

IS DEMOCRACY IN PLAIN SIGHT? PRESIDENTIAL PERSONALISM AND PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT THE COUNTRY'S DEMOCRATIC STATUS*

¿Democracia a simple vista? Personalismo presidencial y estatus democrático del país en la opinión pública

A democracia está à vista de todos? Personalismo presidencial e a opinião pública sobre o status democrático do país

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Abstract

It is often assumed that people's beliefs about democracy are independent of their political motivations. Recent research, however, shows that partisan and political identities play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward democracy. This study argues that citizens who identify with a personalist president are more likely to perceive their country as a democracy. Personalist presidents legitimize their power and authority by appealing to their supposedly exceptional individual qualities and political skills. Their personalist style may thus enhance the sense of collective agency and inspire citizens to believe they live

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in a democracy—but only to a point. Strongly personalist presidents can exert the opposite influence. Drawing on representative surveys from twelve Latin American countries, the analysis indicates that voters are more likely to view their country as a democracy at moderate levels of personalism. Highly personalistic presidents tend to divide the electorate, with opposition voters becoming more skeptical about their country's democratic status. These findings suggest that personalistic presidents undermine democratic accountability by polarizing public opinion about democracy.

Palabras clave:

actitudes hacia la democracia; personalismo; legitimación; votantes ganadores-perdedores; retroceso democrático

Resumen

A menudo se asume que las creencias sobre la democracia son independientes de las motivaciones políticas. Investigaciones recientes demuestran, en cambio, que las identidades partidistas y políticas desempeñan un papel crucial en la formación de actitudes hacia la democracia. Este estudio argumenta que los ciudadanos que se identifican con un presidente personalista son más propensos a percibir su país como una democracia. Los presidentes personalistas legitiman su autoridad apelando a sus supuestas cualidades extraordinarias y su estilo puede acentuar el sentido de agencia colectiva. Así, la gente puede sentirse más inclinada a pensar que su país es una democracia—pero sólo hasta cierto punto. Los presidentes demasiado personalistas pueden provocar la reacción opuesta. Un análisis de encuestas representativas de doce países latinoamericanos muestra que los votantes son más propensos a percibir su país como una democracia hasta un nivel moderado de personalismo presidencial. Los presidentes muy personalistas polarizan la opinión pública, y los votantes de la oposición se vuelven más escépticos sobre el estatus democrático de su país. Estos hallazgos sugieren que los presidentes personalistas pueden socavar la rendición de cuentas democrática al polarizar la opinión pública en torno a la democracia.

Palavras-chave:

atitudes em relação à democracia; personalismo; legitimização; disparidade entre vencedores e perdedores; retrocesso democrático

Resumo

Frequentemente, presume-se que as crenças das pessoas sobre a democracia sejam independentes de suas motivações políticas. Pesquisas recentes, no entanto, mostram que as identidades partidárias e políticas desempenham um papel crucial na formação de atitudes em relação à democracia. Este estudo argumenta que cidadãos que se identificam com um presidente personalista são mais propensos a perceber seu país como uma democracia. Presidentes personalistas legitimam seu poder e autoridade apelando para suas supostas qualidades individuais excepcionais e habilidades políticas. Seu estilo personalista pode, portanto, aumentar o senso de agência coletiva e inspirar os cidadãos a acreditarem que vivem em uma democracia — mas apenas até certo ponto. Presidentes fortemente personalistas podem exercer a influência oposta. Com base em pesquisas representativas de doze países da América Latina, a análise indica que os eleitores são mais propensos a ver seu país como uma democracia em níveis moderados de personalismo. Presidentes altamente personalistas tendem a dividir o eleitorado, com os eleitores da oposição tornando-se mais céticos quanto ao status democrático de seu país. Essas descobertas sugerem que presidentes personalistas minam a responsabilidade democrática ao polarizar a opinião pública sobre a democracia.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to certain leaders, some Latin American countries are enjoying an unprecedented democratic revival. Take, for instance, Nayib Bukele's triumphal speech to a jubilant crowd on the night of the 2024 presidential election: "On this day, El Salvador has broken every record from all democracies in the history of the World"¹. Bukele was boasting about the vote share that secured him reelection, which he took as a signal of a "true democracy" (*democracia verdadera*). Or take Claudia Sheinbaum, who claimed that Mexico became the "most democratic country in the world" after the general election to implement the judiciary reform on June 1, 2025, which mandated that judges and magistrates be selected by popular vote.² Or take, indeed, Nicolás Maduro's assertion that "democracy is a priority" in Venezuela, after being sworn in again as president in January 2025. Maduro described Venezuela as a model country of "civism, union, and transparency, where the people define the nation's path"³.

Yet despite these leaders' emphatic assertions, democracy in Latin America is far from thriving. For almost two decades, most democracies in the region have either stagnated or endured backsliding or authoritarian transitions (Mainwaring & Pérez Liñán, 2023). Neither El Salvador, Mexico, nor Venezuela was a flourishing democracy at the time of these declarations. On the contrary, Nicolás Maduro's reelection confirmed Venezuela's status as a full-fledged autocracy amidst extensive evidence of electoral fraud (Corrales & Kronick, 2025)⁴. Similarly, Nayib Bukele's reelection strengthened electoral autocracy in El Salvador (Wolf, 2024), and when Sheinbaum celebrated the election of judges and magistrates, Mexico was arguably close to completing a transition to electoral autocracy (Aguilar Aguilar *et al.*, 2025).

The mismatch between these presidents' claims and the actual state of democracy in their country is thus remarkable. The question is whether voters believe in such a form of democratic triumphalism. Do they perceive their country

1 See the Secretaría de Prensa de la Presidencia <<https://x.com/SecPrensaSV/status/1754606836852875408>>; or President Bukele's speech: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLeuW6FW1HE>> [Access date: October 6, 2025.]

2 Anayeli Tapia, "Claudia Sheinbaum tras la primera elección presidencial: 'Mexico es el país más democrático del mundo'", *Infobae*. June 1, 2025. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2025/06/02/claudia-sheinbaum-tras-la-primer-a-eleccion-judicial-mexico-es-el-pais-mas-democratico-del-mundo/> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLeuW6FW1HE>. [Access date: October 6, 2025.]

3 "Presidente Maduro reafirma la prioridad de la democracia en Venezuela", *Ciudad CCS*, May 27, 2025. Available at: <https://www.ciudadccs.info/index.php/publicacion/30781-presidente-maduro-reafirma-la-prioridad-de-la-democracia-en-venezuela>. [Access date: October 6, 2025.]

4 Nicolás Maduro was de facto removed from power and detained by the United States of America on January 3, 2026.

as a democracy? To what extent are voters' beliefs influenced by the political rhetoric and legitimation strategies used by charismatic but illiberal executives? In this article, I examine the relationship between personalism as a form of political legitimation and people's belief that their country is a democracy. The argument I put forward is that personalist presidents make it more likely that citizens consider their political system a democracy. However, rather than assuming this relationship follows a linear pattern, I advance an alternative explanation drawing on research on presidential powers and support for democratic regimes (Singh & Carlin, 2015).

Personalism is a political legitimation strategy that justifies the leader's right to rule on the basis of their own allegedly exceptional individual virtues and attributes (Brunkert & von Soest, 2023; Tannenber *et al.*, 2021). Presidential personalism should motivate people to believe that their interests and demands are represented by the incumbent government, and many would thus view the system as "more democratic". In this manner, moderately personalistic leaders should motivate citizens to perceive their country as more democratic than non-personalistic presidents. However, when the executive becomes almost exclusively personalistic, the gap between incumbent and opposition voters should increase. The president's supporters are expected to continue believing in the country's democratic status, while the opposition's supporters are expected to drastically change their views.

To test these expectations, I draw on representative surveys from 12 Latin American countries. This is a sample of countries that illustrates the often complex and contradictory political dynamics in Latin America (Levitsky, 2018; Mainwaring & Pérez Liñan, 2023), a region that encompasses both democracies and autocracies, stable regimes and backsliding systems, as well as charismatic and populist leaders. The findings indicate that personalistic presidents tend to make citizens more confident in their country's democratic status. After all, voters value presidents who are capable and inspiring leaders. Thus, relative to non-personalist presidents, incumbent and opposition voters alike are more likely to perceive their country as a democracy at moderate levels of personalism. However, when the president is a strongly personalist leader, democratic assessments diverge. The president's supporters are more confident than opposition voters that their country is a democracy. Strongly personalistic presidents, therefore, tend to increase the divide between the incumbent's voters and those of the party opposition.

These findings are based on cross-sectional survey data and a small sample of countries, and further research is needed to corroborate the results. Nonetheless, the findings are relevant for several reasons. The analysis focuses on a scarcely explored topic: public opinion regarding the democratic status of their country. Asking people whether they believe their country is a democracy complements current research on support for or satisfaction with democracy by underscoring

citizens' factual assessments about their political regime. Second, by asking people about their country's democratic status, this study contributes to an ongoing research agenda about the role of partisan and politically motivated reasoning on democratic assessments. If people's commitment to or evaluations of democracy are influenced by their political beliefs or identities rather than by, say, democracy's values or the actual quality of the regime's democracy, it becomes harder to hold incumbents or parties accountable for their democratic transgressions.

This article also contributes to the study of the influence of political motivations on democratic assessments by addressing a crucial topic in Latin American politics: the impact of strong, charismatic executives on the stability and quality of democracy (Frantz *et al.*, 2021). There is already a thriving body of scholarship on how populist and power-grabbing executives in Latin America are dividing democratic assessments and regime support in a manner that serves their undemocratic agendas (Bessen, 2024; Bohigues & Sendra, 2026; Cella *et al.*, 2025; Cohen *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, as already noted, personalistic presidents may claim that the regime is more democratic than ever under their watch, even if the opposite is true. If most citizens are ready to reject these claims, they could resist and promote democratic resilience (Gamboa, 2022; Lührmann, 2021). On the contrary, if a substantial share of the voters chooses to trust the executive, they probably lend popular legitimacy to the regime's overhaul (Bessen, 2024; Bohigues & Sendra, 2026; Cella *et al.*, 2025; Cohen *et al.*, 2022; Singer, 2018). The evidence presented in this article suggests that strong personalistic presidents may be able to avoid and subvert democratic accountability by polarizing public opinion about the democratic status of their country.

2. TAKE A GUESS: IS THIS COUNTRY A DEMOCRACY?

It should be fairly straightforward for people to recognize whether their country is a democracy, as it basically entails ascertaining a matter of fact. People may have a more or less sophisticated understanding of democracy or may be more or less committed to the values and institutions of this regime. In any case, they should produce accurate assessments most of the time, provided that they are motivated to stay true to the facts and rely on the relevant evidence (Druckman, 2012, pp. 200-202; Taber & Lodge, 2012, p. 159). However, some citizens might be inclined to believe their country is a democracy when it is not, or, conversely, perceive it as an authoritarian regime when it is a democracy, even if a weak or uneven one.

Why does it matter? Citizens' attitudes toward democracy are an essential component of political support (Norris, 2017). Theories of political culture have long considered support for democracy's core values and institutions a crucial

factor in regime stability (Booth & Seligson, 2009; Claassen, 2020; Mauk, 2020). There is also extensive scholarship focused on satisfaction with democracy (Singh & Mayne, 2023), an outcome of regime performance that might promote further democratization driven by “dissatisfied democrats” (Klingemann, 2014). More recently, an increasing body of research has been analyzing how people’s attitudes toward democracy interact with incumbent-driven democratic backsliding (Ahmed, 2023; Wunsch *et al.*, 2022). As the comparative literature shows, the most common path of democratic breakdown is the gradual dismantling of the regime’s core institutions (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Thus, one of the central questions in current research on comparative political behavior is about the role that people’s attitudes toward democracy play in defending democracy or facilitating autocratization.

In this scenario, whether people believe their regime is a democracy or not could be highly consequential. Citizens’ ability to defend democracy may depend on their ability to identify opportunities to strengthen democracy or threats to the regime’s principles and institutions. They should be able to punish or reward their representatives for their behavior toward democracy (Little *et al.*, 2022; Svolik, 2020). Yet deciding whether the political system is a democracy requires an informed judgment about what democracy is. However, people’s attitudes toward democracy are often shaped by limited information and inconsistent beliefs. Many people tend to have incoherent or inconsistent understandings of democracy (Carlin & Singer, 2011; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007), and sometimes could perceive certain authoritarian norms or behaviors as democratic, or vice versa (Kirsch & Welzel, 2018; Shin & Kim, 2018). The different conceptions, and even misunderstandings, of democracy in public opinion are often compounded by inadequate conceptualization and measurement strategies—public opinion surveys should properly reflect the conceptual structure of democracy while gauging people’s understanding of democracy (Claassen *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, for many people, distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic regimes could be demanding. Democracy is a *polyarchy*, a political system that realizes the ideal of a government responsive to the people through universal suffrage, free and fair elections, freedoms of political expression and association, and the right to access alternative sources of information (Coppedge *et al.*, 2020; Dahl, 1971; Munck, 2023; Teorell *et al.*, 2019). No political regime can be considered a democracy unless it is, first and foremost, a polyarchy or an “electoral democracy”. However, democracies differ significantly in their institutional features and performance, and some may appear less democratic than others. In addition, some democracies might be experiencing backsliding, and the line between democracy and non-democracy can become blurred. Some regimes may display the typical institutions of democratic rule—such as universal suffrage, political parties, and elections—but fail to meet basic standards of political fairness or civil liberties.

Electoral autocracies, in particular, use the institutional framework of liberal and electoral democracies as a façade to justify authoritarian rule (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013).

In summary, deciding on the country's democratic status may seem straightforward, but it still requires analyzing and balancing complex information. This is why citizens might resort to their political attachments and identities to guide their judgment. While it is often assumed that citizens are motivated to verify the accuracy of their opinions and beliefs, a growing body of research indicates that they are usually less inclined to seek reliable information and update their beliefs than to let their existing political views guide their judgment (Ditto *et al.*, 2025). Indeed, citizens' political beliefs and attachments significantly influence how they receive and interpret new information (Taber & Lodge, 2012). When presented with evidence that conflicts with their beliefs, they may be reluctant to change their views if doing so entails revising their political identity and commitments (Bayes *et al.*, 2020; Druckman, 2012). In other words, politically motivated reasoning may lead some citizens to believe that their country is a democracy when it is not or to regard a democratic regime as authoritarian if this better aligns with their political preferences (Krishnarajan, 2023).

3. PRESIDENTIAL PERSONALISM AND REGIME ASSESSMENTS

The argument in this research is that personalistic presidents are crucial in shaping citizens' beliefs about their country's democratic status. Personalism is a strategy of political legitimation, an ideal type of the claims rulers use to justify their power and authority (Tannenberg *et al.*, 2021). Drawing on Max Weber's types of domination and other sources, Tannenberg *et al.* (2021) distinguish among legal-rational, personalistic ("person of the leader"), ideological, and performance-based legitimacy claims that both democratic and non-democratic authorities use to seek compliance and cooperation. Specifically, the "person of the leader" legitimation strategy is "based on the extraordinary, supernatural, or exceptional qualities of an individual leader" (Tannenberg *et al.*, 2021, p. 80). Note that personalistic legitimation should be distinguished from populism, a Manichean discourse about the moral battle between "the People" and the "elites" (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). While many populist leaders are also characteristically personalistic (Weyland, 2017), these attributes are conceptually distinct and should be kept separate to assess their consequences on democratic politics (Hawkins & Mitchell, 2025).

Personalism is becoming an increasingly relevant force. According to Frantz *et al.* (2021), personalistic politics has been growing over the past few decades, increasing the likelihood of populism, political polarization, and democratic erosion.

In a recent study involving 164 countries worldwide, Brunkert and von Soest (2023), find that leaders who appeal to their exceptional individual qualities and their bond with the common people tend to weaken constraints on the executive and undermine horizontal accountability. Latin America has long been fertile soil for personalist politics, amid weak party-system institutionalization, poor programmatic structuration, party-brand dilution, or party-system collapse (Lupu, 2014; Mainwaring, 2018; Seawright, 2012). Strong, charismatic leaders have often been associated with political instability and democratic backsliding in the region (O'Donnell, 1994; Weyland, 2001). For instance, Levitsky and Loxton (2013) show that personalistic populist leaders are key to explaining the emergence of competitive authoritarianism. Pérez-Liñán *et al.* (2019) find that presidential hegemony is crucial to explaining democratic stability in Latin America between 1925 and 2016. In the same vein, Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid (2020) provide evidence that personalistic presidents who dominate their own weakly organized parties are likely to concentrate power, undermine horizontal accountability, and limit the rule of law.

If personalistic presidents strive to concentrate power and undermine democratic governance by appealing to their exceptional leadership attributes, under what conditions are voters willing to accept those claims and confer legitimacy to those leaders? I argue that voters are more likely to perceive their country as a democracy when they believe that personalist presidents represent their political preferences and interests. This is in line with Singer's (2018, 2021) theory of political delegation of power to the executive, which explains why voters and legislators alike are willing to tolerate executive aggrandizement and democratic subversion. As the evidence indicates, those who believe they are better off with the incumbent government should support actions and behaviors that reinforce that position. When it comes to democracy, citizens' views will become "politically motivated" by their identification with the sitting executive.

The relationship between presidential personalism and public opinion on democracy would normally be expected to follow a linear pattern, with citizens becoming more likely to believe their country is a democracy as presidential personalism becomes more accentuated. Yet, following Singh and Carlin's (2015) research on the relationship between presidential power and democratic regime support, I advance an alternative explanation. Singh and Carlin (2015) argue that voters prefer presidents with moderate lawmaking powers and legislative success. Feeble executives are often paralyzed by legislative gridlocks and impasses, thus failing to advance policy change and perform their representative role. Conversely, a too-strong president might enact change but also avoid accountability, leaving voters feeling that they have little to no control over the policymaking process. Instead, presidents with moderate legislative power and success increase voters' sense of collective agency and accountability. Then, leveraging up to 142

Latinobarometro surveys conducted from 1995 to 2005 across 18 Latin American countries, Singh and Carlin (2015) assess the impact of the president's legislative powers, political constraints on the executive, and the president's legislative success on both support for and satisfaction with democracy. Their findings corroborate the theory that support for democratic regimes peaks when presidents have moderate legislative power and success.

Along the same line, I argue that personalism inspires feelings of representation and collective agency in the electorate, but only to a certain point. Voters prefer leaders who show the skills and abilities required to perform and deliver, but not necessarily leaders over whom they have little to no influence. To that extent, voters' perception that their country is a democracy is expected to peak at moderate levels of presidential personalism. Therefore, the first hypothesis reads like this:

H1. Citizens are more likely to perceive their country as a democracy at moderate levels of presidential personalism.

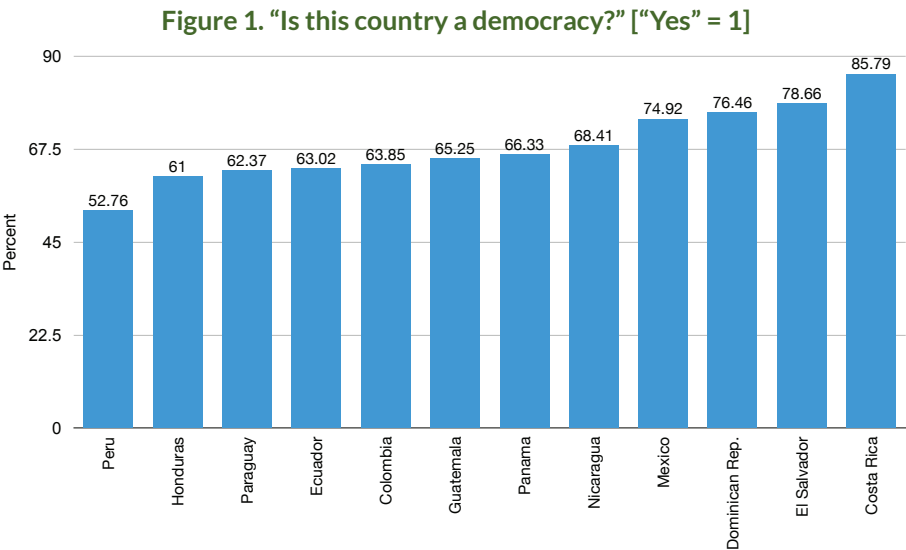
Personalistic presidents are often illiberal leaders who strive to persuade citizens to trust their rule while overlooking the piecemeal yet progressive subversion of democratic institutions. They rarely attack democracy in the abstract or declare their intention to establish a dictatorship, and are more likely to present themselves as champions of some sort of "true democracy" (Cella *et al.*, 2025). What gives away their authoritarian leanings is their unwillingness to play by the rules—they disrespect democratic norms and procedures, viewing opposition as illegitimate. In these circumstances, compared to moderately personalistic presidents, strong personalism might drive public opinion apart. When a personalistic leader is in power, those who voted for the president may overestimate the system's democratic status, while those identified with the opposition may be convinced of the opposite.

Recent studies conducted in Latin America have shown that voters' identification with the incumbent president is associated with attitudes that support executive expansion or tolerance for anti-democratic behavior (Cohen *et al.*, 2022; Singer, 2018). For instance, the perception of civil liberties is larger among the president's supporters in countries where democracy has already been eroded (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2020). Identification with the government is also associated with greater support for the regime and backing for the expansion of the executive branch, particularly when presidents justify their actions using populist rhetoric (Bessen, 2024; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2021). Accordingly, extreme personalistic leaders are expected to polarize public opinion, sharply dividing incumbent and opposition voters. The second hypothesis is this:

H2. The gap between incumbent and opposition voters regarding the belief that the country is a democracy is expected to widen at higher levels of presidential personalism.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

To test the hypotheses, I leverage data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project's AmericasBarometer surveys (LAPOP Lab, 2023). It is still not very common for cross-national representative surveys to ask people about the democratic status of their country. A valuable exception is the 2023 AmericasBarometer, which included the following question: "DEM30: In your opinion, is (country) a democracy?". The dependent variable, *democratic status*, is thus a binary indicator, taking the value of 1 when respondents say "Yes" and 0 when they answer "No". The dependent variable was measured in only twelve countries: Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and the Dominican Republic. In Nicaragua, it was fielded as PN5: "In your opinion, is Nicaragua a very democratic country, somewhat democratic, not very democratic, or not at all democratic?". In this case, the first three options were coded as 1, as they recognize some degree of democracy in the country. Only the fourth option was coded as 0 (zero). Figure 1 shows that Costa Rica is the country



Source: The AmericasBarometer 2023 survey by LAPOP. Percentages account for the survey design according to TheAmericasBarometer guidelines (LAPOP Lab, 2023).

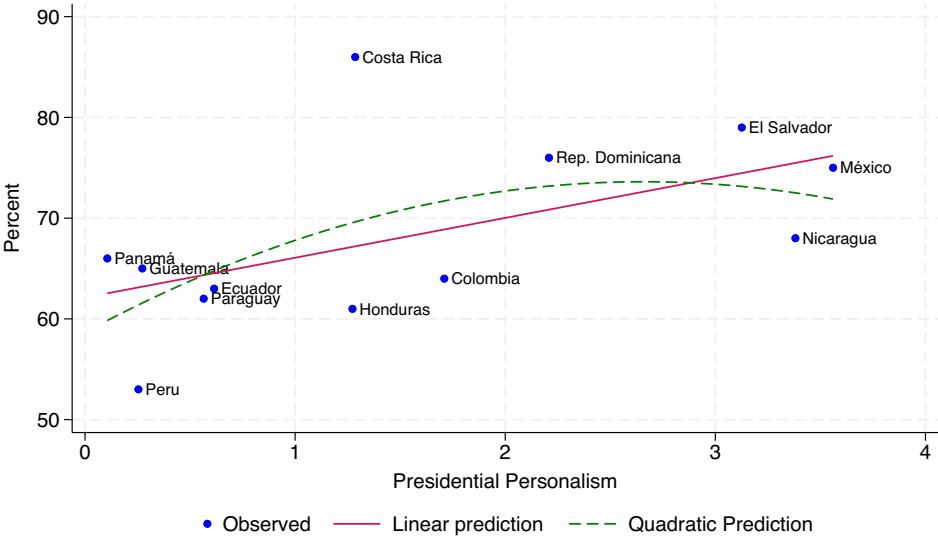
where 85 % of the voting-age population believes their country is a democracy, while only 52.76 % in Peru have a similar opinion about their political system. All the other nations in the sample are located between these two countries.

At the individual level, the independent variable measures voters' identification with the incumbent government by asking respondents which candidate they endorsed in the most recent presidential election. In countries with two-round elections, respondents are asked about their first-round choice. Based on the candidate list provided by TheAmericasBarometer questionnaire, voters are then classified as "incumbent voters" if they voted for the candidate who won the election and "opposition voters" if they chose one of the losing candidates. Therefore, *electoral choice*, the individual-level independent variable, is based on the "winning" and "losing voters" gap. In this study, the terms "winning voters", "incumbent voters", and "government voters" are used interchangeably, as well as "losers" and "opposition voters". This variable also encompasses two residual categories: "blank/null vote" and "abstention", which include voters who canceled their ballot, voted for "others", turned out to vote but did not recall for whom, or simply said they did not vote on election day. These categories are shown in the results but are not discussed in the analysis. Table A5 in the Appendix shows the differences between incumbent and opposition supporters across the countries in the sample.

On the other hand, the regime-level independent variable is *presidential personalism*, measured using V-Dem, v15's "v2exl_legitlead" variable. Presidential personalism gauges strategies of political legitimation centered on the "person of the leader", defined as claims that the president is endowed with extraordinary personal qualities and/or leadership skills (Tannenbergh *et al.*, 2020). According to Coppedge *et al.* (2025b), these extraordinary personal qualities include being recognized as "father or mother of the nation, exceptionally heroic, moral, pious, or wise, or any other extraordinary attribute valued by society". The v2exl_legitlead variable gauges how much the country's chief executive is endowed with such extraordinary attributes. The response options are as follows: 0: "Not at all", 1: "To a small extent", 2: "To some extent, but it is not the most important component", 3: "To a large extent but not exclusively", and 4: "Almost exclusively". In the following, I retain the original measurement scale (0-4), but note that the v2exl_legitlead variable was rendered continuous by the V-Dem v15 measurement model.

In the sample of countries, strongly personalistic presidents are found in El Salvador (Nayib Bukele = 3.12), Mexico (Andrés Manuel López Obrador = 3.56), and Nicaragua (Daniel Ortega = 3.38). As an illustration, Figure 2 shows the percentage of people who perceive their political system as a democracy across Latin American nations, mapped onto the full range of scores on the presidential personalism variable. The descriptive data in Figure 2 suggest a positive linear relationship between presidential personalism and the perception that each country is a democracy. Figure 2 also suggests a slightly non-linear, quadratic relationship fits the data.

**Figure 2. “This Country is a Democracy”:
Regime Assessments and Presidential Personalism**



Source: The AmericasBarometer 2023 survey by LAPOP and V-Dem Project v15. Percentages account for the survey design according to TheAmericasBarometer guidelines (LAPOP Lab, 2023).

To conduct the analysis, I resort to a multilevel modelling strategy. Multilevel modeling is recommended primarily when the number of system-level units is sufficiently large to produce stable and unbiased country-level estimates (Bryan & Jenkins, 2015). Nevertheless, even 10 or, as in this case, 12 second-level units could provide stable and reliable estimations (Stegmueller, 2013). The dependent variable, *democratic status*, is a binary measure, so I use multilevel logistic regression models to test the hypotheses. At the individual level, all models control for respondents' sociodemographic characteristics—sex, age, educational level, and urban or rural residence—as well as for two key predictors of regime support. The first measures ego-tropic economic evaluations (*personal economy*), a key predictor of voters' electoral choices and attitudes toward democracy (Singer, 2018; Singer & Carlin, 2013)—the sociotropic alternative was not included in all the countries in the sample. The second, *interest in politics*, is also a crucial determinant of political behavior (Robison, 2017). To control for the possibility that voters do not recall with sufficient precision whom they voted for, I included an additional variable measuring the number of months elapsed since the last presidential election. The results remain the same even when other individual-level controls are introduced.

See the Appendix for question wording, variable measurement, and descriptive statistics.

At the system level, I control for each country's economy by applying a log transformation to its per capita Gross Domestic Product in 2015 US dollars. I also introduced V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy) (Coppedge *et al.*, 2025a) as a regime-level control variable. The Electoral Democracy Index maps Robert Dahl's concept of *polyarchy* onto a scale from 0 to 1. The strongest electoral democracy in the sample is Costa Rica (0.86). In turn, El Salvador (0.38) and Nicaragua (0.16) were both well below the 0.5 cut-point. Both were classified as electoral autocracies in 2023 under the *Regimes of the World* typology. (Lührmann *et al.*, 2018). It could be even argued that Nicaragua, much like Venezuela, was already a full-blown dictatorship (Thaler & Mosinger, 2022).

It should be underscored from the outset that the small sample of countries in a single survey wave is one of the most important limitations of this study. In these circumstances, it might be difficult to claim that the findings are valid beyond the countries included in the analysis. As already noted, this limitation stems from the use of a dependent variable measured only across 12 Latin American countries. And yet, such a limitation could be overcome by selecting another indicator of democratic support or assessment. This would allow leveraging the wide temporal and geographical coverage available from both TheAmericasBarometer and the V-Dem Project. This would also, however, shift the study's substantive focus. Rather than inquiring whether people regard their country as a democracy or not, the study would assess, say, whether people support democracy or are satisfied with the regime's performance, which are substantively different questions. For instance, people can support, oppose, or remain indifferent towards democracy (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2019; Subinas & García-Rendón, 2025), while still recognizing the democratic status of their country. Likewise, aside from their commitment to democratic norms, people can be deeply dissatisfied with the regime's performance and nevertheless acknowledge that the country is a democracy.

Thus, in this case, there seems to be a trade-off between addressing a relatively understudied yet relevant question with a limited dataset or leveraging comprehensive datasets to tackle equally important but distinct questions. The second alternative provides more analytical leverage, but also risks shifting new research towards questions for which there is already enough data. This study took the first path. As the analysis below should illustrate, inquiring whether a certain country is a democracy provides distinctive analytical leverage for examining how political motivations influence regime assessments.

5. RESULTS

A large majority of citizens in the Latin American countries included in the analysis believe that they live in a democracy (68.2 %). Several nations in the region also are—and have been—home to characteristically charismatic and personalistic presidents. Now, the question is, do personalistic executives motivate citizens to believe that their regime is a democracy to a greater extent than leaders who are less prone to legitimize their rule in personalistic terms? The argument developed in this study is that personalistic presidents tend to motivate voters to believe they live in a democracy, but only to a certain extent, and not in the same way for different groups of voters. The empirical test of this argument is shown in Table 1, in models M3 and M4, which examine hypotheses H1 and H2, respectively. I will address M1 and M2 later in the discussion.

Table 1. Presidential personalism, electoral choice, and public opinion about the country's democratic status. Dependent variable: "Is this country a democracy?" ("Yes" =1, "No" =0)

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Electoral Choice (Base: Voted for Incumbent)				
Voted for Opposition	-0.128 [0.139]	0.221 [0.170]	-0.128 [0.139]	0.120 [0.224]
Blank/Null vote	-0.465*** [0.136]	-0.195 [0.163]	-0.464*** [0.135]	-0.191 [0.216]
Abstained	-0.141 [0.102]	0.188 [0.119]	-0.143 [0.101]	0.218 [0.150]
Presidential Personalism	0.211** [0.076]	0.354*** [0.106]	0.867*** [0.203]	0.987*** [0.261]
Presidential Personalism × Opposition		-0.277** [0.089]		-0.033 [0.258]
Presidential Personalism × Blank/Null		-0.215 [0.131]		-0.221 [0.335]
Presidential Personalism × Abstained		-0.227** [0.073]		-0.290 [0.196]

ALEJANDRO MONSIVÁIS CARRILLO
IS DEMOCRACY IN PLAIN SIGHT? PRESIDENTIAL PERSONALISM AND PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT
THE COUNTRY'S DEMOCRATIC STATUS

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Presidential Personalism ²			-0.211*** [0.059]	-0.205** [0.077]
Presidential Personalism ² × Opposition				-0.075 [0.074]
Presidential Personalism ² × Blank/ Null				0.001 [0.105]
Presidential Personalism ² × Abstained				0.018 [0.061]
Electoral Democracy Index	0.053 [0.398]	-0.199 [0.398]	-2.003*** [0.519]	-2.247*** [0.435]
Months since the election	-0.003 [0.005]	-0.005 [0.005]	-0.003 [0.004]	-0.005 [0.004]
Personal economy	0.563*** [0.101]	0.536*** [0.095]	0.565*** [0.101]	0.539*** [0.094]
Political interest	0.441*** [0.061]	0.434*** [0.060]	0.442*** [0.060]	0.434*** [0.059]
Sex (Base: Female): Male	0.051 [0.030]	0.052 [0.030]	0.052 [0.030]	0.053 [0.030]
No identification	0.047 [0.759]	0.038 [0.764]	0.043 [0.758]	0.031 [0.760]
Years of age	0.001 [0.002]	0.001 [0.002]	0.001 [0.002]	0.001 [0.002]
Education level	-0.154*** [0.031]	-0.154*** [0.032]	-0.154*** [0.031]	-0.154*** [0.031]
Urban location	0.146*** [0.039]	0.153*** [0.038]	0.147*** [0.039]	0.152*** [0.038]
Ln (GDP/Per capita)	0.457*** [0.133]	0.501*** [0.141]	0.892*** [0.204]	0.939*** [0.195]
Constant	-3.240** [1.141]	-3.601** [1.195]	-6.067*** [1.485]	-6.449*** [1.455]
Var. Country	0.052* [0.024]	0.050* [0.024]	0.034 [0.019]	0.030 [0.018]

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Log Likelihood	-8,047.103	-8,023.911	-8,044.768	-8,019.346
AIC	16118.21	16,069.82	16,111.54	16,060.69
BIC	16209.23	16,153.26	16,194.97	16,144.13
Observations (individuals)=	14,547	14,547	14,394	14,547
Number of Countries=	12	12	12	12

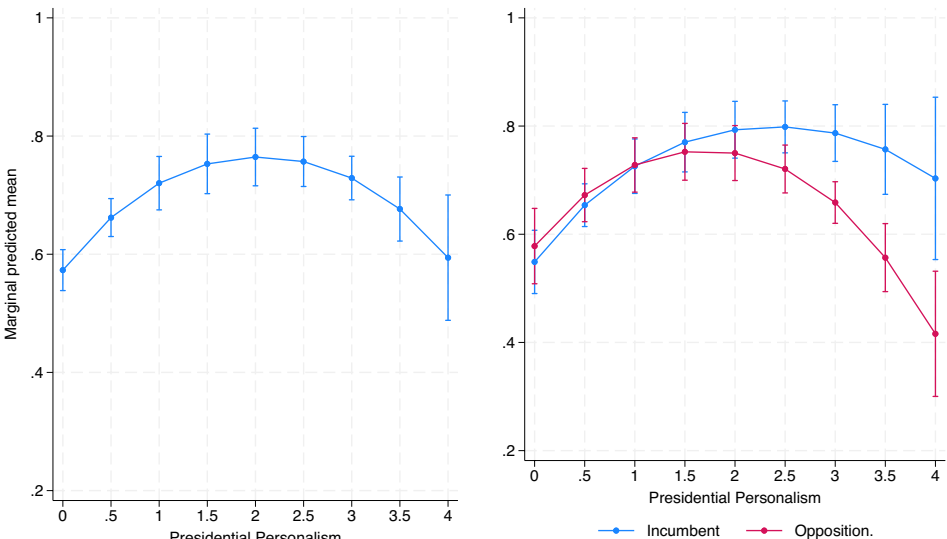
Multilevel logistic regression models. Individual and system-level control variables are included but not shown. Robust standard errors in brackets. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

The first hypothesis (H1) posits a non-linear relationship between presidential personalism and people’s assessments of democracy. The expectation is that a moderate level of presidential personalism predicts a higher percentage of people perceiving their country as a democracy than when presidents who extol their leadership and personal virtues either too strongly or too weakly. Model M3 tests this expectation by introducing the squared transformation of presidential personalism in the analysis. The results are congruent with the hypothesis. People are more likely to perceive their nation as a democracy as presidential personalism increases, but only up to a point, which coincides with a moderate level of personalism in the executive. As shown in Figure 4, from 57 % (95 % Confidence Interval: 54-61 %) when presidents are not personalistic at all, the percentage of voters persuaded to live in a democracy rises to 76 % (95 % CI: 71-81 %) when presidents are only moderately personalistic. Then, as the personalistic style becomes dominant, the number of people who perceive their regime as democratic decreases. At the extreme of presidential personalism, only 59 % (95 % CI: 40-70 %) is expected to describe their political system as democratic.

The data thus indicates that moderately personalistic executives are more likely to induce citizens to have a favorable view of their political system. The next hypothesis addresses the different responses from government and opposition voters to personalistic presidents. In line with hypothesis H2, the non-linear relationship between personalism and the belief that the country is democratic is expected to differ depending on whether voters support the sitting executive. The results shown in M4 provide additional evidence that the relationship between personalism and the outcome variable is non-linear. As the right-side panel in Figure 3 illustrates, among government supporters, trust in the democratic status of their nation increases with personalistic presidents—from 55 to 80 %—, but then halts and begins to decline around the 2.5 score on the personalistic legitimatation scale. Incumbent voters seem driven to believe their country is a democracy

until the president becomes more than a moderate personalistic leader. Despite the downward shift, 70 % of the government voters are still expected to believe their country is a democracy when the president is a strongly personalistic leader. Moreover, the upper limit of the confidence interval still indicates that 85 % of the incumbent's voters view their country as a democracy, corroborating that even at extreme levels of personalism, there is a substantial majority of presidential voters who are persuaded of their nation's democratic status.

Figure 3. Presidential Personalism, Electoral Choice, and the Country's Democratic Status



Dependent variable: "Is this country a democracy?" ("Yes" = 1, "No" = 0).

Marginal predictions with 95 % confidence intervals. All covariates are at their means.

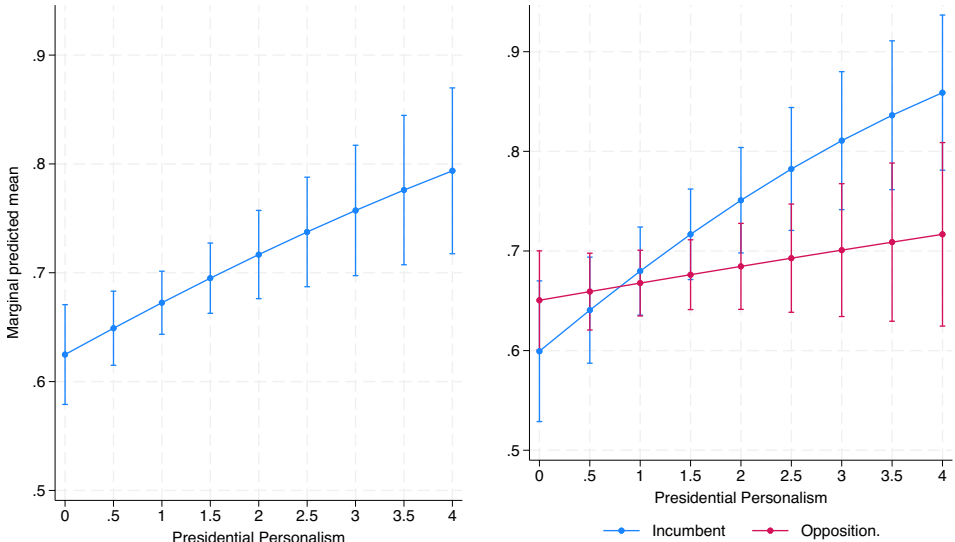
On the other hand, the results are in line with the predictions for opposition voters. After the opposition voters initially follow the incumbent supporters closely in their assessment of the regime, their judgment becomes less sanguine once the president grows moderately personalistic. According to the marginal predictions displayed in Figure 4, the path of opposition voters diverges systematically once the personalistic style becomes largely dominant. In this manner, when the executive is a strongly personalistic leader, only 42 % (95 % CI: 30-53 %) of opposition supporters are expected to believe their country is a democracy. This not only contrasts with 70 % (95 % CI: 55-85 %) of the incumbent's voters who believe their country is a democracy under a strongly personalistic president, but also with

the 58 % (95 % CI: 51-65 %) of the opposition voters who are optimistic about democracy in their nation when the president is not a personalistic leader at all. The confidence intervals for the point estimates of opposition supporters who perceive their country as a democracy overlap at the extremes of personalism—as shown in Figure 3. Nonetheless, the absolute difference between these two points is noteworthy. The inverted “U”-shaped relationship between personalism and the belief that the country is a democracy thus appears more pronounced among opposition voters.

In sum, the results are consistent with the empirical expectations. It could be the case, however, that the data may be better explained by a linear relationship. Models M1 and M2 examine this possibility. M1 tests the direct relationship between presidential personalism and people's democratic assessments, while M2 examines the interaction between presidential personalism and voters' status as incumbent or opposition supporters. In both cases, the results confirm the belief that the country is a democracy increases as the executive's personalistic traits also increase. The linear explanation, however, is somewhat less efficient than the non-linear hypotheses, as indicated by the AIC and BIC criteria shown in Table 1. This is also illustrated by the model predictions shown in Figure 4. First, the model predictions cannot statistically differentiate between incumbent and opposition voters, as their confidence intervals overlap throughout. Second, according to this model, only incumbent voters are conditioned by presidential personalism, whereas opposition voters do not seem to change their minds, regardless of how personalistic the executive is.

In substantive terms, the point estimates for incumbent (87 %) and opposition voters (72 %) in Figure 4 do differ significantly at the top of presidential personalism, although the confidence intervals overlap. Under this approach, however, the opposition voters seem quite optimistic about their country's democratic status, even at the lower bound of the confidence interval (95 % IC: 61-84 %). Conversely, as Figure 3 illustrates, the theoretical argument advanced in this study predicts that opposition voters not only differ systematically from the incumbent's supporters when the president is almost exclusively personalistic, but also are expected to be considerably less persuaded (42 %) of their country's democratic status (95 % CI: 30-53 %).

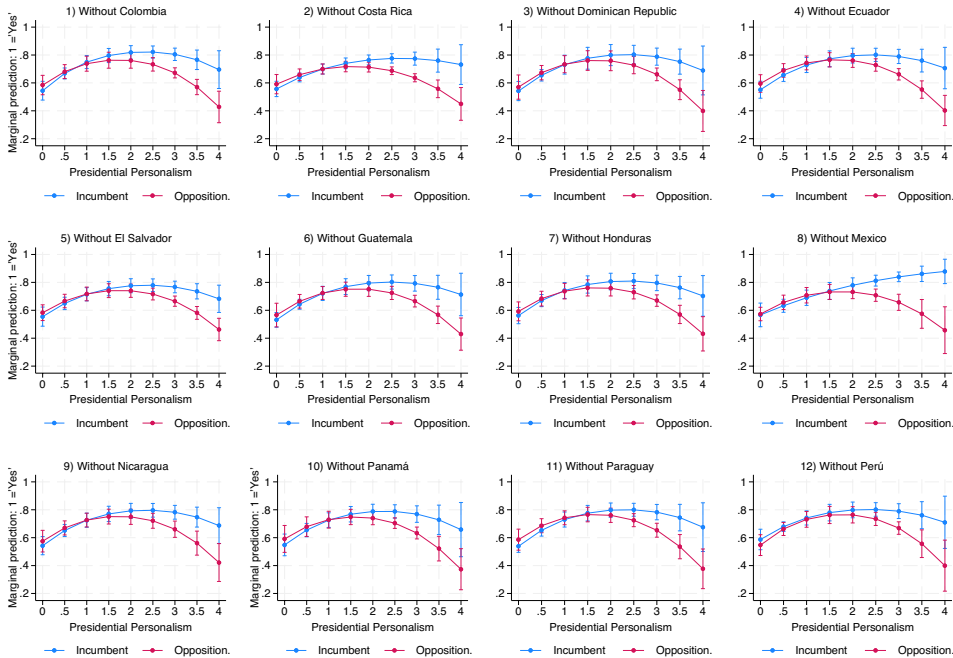
Figure 4. Testing the Linear Relationship: Presidential Personalism and Public Opinion About the Country's Democratic Status



Dependent variable: "Is this country a democracy?" ("Yes" = 1, "No" = 0).
Marginal predictions with 95 % confidence intervals. All covariates are at their means.

A further test of the hypotheses is shown in Figure 5. In this test, the analysis was replicated with all countries in the sample, excluding one country at a time—the full results are in Tables A8-A9 in the Appendix. The results confirm that the non-linear relationship persists, even when the confidence intervals of incumbent and opposition voters overlap in some model specifications. In each replication, however, the incumbent and opposition voters hold similar views until opposition supporters become skeptical of their country's democratic status once the president goes beyond being moderately personalistic.

Figure 5. Testing the Non-Linear Relationship: Presidential Personalism and Public Opinion About the Country's Democratic Status



Note: Dependent variable: “Is this country a democracy?” (“Yes” = 1, “No” = 0).
Marginal predictions with 95 % confidence intervals. All covariates are at their means.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings are consistent with a broader literature showing not only that many people hold inconsistent beliefs and information about democracy (e.g., Carlin & Singer, 2011; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007; Shin & Kim, 2018), but also that their beliefs and democratic commitments are influenced by politically motivated reasoning (e.g., Krishnarajan, 2023), often shaped by elite behavior and rhetoric (e.g., Bessen, 2024; Cella *et al.*, 2025; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2026). It is worth underscoring that this research is consistent with a theory positing that citizens *rationalize* their democratic assessments (Krishnarajan, 2023), rather than trading off democratic principles for policy or political gain (Graham & Svulik, 2020). Graham & Svulik’s (2020) approach presupposes that citizens can distinguish which actions undermine or enhance democracy, and still support democratic transgressions to reinforce their party’s position vis-à-vis the opposition. This study shows that the

presidential representational style decisively shapes how citizens understand democracy, much like partisan biases (Krishnarajan, 2023) or populist rhetoric (Bessen, 2024; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2026). Moreover, the findings suggest that presidential personalism in Latin America is as important as populist rhetoric in shaping democratic assessments. Provided that personalism and populism are convergent yet distinctive phenomena—one is focused on the leader's persona and the other on the Manichean discursive framework that pits the people against the elites—it is necessary to further disentangle their distinctive relationship with political support and democratic backsliding in general (Hawkins & Mitchell, 2025).

Specifically, the analysis indicates that the relationship between presidential personalism and people's beliefs about their country's status as a democracy follows an inverted "U"-shaped pattern. This means, in the first place, that the people are more likely to perceive their nation as a democracy as presidents become moderately personalistic. In line with the theoretical argument in this study, the data suggest that people feel identified with presidents who demonstrate the individual qualities required to make a difference, so to speak. When the president lacks leadership skills or personal charm, people may feel inadequately represented. Disappointed with the executive's leadership, they might begin to question whether their country really is a democracy. Instead, moderate personalistic presidents enhance the sense of collective agency and encourage people to trust in the regime's democratic credentials. This influence is observed among both incumbent and opposition voters.

The analysis also reveals a downward-polarizing influence exerted by increasing presidential personalism. As presidents become more than moderately personalistic, the gap between incumbent and opposition supporters increases. Incumbent voters remain confident in their country's democratic status, but opposition voters rapidly shift in the opposite direction, adopting more pessimistic assessments. As presidential personalism radicalizes beyond a moderate level, the belief in the regime's democratic status drops sharply among opposition voters.

It is worth highlighting that the findings hold after controlling for the level of electoral democracy. Interestingly, the relationship between electoral democracy and citizens' assessments of their country's democratic situation is negative. This implies that, once personalism is accounted for, lower levels of democracy are correlated with a larger proportion of citizens who perceive their country as democratic. However, this result may be driven by the sample not including some of the most robust democracies in Latin America, such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay. Likewise, the limited sample of countries also prevents an examination of the influence of presidential personalism in cases that exhibit greater variation in party-system programmatic structuration.

A closer look at the country cases is helpful to make further sense of the results. At the time of the survey, there were democratic countries led by

non-personalistic presidents, such as Ecuador (Guillermo Lasso), Panama (Laurentino Cortizo), or Paraguay (Mario Abdo), in which citizens' confidence in the democratic status of their political systems was far from remarkable. On the other hand, non-personalistic leaders also occupied the presidency in Guatemala and Peru. These cases illustrate that while personalism often coincides with episodes of autocratization, not every episode of autocratization is driven by a personalistic president. Namely, in Guatemala and Peru, democratic backsliding unfolded under non-personalistic presidents, such as Alejandro Giammattei, and Dina Boluarte, who was appointed president of Peru after the parliamentary impeachment of Pedro Castillo in December 2022. Both countries are among those in which voters, in general, were hardly persuaded that those countries were democracies. In Guatemala, Giammattei's supporters did not differ from opposition voters in their views on the country's democratic status, consistent with Meléndez's (2023) argument that democratic values in Guatemala are resilient despite persistent "difficult conditions". In Peru, persistent failures in representation and accountability, as well as inter-branch conflict and political dysfunction, have eroded support for and satisfaction with democracy (Carrión & Zárate, 2023). Considering that Dina Boluarte was the sitting president when the 2023 AmericasBarometer Survey was conducted, it is likely that Pedro Castillo's voters and the supporters of the opposition candidates shared a similar lack of confidence in their country's democracy.⁵ In any case, neither Giammattei nor Boluarte was a personalistic executive, despite their participation in collusive measures aimed at sabotaging the rules and political institutions.

Now, consider the Dominican Republic, a country where approximately 80 % of the electorate see it as a democracy, similar to Costa Rica, where most citizens (81 %) also agreed that the country was a democracy. Yet, while Costa Rica was a stronger democracy than the Dominican Republic, the Dominican Republic had a moderately personalistic president, Luis R. Abinader. At the time of the survey, the country's President, Abinader, was very popular—he got reelected in 2024 with 57 % of the vote—and scored 2.21 on the 0-4 personalistic legitimation scale. Thus, the contrast between Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic illustrates how a moderately personalistic president correlates with the electorate's perception that it is a democracy, a perception as widespread as in a stronger democracy presided over by a somewhat less personalistic executive (Rodrigo Chaves).

Finally, in countries such as El Salvador, Mexico, and Nicaragua, the executive was an illiberal, personalistic leader: Nayib Bukele, Andrés Manuel López Obrador,

5 Peru was enduring an episode of autocratization in 2023. That year, the AmericasBarometer survey asked respondents about their choice in the first round of the 2021 election. Thus, those who declared having voted for Pedro Castillo, "the winner", were not the "incumbent voters", as a result of Castillo's impeachment.

and Daniel Ortega, respectively. In all three cases, the belief that the country is a democracy was widespread. However, in 2023, Mexico was at the “gates of authoritarianism” after a sustained process of decline driven by López Obrador’s populist transformation (Aguilar Aguilar *et al.*, 2025; Gordillo García, 2025). Likewise, driven by strongly personalistic leaders, El Salvador (Luján & Puig Lombardi; Wolf, 2024) and Nicaragua (Osawa, 2025) had already transitioned to autocracy. In each of these three countries, public opinion about the regime’s status was polarized. Presidential supporters were overwhelmingly convinced of the regime’s democratic quality (85 % in El Salvador, 79 % in Mexico, and 96 % in Nicaragua), while opposition supporters were substantially less convinced (60 %, 65 %, and 61 %, respectively)—even when those who perceive the country as a democracy still represented a large share.

These last three countries—and Nicaragua in particular—raise the question of how reliable citizens’ assessments of democracy under dictatorship are. People may provide socially desirable responses out of fear of reprisal. This topic warrants further research in Latin America, as most autocracies and electoral autocracies in the region still rely on electoral and popular legitimacy. In any case, the mismatch between the country’s democratic status and citizens’ assessments in these cases is striking and illustrates how presidential rhetoric can shape public opinion about democracy while avoiding accountability in a manner compatible with authoritarian governance.

7. CONCLUSIONS

For most people, deciding whether they live in a democracy should be a fairly straightforward judgment—and provided they account for the actual status of their political regime, their views should be accurate most of the time. This expectation, however, is premised on the assumption that citizens can distinguish between democracy and non-democracy on the basis of verifiable information. However, people’s attitudes and beliefs concerning democracy are usually driven instead by political allegiances and motivations (Krishnarajan, 2023). This article presents evidence that people’s assessment of their country’s democratic status is influenced by their affinity for personalistic presidents, leaders who justify their rule by claiming exceptional individual qualities and political skills.

Presidential personalism has long been a concern in Latin America (e.g., O’Donnell, 1994; Rhodes-Purdy & Madrid, 2020; Weyland, 2001). Personalistic leaders often use and abuse the formal and informal powers of the presidency, undermining horizontal accountability, the separation of powers, and the overall quality of democratic governance. How people respond to personalistic presidents who might be willing to subvert democratic norms and institutions to

advance their agenda is thus as relevant as ever. Earlier studies have shown that Latin American citizens are happier with democracy when executive power is neither so strong as to become unaccountable nor so weak as to become ineffective (Singh & Carlin, 2015). The evidence discussed in this article also indicates that moderately personalistic presidents are more likely to inspire both incumbent and opposition voters to believe that the country is a democracy. Non-personalism tends to make people skeptical of their nation's democratic status, while strong personalism polarizes public opinion, making opposition voters widely pessimistic about democracy in their country.

Data limitations prevent ruling out the possibility that the results are driven by the sample of countries included in the analysis. Nevertheless, this study examines whether citizens perceive their country as a democracy, a topic that remains scarcely studied. The evidence corroborates that public assessments of democracy are often politically motivated. In line with studies showing that elite rhetoric is decisive for shaping democratic beliefs and commitments (e.g., Bessen, 2024; Cella *et al.*, 2025), the results indicate that presidential personalism is an influential strategy of political legitimation. Moreover, the analysis reveals that the relationship between presidential personalism and democratic assessments is non-linear. Weakly personalistic presidents tend to depress the feeling of living in a democracy, whereas moderately personalistic presidents increase regime support by leading people to perceive their country as a democracy. In turn, more extreme personalistic executives polarize democratic assessment, fostering optimistic assessments among the incumbent supporters while driving opposition voters in the opposite direction.

These findings contribute to our understanding of how illiberal leaders can polarize public opinion to advance their personal agendas, often by undermining democracy. Illiberal, non-democratic leaders do not need to rely on personalistic legitimization strategies to weaken the rule of law or subvert essential freedoms and rights (Balderacchi & Tomini, 2024)—as Guatemala and Peru serve as an example. However, like populist leaders, strongly personalistic leaders are expected to polarize public opinion and persuade their supporters that democracy is thriving, even when, more often than not, the opposite is true. As the recent developments in El Salvador, Mexico, or Nicaragua illustrate, by deepening divisions in public opinion on issues such as the regime's democratic status, personalistic presidents may sabotage democratic accountability and entrench their hold on power.

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9. APPENDIX

Table A1. Variable Measurement

Variable	Question wording	Measurement
Democratic status	DEM30. "In your opinión, is (country) a democracy..."	"Yes" = 1, "No" = 0.
Electoral choice	VB2. "Did you vote in the last presidential elections of (year of last presidential/general elections)" and VB3N Who did you vote for in the last presidential election of (year)?"	"Voted for Incumbent" = 1 if respondents voted for the winning candidate; "Voted for Opposition" = 2 if voted for opposition candidates; "Null vote" = 3 if voted blank, null or "others" "Abstained" = 4 if did not vote in the last presidential election.
Months since election	Number of months since the presidential election.	Continuous variable: 0-60
Personal economy	IDIO2. "Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?"	Three-point ordinal variable: 0 "Worse", 0.5 "Same", 1 "Better"
Political interest	POL1. "How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?"	4-point ordinal variable: 0 "None" – 1 "A lot"
Sex	Q1TC. "For statistical purposes, could you please confirm your gender?"	1 "Male", 2 "Female", 3 "Neither"
Years of age	Q2. "How old are you?"	Numerical variable. Range: 16-95 years.
Education level	EDRE. "¿What is the highest level of education you have reached?"	6-point ordinal variable. 0 "None"- 6 "Tertiary or university or higher complete"
Urban residence	UR. Urban, rural (census definition)	1 "Urban", 2 "Rural"

Source: Author elaboration using The AmericasBarometer 2023 surveys.

Table A2. Individual-level variables: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N=	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Democratic status	17,697					
No		32	—	—	0	1
Yes		68	—	—	0	1
Electoral choice	14,869					
Voted for incumbent		37	—	—	0	1
Voted for opposition		22	—	—	0	1
Null vote		04	—	—	0	1
Abstained		38	—	—	0	1
Months since election	20,121	—	33.6	16.45	12	60
Personal economy	19,211	—	0.34	0.37	0	1
Political interest	17,701	—	0.34	0.33	0	1
Sex	19,173					
Male		49	—	—	0	1
Famale		51	—	—	0	1
Other		00	—	—	0	1
Years of age	19,346	—	38.70	15.79	16	95
Education level	19,269	—	3.51	1.61	0	6
Urban residence	19,253		1.36	0.48	1	2

Source: The AmericasBarometer 2023 survey by LAPOP.

Table A3. Regime-level variables

Polyarchy	
Electoral democracy index (D) (v2x_polyarchy) "To what extent is the ideal of electoral democracy in its fullest sense achieved?" <i>Varieties of Democracy Project</i> (Coppedge et al., 2025, p. 295-296)	"Clarification: The electoral principle of democracy seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. In between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media capable of presenting alternative views on matters of political relevance" Scale: "Interval, from low to high (0-1)"
Presidential personalism	
Person of the leader (v2exl_legitlead). Question: To what extent is the Chief Executive portrayed as being endowed with extraordinary personal characteristics and/or leadership skills (e.g. as father or mother of the nation, exceptionally heroic, moral, pious, or wise, or any other extraordinary attribute valued by the society)? <i>Varieties of Democracy Project</i> (Coppedge et al., 2025, p. 232)	Responses: "0: Not at all. 1: To a small extent. 2: To some extent but it is not the most important component 3: To a large extent but not exclusively. 4: Almost exclusively" Scale: "Ordinal, converted to interval by the measurement model"
Gross Domestic Product/Per capita	
"Gross domestic product is the total income earned through the production of goods and services in an economic territory during an accounting period. The core indicator has been divided by the general population to achieve a per capita estimate" <i>World Development Indicators</i> .	This indicator is expressed in constant prices, meaning the series has been adjusted to account for price changes over time. The reference year for this adjustment is 2015. This indicator is expressed in United States dollars"

Table A4. Descriptive statistics at the country level

Country	“Is this country a democracy?” [“Yes” = 1, “No” = 0]			Polyarchy	Presidential Personalism
	Proportion	95 % Confidence interval			
Colombia	0.639	0.61	0.67	0.71	1.71
Costa Rica	0.858	0.83	0.88	0.86	1.286
Dominican Rep.	0.765	0.74	0.79	0.68	2.208
Ecuador	0.630	0.60	0.66	0.639	0.614
El Salvador	0.787	0.76	0.81	0.38	3.126
Guatemala	0.653	0.62	0.68	0.505	0.273
Honduras	0.610	0.58	0.64	0.538	1.273
Mexico	0.749	0.72	0.77	0.549	3.56
Nicaragua	0.684	0.66	0.71	0.159	3.381
Panama	0.663	0.64	0.69	0.725	0.106
Paraguay	0.624	0.59	0.65	0.575	0.565
Peru	0.528	0.50	0.56	0.712	0.254

Source: The AmericasBarometer 2023 survey by LAPOP and V-Dem Project v15. The proportion of a country's perceived democratic status and the 95 % confidence intervals are estimations that account for the survey sample design.

**Table A5. Electoral Choice and the Country's Democratic Status. Dependent
Variable: "Is this Country a Democracy?" ["Yes" = 1, "No" = 0]**

Country	Electoral Choice	Estimated proportion	95 % Confidence interval	
Colombia	Incumbent	0.656	0.604	0.707
	Opposition	0.657	0.593	0.721
Costa Rica	Incumbent	0.873	0.837	0.909
	Opposition	0.864	0.823	0.905
Dominican Republic	Incumbent	0.808	0.771	0.844
	Opposition	0.733	0.677	0.788
Ecuador	Incumbent	0.639	0.586	0.692
	Opposition	0.565	0.517	0.613
El Salvador	Incumbent	0.854	0.822	0.885
	Opposition	0.598	0.471	0.725
Guatemala	Incumbent	0.641	0.574	0.709
	Opposition	0.646	0.578	0.713
Honduras	Incumbent	0.622	0.585	0.660
	Opposition	0.637	0.584	0.689
Mexico	Incumbent	0.794	0.762	0.826
	Opposition	0.652	0.562	0.741
Nicaragua	Incumbent	0.964	0.933	0.995
	Opposition	0.615	0.507	0.724
Panama	Incumbent	0.673	0.625	0.721
	Opposition	0.662	0.609	0.715
Paraguay	Incumbent	0.677	0.624	0.731
	Opposition	0.579	0.509	0.648
Peru	Incumbent	0.460	0.413	0.507
	Opposition	0.585	0.542	0.629

Source: Estimated proportions for survey data with complex sample design.
Models regress the country's democratic status on citizens' electoral choices.
The 2023 AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP.

Table A6. Presidential personalism and public opinion about the country's democratic status. Dependent variable: "Is this country a democracy?" ("Yes" = 1, "No" = 0)

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral Choice (Base: Voted for Incumbent)			
Voted for Opposition	-0.127* [0.052]	-0.128 [0.139]	-0.128 [0.139]
Blank / Null vote	-0.460*** [0.101]	-0.465*** [0.136]	-0.465*** [0.136]
Abstained	-0.147** [0.046]	-0.142 [0.102]	-0.141 [0.102]
Presidential Personalism		0.209*** [0.063]	0.211** [0.076]
Electoral Democracy Index			0.053 [0.398]
Months since the election	0.061 [0.039]	-0.003 [0.005]	-0.003 [0.005]
Personal economy	0.557*** [0.054]	0.563*** [0.100]	0.563*** [0.101]
Political interest	0.443*** [0.060]	0.441*** [0.061]	0.441*** [0.061]
Sex (Base: Female): Male	0.052 [0.037]	0.051 [0.030]	0.051 [0.030]
No identification	0.047 [0.659]	0.047 [0.759]	0.047 [0.759]
Years of age	0.001 [0.001]	0.001 [0.002]	0.001 [0.002]
Education level	-0.152*** [0.014]	-0.154*** [0.031]	-0.154*** [0.031]
Urban location	0.141** [0.049]	0.146*** [0.039]	0.146*** [0.039]

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	M1	M2	M3
Ln (GDP / Per capita)	—	0.469** [0.166]	0.457*** [0.133]
Constant	-2.340 [2.327]	-3.306* [1.362]	-3.240** [1.141]
Var. Country	—	0.052* [0.024]	0.052* [0.024]
Log Likelihood	—	-8047.104	-8047.103
AIC	—	16116.21	16118.21
BIC	—	16199.64	16209.23
Observations (individuals)=	14,394	14,547	14,547
Number of Countries=	12	12	12

Model M1 is a logistic regression for survey data. Country-level fixed effects are included but not shown. Models M2-M6 are multilevel logistic regressions. Robust standard errors in brackets. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

Table A7. Presidential personalism, electoral choice, and public opinion about the country's democratic status. Dependent variable: "Is this country a democracy?" ("Yes" = 1, "No" = 0)

	M4	M5	M6
Electoral Choice (Base: Voted for Incumbent)			
Voted for Opposition	-0.128 [0.139]	0.221 [0.170]	0.120 [0.224]
Blank / Null vote	-0.464*** [0.135]	-0.195 [0.163]	-0.191 [0.216]
Abstained	-0.143 [0.101]	0.188 [0.119]	0.218 [0.150]
Presidential Personalism	0.867*** [0.203]	0.354*** [0.106]	0.987*** [0.261]
Presidential Personalism × Opposition		-0.277** [0.089]	-0.033 [0.258]
Presidential Personalism × Blank / Null		-0.215 [0.131]	-0.221 [0.335]
Presidential Personalism × Abstained		-0.227** [0.073]	-0.290 [0.196]
Presidential Personalism ²	-0.211*** [0.059]		-0.205** [0.077]
Presidential Personalism ² × Opposition			-0.075 [0.074]
Presidential Personalism ² × Blank / Null			0.001 [0.105]
Presidential Personalism ² × Abstained			0.018 [0.061]
Electoral Democracy Index	-2.003*** [0.519]	-0.199 [0.398]	-2.247*** [0.435]
Months since the election	-0.003 [0.004]	-0.005 [0.005]	-0.005 [0.004]

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	M4	M5	M6
Personal economy	0.565*** [0.101]	0.536*** [0.095]	0.539*** [0.094]
Political interest	0.442*** [0.060]	0.434*** [0.060]	0.434*** [0.059]
Sex (Base: Female): Male	0.052 [0.030]	0.052 [0.030]	0.053 [0.030]
No identification	0.043 [0.758]	0.038 [0.764]	0.031 [0.760]
Years of age	0.001 [0.002]	0.001 [0.002]	0.001 [0.002]
Education level	-0.154*** [0.031]	-0.154*** [0.032]	-0.154*** [0.031]
Urban location	0.147*** [0.039]	0.153*** [0.038]	0.152*** [0.038]
Ln (GDP / Per capita)	0.892*** [0.204]	0.501*** [0.141]	0.939*** [0.195]
Constant	-6.067*** [1.485]	-3.601** [1.195]	-6.449*** [1.455]
Var. Country	0.034 [0.019]	0.050* [0.024]	0.030 [0.018]
Log Likelihood	-8044.768	-8023.911	-8019.346
AIC	16,111.54	16,069.82	16,060.69
BIC	16,194.97	16,153.26	16,144.13
Observations (individuals)=	14,394	14,547	14,547
Number of Countries=	12	12	12

Multilevel logistic regression models. Robust standard errors in brackets.

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Table A8. Supplementary Analysis: Public opinion about the country's democratic status. Dependent variable: "Is this country a democracy?" ("Yes" = 1, "No" = 0)

	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12
Electoral Choice (Base: Voted for Incumbent)						
Voted for Opposition	0.165 [0.221]	0.140 [0.221]	0.116 [0.233]	0.184 [0.216]	0.115 [0.226]	0.14 [0.258]
Blank / Null vote	-0.308 [0.250]	-0.170 [0.224]	-0.165 [0.215]	-0.293 [0.250]	-0.205 [0.217]	-0.163 [0.238]
Abstained	0.234 [0.151]	0.208 [0.144]	0.181 [0.151]	0.209 [0.154]	0.229 [0.151]	0.253 [0.180]
Presidential Personalism (PP)	1.173*** [0.276]	0.758*** [0.210]	1.064** [0.383]	0.992*** [0.256]	0.892*** [0.231]	1.041*** [0.265]
PP × Opposition	-0.193 [0.279]	-0.072 [0.273]	-0.022 [0.300]	-0.021 [0.237]	-0.051 [0.236]	-0.056 [0.280]
PP × Blank / Null	0.053 [0.492]	-0.217 [0.352]	-0.294 [0.322]	-0.296 [0.323]	-0.213 [0.330]	-0.247 [0.355]
PP × Abstained	-0.402* [0.200]	-0.268 [0.204]	-0.247 [0.208]	-0.284 [0.194]	-0.298 [0.182]	-0.323 [0.214]
Presidential Personalism ²	-0.253** [0.078]	-0.141* [0.067]	-0.226* [0.108]	-0.206** [0.077]	-0.189** [0.062]	-0.211** [0.078]
PP ² × Opposition	-0.032 [0.079]	-0.066 [0.080]	-0.078 [0.082]	-0.087 [0.071]	-0.052 [0.058]	-0.07 [0.077]
PP ² × Blank / Null	-0.067 [0.138]	-0.005 [0.112]	0.019 [0.101]	0.035 [0.098]	0.029 [0.094]	0.007 [0.109]
PP ² × Abstained	0.047 [0.063]	0.009 [0.067]	0.007 [0.062]	0.016 [0.062]	0.026 [0.056]	0.025 [0.064]
Electoral Democracy Index	-2.301*** [0.396]	-2.019*** [0.242]	-2.386*** [0.564]	-2.263*** [0.467]	-2.071*** [0.606]	-2.175*** [0.441]
Months since the election	-0.008* [0.003]	-0.001 [0.003]	-0.005 [0.004]	-0.005 [0.004]	-0.007 [0.004]	-0.006 [0.004]

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	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12
Personal economy	0.601*** [0.085]	0.521*** [0.100]	0.577*** [0.097]	0.531*** [0.101]	0.511*** [0.097]	0.529*** [0.102]
Political interest	0.395*** [0.047]	0.418*** [0.060]	0.428*** [0.066]	0.445*** [0.065]	0.472*** [0.050]	0.430*** [0.065]
Sex (Base: Female): Male	0.057 [0.034]	0.049 [0.032]	0.046 [0.033]	0.069* [0.029]	0.058 [0.032]	0.048 [0.033]
No identification	0.024 [0.763]	-0.317 [0.868]	0.469 [0.898]	0.483 [0.890]	0.04 [0.758]	0.036 [0.761]
Years of age	-0.001 [0.002]	0.000 [0.003]	-0.001 [0.002]	0 [0.003]	0.001 [0.003]	0.001 [0.003]
Education level	-0.163*** [0.033]	-0.156*** [0.031]	-0.174*** [0.026]	-0.147*** [0.033]	-0.148*** [0.034]	-0.150*** [0.034]
Urban location	0.145*** [0.040]	0.144*** [0.040]	0.139*** [0.039]	0.165*** [0.039]	0.168*** [0.037]	0.168*** [0.038]
Ln(GDP / Per capita)	0.996*** [0.173]	0.685*** [0.067]	0.995*** [0.231]	0.942*** [0.205]	0.936*** [0.209]	0.968*** [0.191]
Constant	-6.759*** [1.254]	-4.413*** [0.496]	-6.742*** [1.748]	-6.483*** [1.491]	-6.468*** [1.508]	-6.817*** [1.443]
Var. Country	0.018* [0.009]	0.002 [0.002]	0.03 [0.018]	0.033 [0.019]	0.028 [0.019]	0.03 [0.018]
Log Likelihood	-7206.864	-7525.102	-7296.598	-7350.218	-7407.517	-7333.257
AIC	14433.73	15,072.2	14613.2	14720.44	14835.03	14688.51
BIC	14508.69	15,154.67	14688.03	14795.51	14909.97	14771.08
Observations (individuals)=	13,303	13,317	13,140	13,462	13,270	13,437
Excluded Country =	Colombia	Costa Rica	Dom. Rep.	Ecuador	El Salvador	Guatemala
Number of Countries=	11	11	11	11	11	11

Multilevel logistic regression models. Robust standard errors in brackets.

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.

Table A9. Supplementary Analysis: Public opinion about the country's democratic status. Dependent variable: "Is this country a democracy?" ("Yes" = 1, "No" = 0)

	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18
Electoral Choice (Base: Voted for Incumbent)						
Voted for Opposition	0.124 [0.223]	0.027 [0.237]	0.132 [0.224]	0.177 [0.319]	[0.210] -0.142	-0.165 [0.158]
Blank/Null vote	-0.199 [0.223]	-0.315 [0.207]	-0.187 [0.218]	0.010 [0.132]	[0.229] 0.295*	-0.283 [0.336]
Abstained	0.228 [0.148]	0.135 [0.160]	0.240 [0.148]	0.276 [0.199]	[0.141] 1.080***	0.064 [0.106]
Presidential Personalism (PP)	1.029*** [0.282]	0.569 [0.325]	1.023*** [0.257]	1.009*** [0.291]	[0.242] [0.210]	0.897** [0.347]
PP × Opposition	-0.090 [0.291]	0.261 [0.261]	-0.067 [0.249]	-0.101 [0.352]	-0.052 [0.239]	0.245 [0.217]
PP × Blank/Null	-0.202 [0.382]	0.163 [0.313]	-0.227 [0.347]	-0.504* [0.223]	-0.230 [0.354]	-0.140 [0.449]
PP × Abstained	-0.328 [0.222]	-0.023 [0.218]	-0.350* [0.169]	-0.355 [0.244]	-0.321 [0.191]	-0.136 [0.170]
Presidential Personalism ²	-0.219** [0.081]	-0.035 [0.096]	-0.217** [0.071]	-0.223* [0.088]	-0.234** [0.077]	-0.190 [0.103]
PP ² × Opposition	-0.057 [0.084]	-0.202** [0.071]	-0.061 [0.069]	-0.059 [0.090]	-0.077 [0.071]	-0.133 [0.070]
PP ² × Blank / Null	-0.003 [0.117]	-0.163* [0.083]	0.003 [0.121]	0.070 [0.084]	0.001 [0.109]	-0.015 [0.127]
PP ² × Abstained	0.029 [0.069]	-0.093 [0.076]	0.045 [0.044]	0.032 [0.070]	0.021 [0.061]	-0.015 [0.060]
Electoral Democracy Index	-2.320*** [0.661]	-1.429 [0.925]	-1.898 [2.029]	-2.932*** [0.861]	-2.432*** [0.608]	-2.354** [0.775]
Months since the election	-0.005 [0.004]	-0.004 [0.005]	-0.003 [0.010]	-0.006 [0.004]	-0.003 [0.005]	-0.004 [0.004]

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	M13	M14	M15	M16	M17	M18
Personal economy	0.578*** [0.098]	0.505*** [0.095]	0.510*** [0.092]	0.542*** [0.103]	0.541*** [0.104]	0.521*** [0.101]
Political interest	0.432*** [0.067]	0.447*** [0.063]	0.430*** [0.062]	0.434*** [0.067]	0.430*** [0.065]	0.450*** [0.066]
Sex (Base: Female): Male	0.045 [0.033]	0.038 [0.028]	0.057 [0.032]	0.062 [0.033]	0.045 [0.032]	0.065* [0.031]
No identification	0.047 [0.764]	0.012 [0.768]	0.236 [0.864]	-0.298 [0.826]	-0.372 [0.772]	0.049 [0.757]
Years of age	0.001 [0.003]	0.001 [0.003]	0.001 [0.002]	0.001 [0.003]	0.002 [0.002]	0.001 [0.003]
Education level	-0.136*** [0.030]	-0.152*** [0.034]	-0.155*** [0.033]	-0.149*** [0.034]	-0.165*** [0.032]	-0.148*** [0.035]
Urban location	0.130*** [0.034]	0.153*** [0.039]	0.163*** [0.038]	0.152*** [0.042]	0.141*** [0.040]	0.156*** [0.041]
Ln(GDP / Per capita)	0.947*** [0.272]	0.809*** [0.234]	0.879** [0.322]	1.154*** [0.313]	0.956*** [0.221]	0.962*** [0.217]
Constant	-6.577** [2.036]	-5.702*** [1.613]	-6.221*** [1.430]	-7.871*** [2.201]	-6.594*** [1.592]	-6.513*** [1.553]
Var. Country	0.035 [0.020]	0.030 [0.020]	0.034 [0.022]	0.030 [0.016]	0.032 [0.020]	0.034 [0.020]
Log Likelihood	-7206.944-7360.918 -7709.64 -7265.457-7364.585-7155.301					
AIC	14433.89 14743.84 15441.28 14550.91 14751.17 14330.6					
BIC	14508.78 14826.24 15523.92 14625.88 14833.81 14405.52					
Observations (individuals)=	13,213 13,249 13,530 13,316 13,536 13,244					
Excluded Country =	Honduras	Mexico	Nicaragua	Panama	Paraguay	Peru
Number of Countries=	11	11	11	11	11	11

Multilevel logistic regression models. Robust standard errors in brackets.

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05.