Only three attitudes were available in 2021: support for democracy, opposition to military coups, and opposition to executive aggrandizement. The 2021 cluster analysis results are therefore not directly com-parable to those of prior waves and not discussed in this report. The appendix presents the main cluster analysis results for all waves.

The cluster analysis identified two clusters in 2012 and four clusters each in 2014, 2017, and 2019. In all waves, a small share of respondents was not classified into any cluster. Unclustered individuals were dissimilar from each other and from those included in other clusters. To facilitate comparisons over survey waves, the resulting clusters can be grouped into four groupings that share a set of defining characteristics:

- *Institutionalists:* Individuals in this group of clusters are characterized by full opposition to military coups and executive aggrandizement. They more closely represent "ideal" democratic citizens than any of their counterparts . This grouping includes institutionalists, democratic institutionalists, and ambiva-lent institutionalists.
- *Military Interventionists:* Individuals in this cluster grouping exhibit full oppo-sition to executive aggrandizement but less-than-full opposition to coups.

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2.   As the authors of the introduction say, cluster analysis refers to a suite of classification techniques used extensively in market research, some social and natural sciences, and computer science. Cluster analysis entails analyzing a collection of heterogeneous objects and grouping them into smaller, more homogenous clusters according to two or more measurable attributes. Of its several variants, we employ Campello *et al.* (2013)'s Hierarchical Density-based Clustering (HDBScan). HDBScan relies on density clustering, effectively finding clusters of different shapes and sizes and calculates each point's outlier score (GLOSH) to identify ungrouped observations. Its main advantages are that the identified clusters maximize the sum of individual cluster stabilities, and it chooses the number of clusters induc-tively. The only parameter HDBScan users must enter is the minimum cluster size(as a percentage of the sample). Our choice of three percent produces a few medium-size clusters for Brazil and the other countries in this special issue. Since responses to political preference questions tend to correlate, we selected Mahalanobis distances for HDBScan's distance metric.

- *Presidentialists:* Individuals in this classification exhibit full opposition to coups but less-than-full opposition to executive aggrandizement.
- *Authoritarians:* Individuals in this cluster grouping are characterized by less-than-full opposition to both coups and executive aggrandizement.

Figure 6. Evolution of Cluster Families, Brazil, 2012–2019
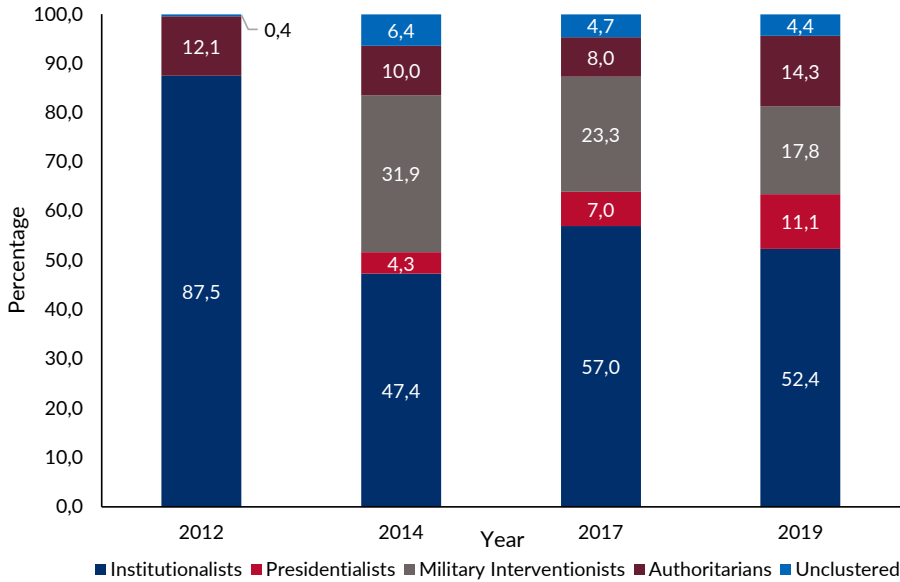
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Note: The Institutionalists grouping includes Institutionalists, Inclusive Institutionalists, and Democratic Institutionalists. The Military Interventionists grouping includes Military Interventionists and Ambivalent Military Interventionists. The Authoritarians grouping includes Authoritarians and Ambivalent Authoritarians.

Figure 6 presents the results of the cluster analysis. Three findings stand out. First, results from 2012 indicate that Brazilians were rather homogeneous in their democratic attitudes: 87.5 percent of respondents were classified as ambivalent institutionalists, displaying high support for democracy, medium-to-high opposition to military coups, and full opposition to executive aggrandizement (see Figure A1 in the appendix). In later years, the cluster analysis was able to identify more dis-tinct attitudinal profiles, and institutionalists ceased to display ambivalent attitudes. Second, between 2014 and 2019, the share of institutionalists increased slightly, from 47.4 percent of respondents to 52.4 percent. Third, between 2014 and 2019, the share of military interventionists and presidentialists

shifted. Military interventionists decreased from 31.9 percent to 17.8 percent, while presidentialists increased from 4.3 percent to 11.1 percent. The share of authoritarians remained relatively stable throughout the period under analysis.

Our cluster analysis identified the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics that significantly distinguished 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 citi-zens' preferences), and political participation. While respondents in all clusters were statistically significantly different from others in a few variables in each wave, there were few stable patterns across all waves and the differences were substantially small. This suggests that the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics examined do not structure attitudes toward democracy in a meaningful way. These caveats aside, we did find some recurrent statistically significant differences that are worth highlighting.

3.1. Institutionalists

Brazilians classified as institutionalists best approximate ideal-typical liberal democrats. Brazilians in this group oppose both military coups and executive aggran-dizement. They are the group most tolerant of protest and regime critics, though still at only modest levels. Citizens in this group are also highly supportive of democratic inclusion. From 2012 to 2018, institutionalists compose the largest group, ranging between 47.2 to 87.5 percent of the sample.

Women were proportionally more likely to be classified as institutionalists in 2017 and 2019, potentially in reaction to President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment and President Michel Temer's subsequent rollback of gender equality in govern-ment. Bucking trends elsewhere, (Foa and Mounk, 2016), Brazilian youth (aged 18–29) became more prevalent among the institutionalists in 2017, while older Brazil-ians became less prevalent. Institutionalists had more average years of schooling than other Brazilians in 2017 and 2019. In 2019, they expressed significantly less approval of the president than others (43.2 percent vs. 60.3 percent) and were less likely to believe that those in government are interested in what people think (33.5 percent vs. 41.2 percent).

3.2. Military Interventionists

Military interventionists hold many common attitudes with institution-alists, including robust support for democracy and democratic inclusion, moderate levels

of tolerance of dissent, and unanimous rejection of executive aggrandize-ment. However, military interventionists are far more permissive of the military stepping in during times of high corruption and high crime. Military intervention-ists are typically the second-most-populous attitudinal cluster in Brazil, ranging from 17.8 percent of the sample to 31.9 percent.

Demographically, the military institutionalist category displays a few distinct traits. In 2019, this grouping included a lower percentage of whites and a higher percentage of black Brazilians. Attitudinally, military interventionists showed diverg-ing forms of political efficacy in 2019. They expressed the least confidence in their understanding of important political issues (low internal efficacy), yet they had significantly more faith that the government is interested in what people think than other Brazilians (high external efficacy).

3.3. Presidentialists

Presidentialist Brazilians oppose military coups, but they believe the president would be justified in dissolving the legislature or Supreme Court and governing without them during "very difficult times". Presidentialists have moderate support for democracy and democratic inclusion and their support is lower than the other clusters. Presidentialists represented a small but growing portion of the population, at 4.3 percent of respondents in 2014, to 7.0 percent in 2017, and 11.1 percent in 2019.

No specific characteristic distinguishes presidentialists from their fellow citi-zens. Presidentialists registered some of the lowest levels of education of all Brazil-ians in 2019. Their presidential approval ratings swung wildly, from 7.6 percent for then-President Temer in 2017, to 61.9 percent for President Jair Bolsonaro in 2019. Presidentialists personify the anti-establishment, anti-democracy segment of the Brazilian populace. Their ranks expanded following the ouster of President Rousseff from the long-ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). They harshly disap-proved of her establishment Vice President and successor (Temer), and they championed the authoritarian-populist (Bolsonaro), who painted the political class as corrupt, elitist, and out of touch with ordinary Brazilians.

3.4. Authoritarians

Authoritarians believe the military would be justified in interrupting democratic politics in certain circumstances. They would also justify the president dissolving the legislature or Supreme Court and governing without them if the country faces "very difficult times." Authoritarians nonetheless hold moderate support for

democracy and democratic inclusion. The percentage of Brazilians in this category ranged from a low of 8.0 percent in 2017 to a high of 14.3 percent in 2019.

In 2012 and 2019, the proportion of white Brazilians was significantly higher among authoritarians than among the rest of the sample, and the proportion of black and brown Brazilians was lower. Authoritarians also stood out by holding a significantly higher level of approval for Presidents Temer (2017) and Bolsonaro (2019) compared to other Brazilians.

4. EXPLAINING LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDINAL DYNAMICS IN BRAZIL

What explains these attitudinal trends? Highly variable democratic attitudes and mixed attitudinal profiles are not uncommon in relatively new democracies (see reviews in Borba and Ribeiro Cardoso, 2021 and König *et al.*, 2022). In this section we identify potential explanations for changes in democratic attitudes in Brazil over time and analyze them in light of the temporal dynamics observed. We caution, however, that our conclusions will necessarily be tentative. Data limitations prevent more systematic empirical tests and, in turn, inferences.

At least three analytic perspectives can shed light on this phenomenon. According to an instrumental or performance-based perspective, volatile democratic attitudes are expected where democracy has not delivered sustained economic progress, political stability, and public safety (e. g., Lipset, 1959; Easton, 1965, 1975; Magalhães, 2014). Until then, citizens may view democracy instrumentally.That is, they may assess democracy on its ability to provide desirable economic, political, and social outcomes (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Claassen and Magalhães, 2022; Fuks, Casalecchi, and Ribeiro, 2019; Katz and Levin, 2016; Mattes and Bratton, 2007). Given Brazil's inconsistent track record on these matters, many Brazilians may continue to ask, "what has democracy done for me lately?".

The winners' consent perspective argues that citizens show greater support for democratic institutions when their preferred leader or party is in power (Cohen *et al.*, 2022; Singer, 2022). However, this support can be shallow and accompanied by support for backsliding that advantages the incumbent. The winners' consent phenomenon makes democracy vulnerable to autocratizing leaders and, in turn, could produce variation in the nature, number, and social composition of profiles of dem-ocratic support over time.

Finally, democracy and democratic attitudes may be locked into a thermostatic relationship: increases in rights of political minorities lead to the rejection of democracy by the majority, and to increases in public support for democracy when these rights become accepted and are subsequently removed or threatened

(Claassen, 2020). Our Brazilian case study can contribute new insights into the debate surrounding this analytic perspective (Tai, Hu, and Solt, 2022).

5. THREE ANALYTIC PERIODS

We structure our exploration of changes in democratic support profiles in Brazil around three analytic periods. These periods represent what we call political-economic contexts because they present distinctive characteristics in terms of the state of the national economy, with variations in growth, inflation and unemployment rates, but also in political terms, with occurrences of scandals involving leaders and political parties, important variations in indicators of trust and political support, and an Impeachment process, as we remember below. The pre-2013 period represents the apex of economic and political performance. Fueled by the commodity boom, President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva presided over a massive expansion of the Brazilian economy, stable prices and exchange rates, and major gains in poverty reduction. He passed the presidential sash to his protégé, Dilma Rousseff, in 2011. We refer to this as the boomtimes period.

However, boom led to bust. Rousseff suffered the "bad luck" of declining global commodity prices and, in turn, deteriorating domestic economic outcomes (Campello and Zucco, 2020). In 2013, demonstrations erupted in several Brazilian cities. Initially focused on public transportation fare hikes, they expanded to protest government corruption, police brutality, and lack of funding for education and healthcare. The following year, the Federal Police opened the Operation Lava Jato anti-corruption criminal investigation, which targeted key public officials and businesspeople. In 2015, at the beginning of Rousseff's second term, anti-corruption protests erupted across the country, many of them calling for her impeachment. Protests continued throughout 2016 and ended with Rousseff's removal and Temer becoming President. The Brazilian right, which has been reinventing itself and occupying the "public sphere" (Rocha, Solano, and Medeiros, 2021) since the beginning of the 2000s, was very active in these protests. With Brazil's political class in full-blown crisis, Judge Sérgio Moro convicted Lula of corruption for presumably receiving a condominium from a construction firm implicated in the Lava Jato scandal. This conviction plucked Lula out of the 2018 presidential race and into prison.

This period of deep political crises affected political elites, institutions, and parties, especially Lula and Rousseff's party, the PT. Since the massive demonstrations of 2013, the PT had been under heavy attack from the streets (Rousseff's sinking presidential approval) (Solano, Oliveira Rocha, 2019; Tatagiba, 2018), from the legislature (Rousseff's impeachment), and from the judiciary (Lula's imprisonment) (Limongi, 2023). At the same time, the economic crisis from

Rousseff's first term continued, with excessive public spending and unchecked in-flation. Following Hunter and Power (2019), we refer to the time from the 2013 protests until Bolsonaro's 2018 election as the perfect storm period.

The third period encompassed Bolsonaro's time in office. Bolsonaro actively undermined democratic norms and institutions by denying the legitimacy of his political opponents, verbally attacking journalists and undermining indigenous property rights in the Amazon. He also sowed baseless doubt that Brazil's voting machines produced fraudulent results and threatened to cancel the 2022 elections unless they were supplemented with a paper ballot. Most strikingly, Bolsonaro incited a series of (often violent) anti-democracy protests in response to a high court judge vetoing his appointee for Director of Federal Police. During the protests, Bolsonaro declared "I am the constitution" and alluded to the possibility of the military stepping in to subvert this check on presidential authority. In defiance of a May 2020 court order to relinquish his cell phone to a corruption investigation, Bolsonaro threatened direct military interference to close Congress and the Supreme Court. After a period of being cowed by Bolsonaro's attacks on democracy, political institutions and society started reacting. The first clear signal of institutional reaction came from the Supreme Court, which opened investigations into fake news in 2018 and anti-democratic activities in 2021. We refer to the time since the election of Bolsonaro as the democratic backsliding period.

How well do the composition and distribution of democratic attitudes over time in Brazil comport with the analytic perspectives outlined above? We employ deductive reasoning to examine our three analytic perspectives against the data in these three analytic periods. As previously noted, lack of observations and an abundance of variables present enormous challenges for drawing confident conclusions about causal relationships. Hence, we cannot adequately test hypotheses and our interpretations must, therefore, be tentative.

5.1. Boomtimes

Unfortunately, we only have comparable individual survey data from one year of Brazil's boomtimes, 2012. But economic data beginning in 2000 helps paint a picture of this period of tremendous economic expansion. Brazil's GDP per capita was over $12,500 by 2012 and still rising (Figure 7). That same year, the infamous mensalão scandal broke, uncovering monthly allowances purportedly paid to deputies to vote in favor of projects of interest to the Executive during the government of Lula da Silva. Unemployment (Figure 8) and inflation rates (Figure 9) were in the single digits.
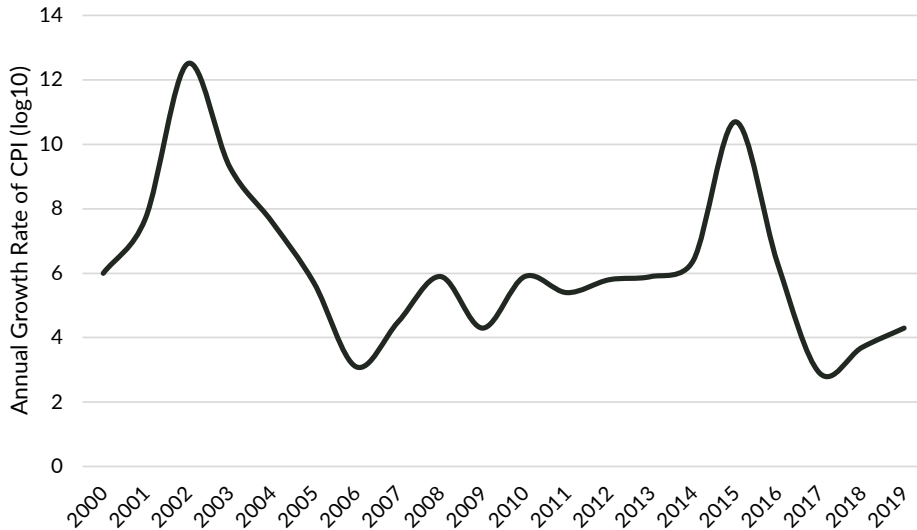
Figure 7. GDP per Capita in Brazil, 2012–2018
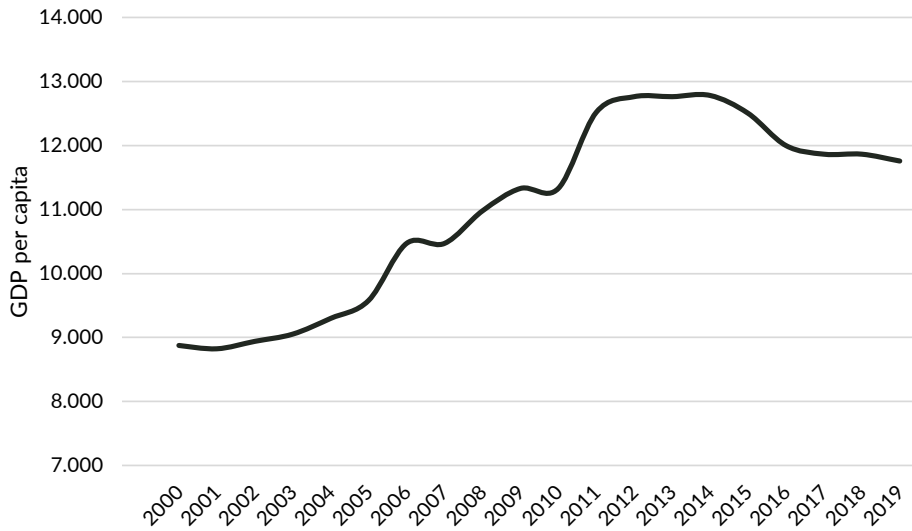
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Figure 8. Average Annual Unemployment Rate in Brazil, 2012–2018
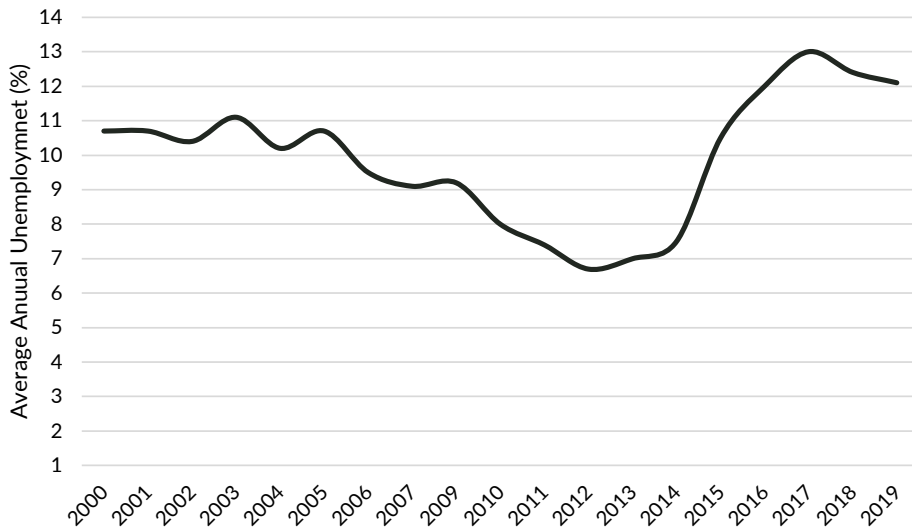
Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Figure 9. Annual Growth Rate of the Consumer Price Index, Brazil, 2012–2018

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.
Note: Calculated from December to December.

The performance-based perspective nicely predicts the distribution of democratic support profiles during the boomtimes. A very high percentage of Brazilians were institutionalists in 2012. Equally telling was their relative standing: institutionalists outnumbered authoritarians, the only other profile that emerged that year, more than 7:1. Improving socioeconomic conditions coincided with the dominance of institutionalist modes over more interventionist and authoritarian ones. While we cannot tell if the dominance of institutionalists in 2012 represented a change from prior waves, the distributions were consistent with what performance theories would predict in 2012.

Given that 87.5 percent of Brazilians fit the institutionalist profiles in 2012, and Dilma Rousseff was elected president in 2011 with 56.1 percent of the vote, there is little to suggest that whether or not one voted for or against the winner heavily determined these profiles. The thermostatic theory is difficult to assess without data before 2012. It would, nonetheless, predict that any rise (or fall) of democratic support should follow a fall (or rise) of levels of democracy. Yet V-Dem's Electoral and Liberal democracy components are essentially static throughout the boomtimes (see Figure 11 and 12 below). As such, democratic support appears to obey an instrumental, performance-driven logic at the tail end of the boomtimes period.

5.2. Perfect Storm

The boomtimes were apparently not strong enough or long enough to buoy democratic attitudes through short-term performance failures. Political, economic, and social headwinds began buffeting Brazil between 2011 and 2012, as good economic times, characterized by low international interest rates and high commodity prices, came to an end (Campello and Zucco, 2021). Unemployment and inflation were somewhat slow to react, but citizens could read the writing on the wall. Figure 10 shows that consumer confidence nosedived by 43.9 points, or 40.5 percent of the previous total value, between December 2012 and April 2016. Impeachment proceedings began against Rousseff shortly thereafter.

**Figure 10. Consumer Confidence Index, 2012–2018 (December)**
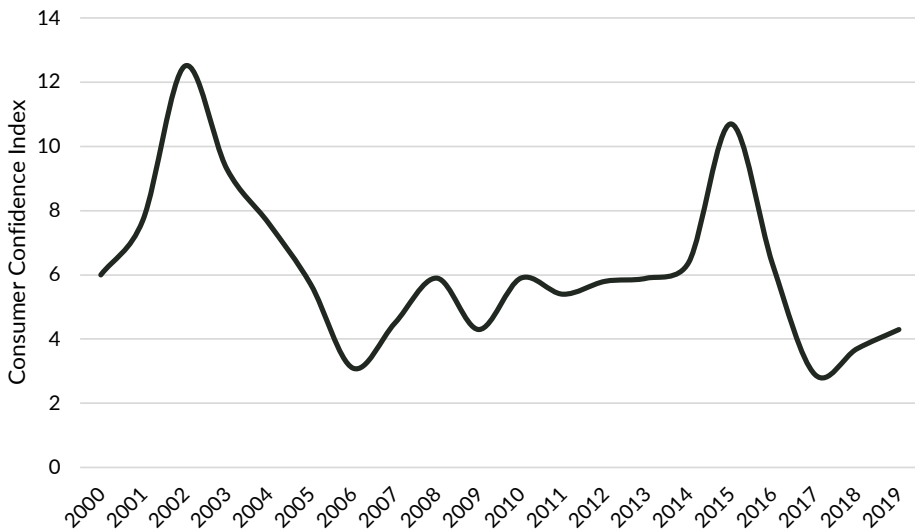
Source: Fundacão Getúlio Vargas.

Crises during the perfect storm coincided with spiraling democratic support. From 2012 to 2014, the ranks of the institutionalists shrunk by nearly half, to 47.4 percent of respondents, its lowest recorded point. Moreover, a crop of military interventionists emerged in 2014 and accounted for 31.9 percent of respondents, its highest recorded point. From 2014 to 2017, the share of institutionalists rebounded by roughly 20 % from its 2012 nadir. The proportion of military interventionists recoiled by about one quarter, and authoritarians regressed slightly, from 10 percent to 8 percent. Presidentialists, meanwhile, rose from 4.3 percent to 7.0 percent of the population.

The largest shift in democratic support profiles from 2012 to 2014 is fully consistent with an instrumental model that links democratic support to robust economic performance. Namely, pure institutionalist types appear to have mutated into hybrid presidentialist and military interventionist types. Pure authoritarians only contributed modestly to this shift: their ranks fell by just 2 percentage points. Economic performance may help explain the rise of presidentialists, but it cannot explain the uptick in institutionalists and the downtick in military interventions and authoritarians from 2014 to 2017.

Figure 11. Electoral Democracy Index and Select Subcomponents of its Freedom of Association and Sources of Alternative Information Index
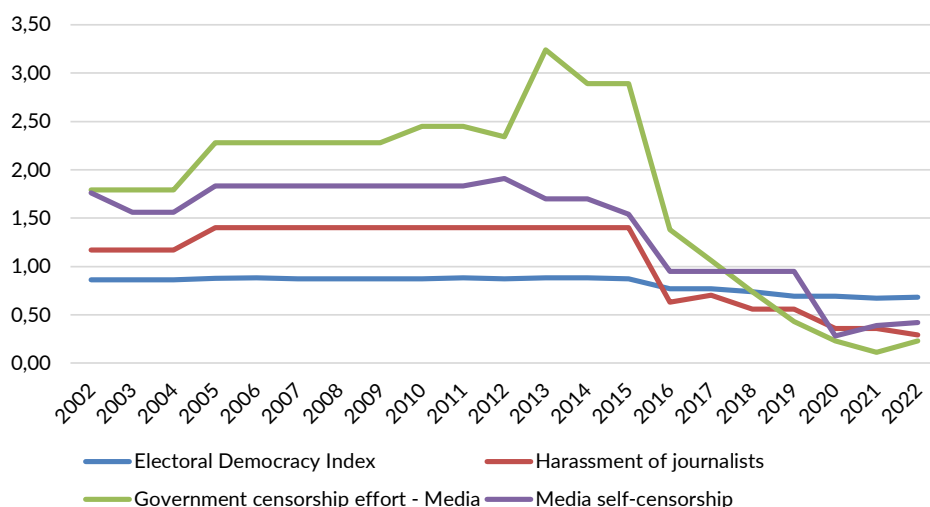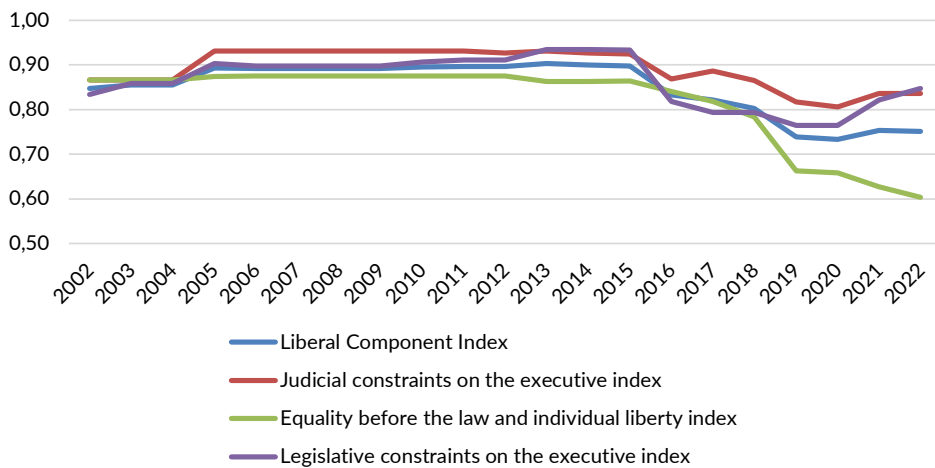

Source: V-Dem.

Note: 95 % confidence intervals excluded for ease of presentation. Compared to 2015, significant differences at the 95 % level register for the Electoral Democracy Index by 2016 and between 2017 and 2021; for the Government censorship effort - Media index by 2016, between 2016 and 2018, and between 2018 and 2021; for the Harassment of journalist index by 2016, and for Media self-censorship by 2016 and between 2019 and 2020.

Because the 2014-2017 interval encapsulates both the elected (then impeached), Dilma Rousseff and the unelected, Michel Temer, it is trickier to untangle. Nevertheless, let us consider the following evidence. First, lack of opposition towards coups d'etat, a hallmark of both the authoritarian profile and the military interventionist profile, subsided as an increasing number of Brazilians became presidentialists, i.e. they supported executive aggrandizement

but rejected military coups. This evidence is consistent with a winners' consent framework. Of course, these new presidentialists could just as easily have been Temer's allies – though he was famously unpopular – as scorned petistas who wished Rousseff had more power over an adversarial congress.

The evidence from the perfect storm period also comports with the thermostatic perspective's key prediction that a drop in democratic attitudes should precede a drop in levels of democracy. Indeed, a splintering of the ranks of institutionalist Brazilians from 2012 to 2014 preceded falling levels of V-Dem's Electoral and Liberal indexes of democracy from 2015, as depicted in Figures 11 and 12.

Figure 12. V-Dem's Liberal Component Index and its Subindexes

Source. V-Dem.

Note: 95 % confidence intervals excluded for ease of presentation. Compared to 2015, significant differences at the 95 % level emerged for the Liberal Component Index by 2018; for the Equality before the law and individual liberty index by 2019; and for the Legislative constraints on the executive index in 2019 and 2020. Judicial constraints do not differ significantly in this period.

Also suggestive of thermostatic dynamics are the growth in institutionalists and the decline in military interventionists and authoritarians from 2014 to 2017. That is, democratic erosion starting in 2015 was followed by Brazilians embracing democracy and rejecting bald-faced forms of authoritarianism. Although the growing ranks of presidentialists in this period tempers support for the thermostatic models, they compromised just 7 percent of the sample in 2017. Their continued growth in the era of democratic backsliding, described below, deserves more careful consideration.

In sum, all three analytic perspectives shed light on certain dynamics of democratic support during the perfect storm. Yet none alone is sufficient. Economic performance seems most plausible helpful between from 2012 to 2014, but winners' consent and, particularly, thermostatic models are most tenable from 2014 to 2017.

An instrumental performance perspective also receives partial support. The former might have predicted a rebound in institutionalists and a regression in authoritarians from 2014 to 2017 had all of the economic numbers pointed in the same direction. But they were quite mixed. GDP kept falling through 2017 and unemployment reached its local peak in 2017. Inflation, however, fell dramatically in 2017 and consumer confidence had begun to rebound. So while we cannot rule out the possibility that these latter indicators fueled more institutionalist support, languishing growth and unemployment rates do not permit a straightforward inference.

In sum, the dynamics of democratic support during the perfect storm period cannot easily be explained through any of these three analytic lenses.

5.3. Democratic Backsliding

The perfect storm precipitated a period of democratic backsliding. Although not pictured here, Brazil's V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index – a combination of the Electoral Democracy Index (in Figure 11) and Liberal Component Index (in Figure 12) experienced a statistically significant drop from 0.79 in 2014 to 0.70 in 2016. This is roughly the same level as Brazil's more troubled neighbors, Argentina and Peru. By 2018, the index declined even further, to 0.62, reaching a statistical tie with Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama. Yet an examination of democratic support profiles from the perfect storm period to the democratic backsliding period reveals a series of nuanced developments. From 2017 to 2019, the percentage of institutionalists declined 5 percentage points, to 52.4 percent. The percentage of military interventionists also declined, by 6 points, to 17.8 percent. Yet the percentage of presidentialists increased by almost 50 percent, or 4.1 percentage points, to 11.1 percent. Authoritarians, for their part, ballooned from 8 percent to 14.3 percent of Brazilians.

A strict performance-based perspective gives us little purchase on these dynamics. Although GDP growth had yet to return, the economy had stabilized by 2018. Unemployment peaked in 2017. Inflation ticked up from 2017 to 2018 but was near historic lows, and well below rates registered during the economic boomtimes. Consumer confidence was steadily trending up, and by December 2018 stood 47 percent higher than in December 2015. Such economic good news would be expected, in the instrumental model, to bolster support for democratic institutions. It did not.

In the wake of the perfect storm, it appeared that Bolsonaro's populist-nationalist rhetoric (Almeida, 2019; Borges and Rennó, 2021; Tamaki, Braga, and Fuks, 2021) and illiberal ideas resonated enough with Brazilians to win him the presidency (Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki, 2022). Bolsonaro's support could be attributable to changes in the public's democratic attitudes (Cohen *et al.*, 2022), the awakening of illiberal attitudes (Rennó, 2020; Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki, 2022), the activation of latent populist attitudes (Hawkins *et al.*, 2018; Fuks, Ribeiro and Borba, 2021; Paiva, Krause and Lameirão, 2016), or some blend of these explanations (e. g., Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert, 2020). We cannot fully assess these explanations here.

Overall, however, the growth of undemocratic attitudes is consistent with what Claassen (2020) calls a "backlash" —a reaction to a set of liberalizing policies, norms, and behaviors that increasingly menaced the privilege of a substantive, more conservative, segment of Brazilian society. This wave of illiberal attitudes coinciding with the rise of Bolsonaro, who openly attacked civil liberties, the separation of powers, and political and social tolerance on the campaign trail and while in office, is probably not a coincidence. While electoral and liberal democracy were already in retreat when Bolsonaro appeared on the scene, we suspect that this made democratic institutions an easier target for his attacks. Indeed, several V-Dem indices further eroded during his combative government, including government censorship, media self-censorship (Figure 11), and equality before the law and individual freedom (Figure 12).

Unfortunately, data limitations in the 2021 wave of the AmericasBarometer prevent us from adequately judging the flipside of Claassen's (2020) thermostatic proposition: that an expansion of illiberalism during the democratic backsliding period triggers a reverse backlash in which support for democracy grows. However, two pieces of evidence point in this direction. First, the continued rise in support for democratic inclusion (Figure 5) could be a leading indicator of a broader democratic reaction. Second, cluster analysis based on a reduced set of indicators suggest institutionalists rebounded in 2021 to comprise as much as 62.7 percent of the population; this would represent nearly a 15-percentage point increase over the early part of the perfect storm in 2014 (see Figure Appendix A5). While this result is suggestive, only time (and data) will tell whether we are witnessing a reverse backlash in defense of democracy.

6. CONCLUSION

Combining economic indicators, measures of democracy, and contextual information about the national politics of the last two decades, this work presents an overview of the dynamics of democratic in contemporary Brazil. It brings

evidence to bear on some of the most plausible explanations of the cross-sectional and temporal variation in democratic support in Brazil. It cannot, however, offer definitive conclusions given the small-n, macro-level, and longitudinal research design employed throughout this special issue. As such, the tentative inferences drawn here should not be taken as positive or dispositive of any of the three analytic perspectives we consider.

When we examine individual indicators of support for liberal democracy in Brazil, 2014 stands out as a watershed. Rates of support on each dimension reached their trough that year, except for stated support for democracy, which bottomed out in 2017. Similarly, all indicators except for support for democratic inclusion rose sharply in 2017 before again falling in 2019.

Despite this volatility, we found a prominent profile of institutionalists in Brazil that closely approximates that of an ideal-typical liberal democrats. Institutionalists ranged from 47 percent to 88 percent of the national sample in this period. The second-largest grouping was military interventionists, who varied between 18 percent and 32 percent, followed by authoritarians and presidentialists, who varied between 8 and 14 percent, and 4 and 11 percent, respectively.

The core of this study is an analysis of how these democratic profiles vary over three distinct periods of the recent Brazilian democratic history: boomtimes, characterized by economic expansion and good political performance of the federal government pre-2013; perfect storm, which comprises the troubled period from 2013 to the election of Bolsonaro in 2018; and democratic backsliding, marked by Bolsonaro's attacks on democratic norms and institutions.

Theories that emphasize economic and political performance help to explain the dynamics of support for democracy in the first two periods. The perfect storm period proved compatible with all three models of democratic support dynamics. But the instrumental economic performance perspective was wholly insufficient to explain the positive variations of indicators of democratic support during the democratic backsliding current period. Data from this period suggest a society divided between a group that reacts to former president Jair Bolsonaro's assaults on democracy and another group more loyal to illiberal forms of government.

We agree in principle that short-run democratic backsliding largely owes to elite decision-making (Haggard and Kaufman, 2020; Tai, Hu, and Solt, 2022; see also Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2014). Bolsonaro's unilateral actions in office were clearly aimed at, and succeeded in, damaging democratic institutions and norms. Even out of office, Bolsonaro continues to shape the thoughts and actions of millions of faithful followers. Therefore, we believe that illiberal shifts in the political context altered, at least initially, the distribution and the dynamics of democratic attitudes in Brazil in more illiberal directions. We cannot rule out, however, the possibility of the causal arrow running in both directions.

Based on these exploratory analyses, we make the following tentative conclusions. Brazilians' belief systems became less coherent in the wake of the perfect storm. Since then, Brazil appears to be a divided society, with pushback against democracy and an embrace of alternative government structures on the one hand and growing niches of democratic reaction on the other. Bolsonaro's election in 2018 includes a demand component. A right-wing electorate was greatly activated by the prominence of non-economic issues, such as the fight against crime, the rejection of the legalization of abortion, and the expansion of the rights of the LGBT+ community (Rennó, 2020). Associated with the growing widespread anti-partisanship and anti-PTism (Fuks, Ribeiro and Borba, 2021; Paiva, Krause and Lameirão, 2016), this demand for anti-system candidates connected to the extreme right is compatible with the movement observed in the democratic support clusters.

One worry is that the typical left-right cleavage is beginning to overlap with the pro-democracy/anti-democracy cleavage, which reinforces societal division. A fragile democratic tradition contributed to an instrumental withdrawal of loyalty to the regime in the perfect storm period, while recent institutional erosion during the democratic backsliding period could have sparked backlash to defending democracy. More research is needed to test whether and to what extent this conclusion accurately captures reality.

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APPENDIX

The table presents the questions used by LAPOP, as well as the original scales of the variables.

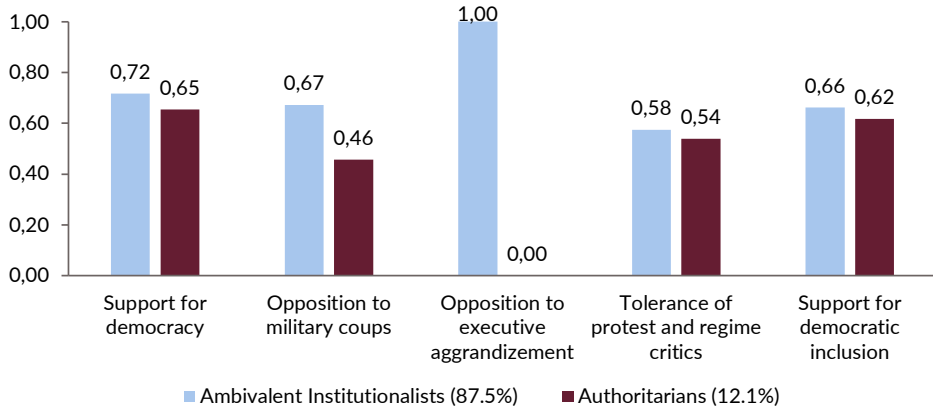### Table A1. Question Wordings and Variables used in Scales

Democratic Attitudes	Questions
Support for democracy	ING4. Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Response options: Seven-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree.
Opposition to military coups	Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified... JC10. When there is a lot of crime Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.
	Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified... JC13. When there is a lot of corruption Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.
Opposition to executive aggrandizement	JC15A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Legislative Assembly and govern without the Legislative Assembly? Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.
	JC16A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to dissolve the Supreme Court and govern without the Supreme Court? Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.
Tolerance of protest and regime critics	D1. There are people who only say bad things about the form of government of Brazil, 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. Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.

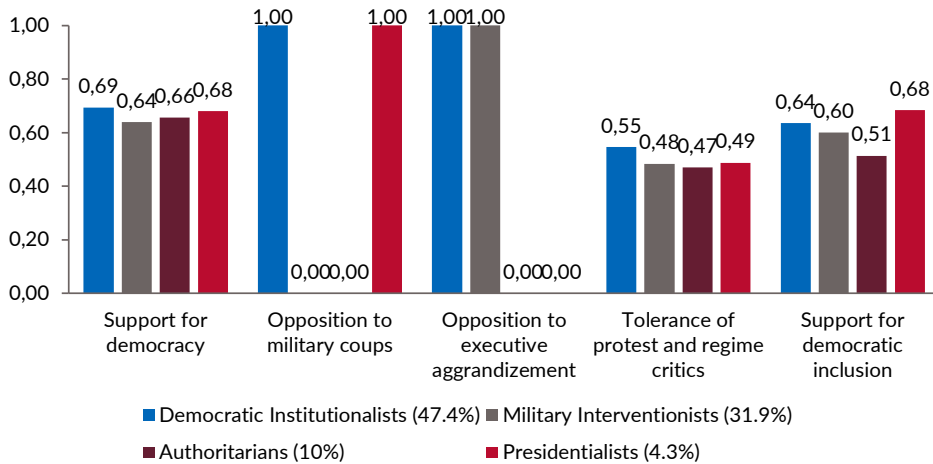| Democratic Attitudes	Questions
Tolerance of protest and regime critics	D2. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views? Please read me the number. Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.
	D3. Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the form of government of Brazil, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office? Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.
	D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches? Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.
Support for democratic inclusion	D5. And now, changing the topic and thinking of homosexuals, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of homosexuals being permitted to run for public office? Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.

Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

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 for each cluster. All attitude scores range from zero (least democratic) to one (most democratic). The percentages next to each clus-ter 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 demo-cratic attitudes and their relative size.
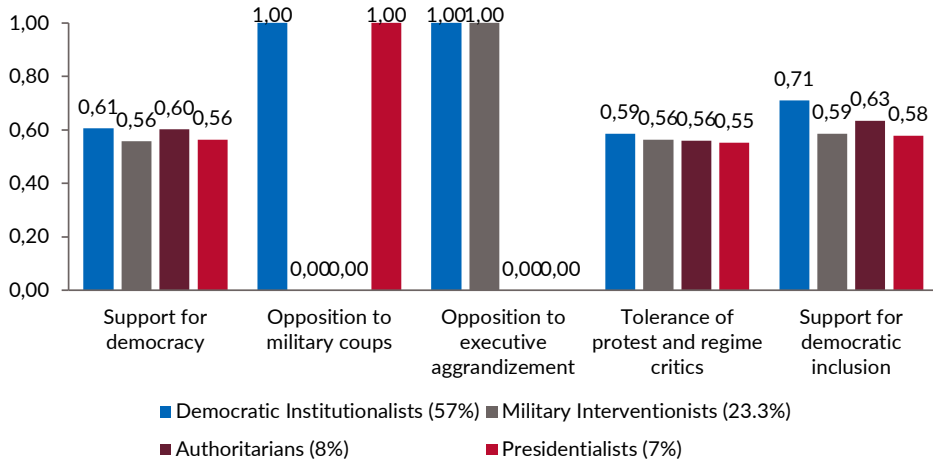
Figure A1: 2012 Cluster Results

Ambivalent Institutionalists (87.5%)   Authoritarians (12.1%)

Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Figure A2: 2014 Cluster Results

Democratic Institutionalists (47.4%)   Military Interventionists (31.9%)
Authoritarians (10%)   Presidentialists (4.3%)

Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Figure A3: 2017 Cluster Results

Democratic Institutionalists (57%) ■ Military Interventionists (23.3%)
Authoritarians (8%) ■ Presidentialists (7%)

Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Figure A4: 2019 Cluster Results

Institutionalists (52.4%) ■ Military Interventionists (17.8%)
Authoritarians (14.3%) ■ Presidentialists (11.1%)
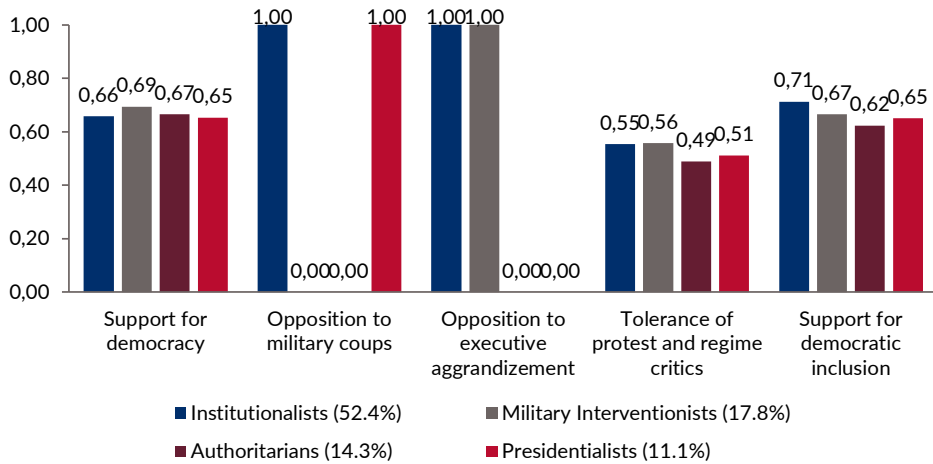
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

Figure A5: 2021 Cluster Results
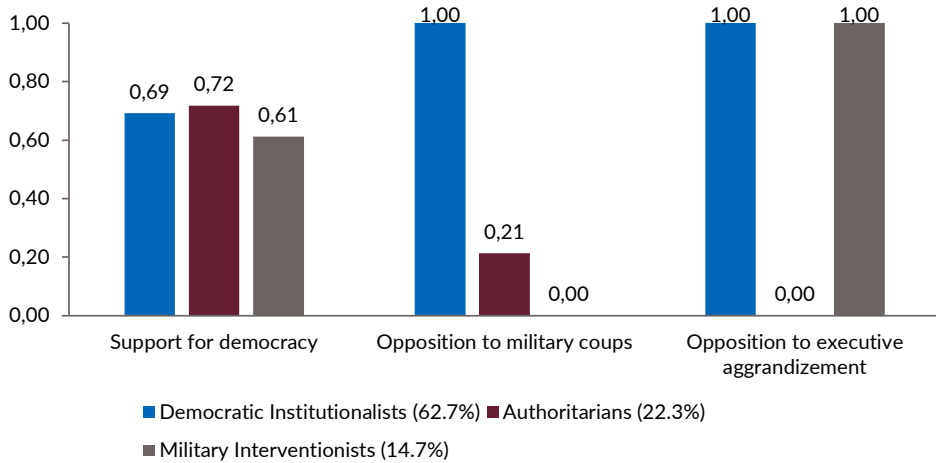
Source: LAPOP AmericasBarometer.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL:
A DESCRIPTIVE EXPLORATION

Ryan E. Carlin, Mário Fuks and Ednaldo Ribeiro

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