



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Latin America and the Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response (LACLEARN)

Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: El Salvador Report

NOVEMBER 2021

This report was prepared for the U.S. Agency for International Development under the terms of Contract No. AID-7200AA19D00006 /7200AA20F00015. It was produced by NORC at the University of Chicago on behalf of Development Professionals, Inc. – Making Cents International, LLC. The opinions expressed herein are the sole responsibility of Development Professionals, Inc. – Making Cents International, LLC and NORC at the University of Chicago, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

As an applied research product, this report is not intended for program design. The report may produce recommendations, which USAID and other actors will determine whether or how to address.

Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: El Salvador Report

Authors:

Luis A. Camacho, Senior Technical Advisor LACLEARN, NORC at the University of Chicago
Amy Erica Smith, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Iowa State University
Ingrid Rojas-Arellano, Research Scientist, NORC at the University of Chicago
Angelo Cozzubo, Senior Research Associate II, NORC at the University of Chicago

Contact:

Javier Calvo Echandi, Chief of Party LACLEARN
Development Professionals Inc.
Email: javier@developmentpi.com
Phone/WhatsApp: 202-468-7698



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

This report was prepared for the U.S. Agency for International Development under the terms of Contract No. AID-7200AA19D00006 /7200AA20F00015. It was produced by NORC at the University of Chicago on behalf of Development Professionals, Inc. – Making Cents International, LLC. The opinions expressed herein are the sole responsibility of Development Professionals, Inc. – Making Cents International, LLC and NORC at the University of Chicago, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

As an applied research product, this report is not intended for program design. The report may produce recommendations, which USAID and other actors will determine whether or how to address.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
METHODOLOGY	2
RESULTS	3
2018 WAVE	3
2021 WAVE	6
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	8
ANNEX 1: CONNECTING DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS	10
ANNEX 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH CLUSTER – 2018 WAVE	17
ANNEX 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH CLUSTER – 2021 WAVE	19

LIST OF ACRONYMS

GLOSH	Global-local Outlier Score from Hierarchies
HDBScan	Hierarchical Density-based Clustering
LACLEARN	Latin America and Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response Task Order
LAPOP	Latin American Public Opinion Project
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
V-DEM	Varieties of Democracy

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, governance and political crises, together with insecurity and longstanding issues of corruption, inequality, and lackluster economic performance, have eroded democratic legitimacy and public trust in government. The 2018/19 Pulse of Democracy report from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) concluded that “the region has settled into a malaise with respect to public views of democracy.” On many measures of support and satisfaction with democracy, the AmericasBarometer survey found sharp declines in 2016 compared to prior survey rounds. These measures remained low in 2018/19, with less than 40 percent of Salvadorans in the region expressing satisfaction with democracy. The COVID-19 pandemic has likely further contributed to public malaise.

In a context of global and regional democratic backsliding, where domestic and foreign actors are actively undermining democracy, a citizenry that remains committed to democratic principles and values—even if dissatisfied with politics and governance—is particularly valuable. A citizenry with highly democratic attitudes is likely to discourage those in power from undermining democracy from within. Perhaps more importantly, citizens with highly democratic attitudes are less likely to support authoritarian candidates at the ballot box and more likely to mobilize against elite actions that undermine democracy.

To respond to the challenge of eroding democratic attitudes in its cooperating countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) requires a better understanding of the populations that have experienced the greatest declines in democratic attitudes and the drivers of observed changes. Under the Latin America and Caribbean Learning and Rapid Response (LACLEARN) Task Order, USAID has requested a study to address those needs. When completed, the study will address the following questions:

- What patterns of support for democracy and other democratic attitudes are present among the citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean?
- What patterns could pose barriers to democratic consolidation or contribute to democratic backsliding? What are the most salient attitudinal, economic, and other characteristics of the citizens holding these worrisome patterns?
- How have patterns evolved in the past 10 years? What contextual factors have contributed to changes over time in patterns of support for democracy and other democratic attitudes? Have attitudinal changes contributed to significant system-level political developments?

This country report presents our answer to the first two questions for El Salvador. We use data from LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer collected between November 13 and December 6 of 2018 (“2018 wave”) and April 21 and June 4 of 2021 (“2021 wave”).

We conduct cluster analysis—a multivariate classification technique—to group citizens into “clusters” with distinct democratic attitudes. Our aim is to divide the citizenry into smaller “publics” of similarly minded individuals and identify those publics with attitudes that could undermine democracy. We then describe the clusters according to their demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics.

METHODOLOGY

We employ cluster analysis to classify Salvadorans into clusters with distinct attitudinal profiles using their scores on different democratic attitudes. The aim is to maximize similarity within each cluster while maximizing dissimilarity between clusters.¹ Cluster analysis is preferable to other classification schemes because it is highly inductive, meaning that it lets survey Salvadorans “speak” for themselves without making assumptions in advance about how to group them.²

Data on five democratic attitudes are available in 2018: support for democracy, opposition to military coups, opposition to executive aggrandizement, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion. For the 2021 analysis, we only use two democratic attitudes—support for democracy and opposition to executive aggrandizement—as the survey questions related to the other three democratic attitudes are not available.³ We define these democratic attitudes as follows:

- *Support for democracy*: The extent to which Salvadorans agree or disagree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.”
- *Opposition to military coups*: Whether Salvadorans believe it would be justified for the military to take power in a military coup in certain circumstances. [*available for 2018 only*]
- *Opposition to executive aggrandizement*: Whether Salvadorans believe it would be justified for the president to close Congress and the Supreme Court and govern without them.

¹ Cluster analysis is a family of classification techniques that are extensively used in market research, some social and natural sciences, and computer science. Cluster analysis entails analyzing a collection of heterogeneous objects and grouping them in smaller, homogenous clusters according to two or more measurable attributes. There are several variants of cluster analysis. We use Hierarchical Density-based Clustering (HDBScan), as developed by Campello, R. J., Moulavi, D., and Sander, J. (2013). “Density-based clustering based on hierarchical density estimates.” In *Pacific-Asia conference on knowledge discovery and data mining* (pp. 160-172). Springer. HDBScan relies on density clustering so it effectively finds clusters of different shapes and sizes. Its main advantages are that the identified clusters maximize the sum of individual cluster stabilities, and the number of clusters is chosen endogenously. Moreover, HDBScan calculates each point’s outlier score (GLOSH), which allows for identifying ungrouped observations (i.e., observations that do not belong to any identified cluster). The only parameter that needs to be entered when using HDBScan is the minimum size of the clusters (as a percentage of the sample). In our analysis, we opted for a value of three percent, which produces a reduced number of medium-size clusters for all countries. Given that responses to political preferences questions are highly likely to correlate with each other, we employed Mahalanobis distances as the criteria for computing the distance metric used by HDBScan.

² For example, it is not necessary to predefine “acceptable” combinations of attitudes or set arbitrary cutoffs for scores to classify respondents into a given cluster.

³ In the 2021 round of the AmericasBarometer in El Salvador, the questions about opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement were administered in a split sample so that each respondent was asked only one of the two questions. We decided to use opposition to executive aggrandizement for cluster analysis as we believe that executive aggrandizement currently represents a greater threat to democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean than military coups. In the specific case of El Salvador, it is relevant to study opposition to executive aggrandizement due to the authoritarian-leaning characteristics of President Nayib Bukele.

- *Tolerance of protest and regime critics:* The extent to which Salvadorans support the right to demonstration and the political rights of regime critics. [available for 2018 only]
- *Support for democratic inclusion:* The extent to which Salvadorans support the political inclusion of historically excluded demographic groups (women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals). [available for 2018 only]

It is important to note that all five of these democratic attitudes could be considered aspects of support for democracy. However, when we use the term “support for democracy” in this report, we are referring specifically to agreement with the first item, which refers to democracy as an abstract concept.

In the following section, we describe the profiles and the share of Salvadorans in each cluster we identify. We also assign labels—e.g., “Institutionalists” and “Military Interventionists”—to each cluster for illustrative purposes. We then describe the clusters according to their demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics.

RESULTS

2018 WAVE

Using the five democratic attitudes described above, cluster analysis classifies 80 percent of the 2018 AmericasBarometer population for El Salvador into three distinct clusters. This means that about 20 percent of Salvadorans do not belong to any cluster.

We labeled the clusters “Institutionalists,” “Military interventionists,” and “Ambivalent Presidentialists.” Salvadorans in all three clusters have similarly moderate to high support for democracy, moderate support for democratic inclusion and low tolerance of protest and regime critics. The clusters are categorically differentiated by the extent to which they oppose undemocratic actions by either the military or the executive. Below we present each cluster in more detail.

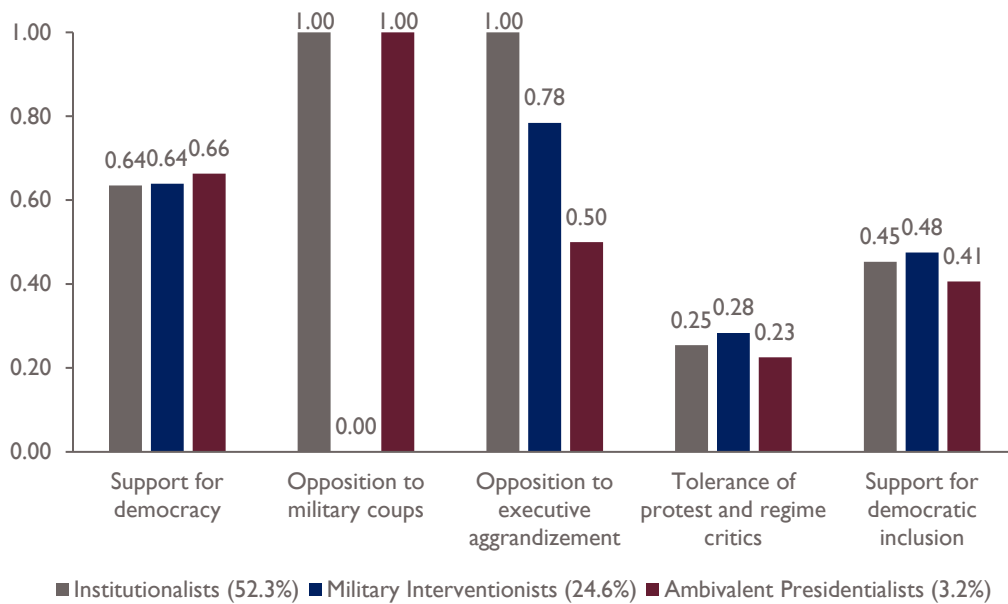
Institutionalists: Salvadorans in this cluster have very high opposition to both military coups and executive aggrandizement. However, they have moderate support for democratic inclusion and low tolerance of protest and regime critics. Institutionalists compose 52.3 percent of the population.

Military Interventionists: Salvadorans in this cluster are characterized by very low opposition to military coups—in fact, all Salvadorans in this group justify a military coup to deal with crime or corruption. They have high opposition to executive aggrandizement, moderate level of support for democratic inclusion, and moderate to low tolerance of protest and regime critics. Military Interventionists compose 24.6 percent of the population.

Ambivalent Presidentialists: Salvadorans in this cluster have high opposition to military coups, moderate to low support for the inclusion of minorities, and moderate to low tolerance of protest and regime critics. What distinguishes this cluster is that half of Salvadorans in this group do not oppose the President closing either the Supreme Court or the legislature. Ambivalent Presidentialists represent 3.2 percent of the population.

Figure I shows how these clusters compare to each other in terms of their democratic attitudes. All attitudes range from zero (least democratic) to one (most democratic).

Figure I. Profiles of Democratic Attitudes in El Salvador – 2018 Wave



To describe the clusters’ key characteristics, we compare Salvadorans in each cluster to all other Salvadorans—that is, to those in the other two clusters and those who do not belong to any cluster. Annex 2 reports the breakdown of Salvadorans in each cluster across categories of a given characteristic.

INSTITUTIONALISTS

The box presents the main characteristics of the Institutionalists. In the text, we highlight those characteristics that are significantly different from the rest of Salvadorans.

Institutionalists are older than the rest of Salvadorans; the share of Salvadorans who are 60+ years old is significantly higher among Institutionalists than among all other Salvadorans (18 vs. 14 percent). Institutionalists are significantly more likely to live in rural areas (40 vs. 34 percent) and significantly less likely to have been a victim of a crime in the past 12 months (17 vs. 25 percent) than the rest of Salvadorans.

Institutionalists are significantly more likely to approve of the performance of the President than the rest of Salvadorans (34 vs. 30 percent). Moreover, the share of Salvadorans who voted in the last presidential election is significantly higher among Institutionalists than among all other Salvadorans (68 vs. 63 percent). However, the proportion of Salvadorans who believe that they understand important political issues is significantly lower among Institutionalists than among all other Salvadorans (51 vs. 57 percent).

INSTITUTIONALISTS' CHARACTERISTICS

- Female: 51 percent
- Elderly (60+ y.o.): 18 percent
- Mestizo: 41 percent
- Rural: 40 percent
- Middle wealth quintile: 22 percent
- Years of schooling: 8.9
- Was victim of a crime in the past 12 months: 17 percent
- People in neighborhood who were victim of a crime: 20 percent
- Number of corruption instances experienced in the past 12 months: 0.16
- People in neighborhood who experienced at least one corruption instance: 12 percent
- Approves of the performance of the President: 34 percent
- Believes that they understand important political issues: 51 percent
- Believes that those who govern are interested in what people think: 32 percent
- Voted in the last presidential elections: 68 percent
- Participated in a demonstration or protest in the past 12 months: 2 percent
- Attended a city council meeting in the past 12 months: 9 percent
- Attends meetings of a community improvement association: 29 percent

MILITARY INTERVENTIONISTS

MILITARY INTERVENTIONISTS' CHARACTERISTICS

- Female: 51 percent
- Young (18–29 y.o.): 42 percent
- Mestizo: 45 percent
- Rural: 35 percent
- Two wealthiest quintiles: 43 percent
- Years of schooling: 9.5
- Was victim of a crime in the past 12 months: 30 percent
- People in neighborhood who were victim of a crime: 21 percent
- Number of corruption instances experienced in the past 12 months: 0.2
- People in neighborhood who experienced at least one corruption instance: 12 percent
- Approves of the performance of the President: 23 percent
- Believes that they understand important political issues: 58 percent
- Believes that those who govern are interested in what people think: 32 percent
- Voted in the last presidential elections: 62 percent
- Participated in a demonstration or protest in past 12 months: 2 percent
- Attended a city council meeting in the past 12 months: 9 percent
- Attends meetings of a community improvement association: 30 percent

Military Interventionists are younger than the rest of Salvadorans; the share of Salvadorans who are between 18 and 29 years old is significantly higher among Military Interventionists than among all other Salvadorans (42 vs. 31 percent). Military Interventionists are more likely to identify as Mestizo (45 vs. 40 percent) and more educated (9.5 vs. 8.9 years of schooling) than the rest of Salvadorans.

The proportion of Salvadorans who have been a victim of a crime in the past year is significantly higher among Military Interventionists than among all other Salvadorans (30 vs. 17 percent). Also, Military Interventionists are less likely to approve of the performance of the President than the rest of Salvadorans (23 vs. 36 percent). Finally, the share of Salvadorans who voted in the last presidential election is significantly lower among Military Interventionists than among all other Salvadorans (62 vs. 67 percent).

AMBIVALENT PRESIDENTIALIST

Ambivalent Presidentialists are younger than the rest of Salvadorans; the share of Salvadorans who are between 18 and 29 years old is significantly higher among this group than among all other Salvadorans (53 vs. 33 percent). They are also significantly more likely to be White (37 vs. 22 percent) and significantly less likely to identify as Mestizo (29 vs. 42 percent) than the rest of Salvadorans.

The share of Salvadorans who have been victim of a crime in the past year is significantly lower among Ambivalent Presidentialists than among all other Salvadorans (12 vs. 21 percent). Moreover, Ambivalent Presidentialists are more likely to believe that those who govern are interested in what people think than other Salvadorans (47 vs. 32 percent). Finally, the share of Salvadorans who attended a city council meeting in the past 12 months is significantly lower among Ambivalent Presidentialists than among all other Salvadorans (2 vs. 9 percent).

AMBIVALENT PRESIDENTIALISTS' CHARACTERISTICS
• Female: 49 percent
• Young (18–29 y.o.): 53 percent
• White: 37 percent
• Rural: 41 percent
• Two poorest quintiles: 50 percent
• Years of schooling: 9.3
• Was victim of a crime in the past 12 months: 12 percent
• People in neighborhood who were victim of a crime: 18 percent
• Number of corruption instances experienced in the past 12 months: 0.18
• People in neighborhood who experienced at least one corruption instance: 13 percent
• Approves of the performance of the President: 45 percent
• Believes that they understand important political issues: 53 percent
• Believes that those who govern are interested in what people think: 47 percent
• Voted in the last presidential elections: 57 percent
• Participated in a demonstration or protest in past 12 months: 2 percent
• Attended a city council meeting in the past 12 months: 2 percent
• Attends meetings of a community improvement association: 31 percent

2021 WAVE

Using two democratic attitudes—support for democracy and opposition to executive aggrandizement—cluster analysis classifies the 2021 AmericasBarometer population for El Salvador into three distinct clusters. In 2021, these clusters include 100 percent of the analyzed sample (i.e., each respondent fits into one of the three clusters). Although the clusters have similar names as the 2019 wave, it is important to emphasize that they are not the same groups

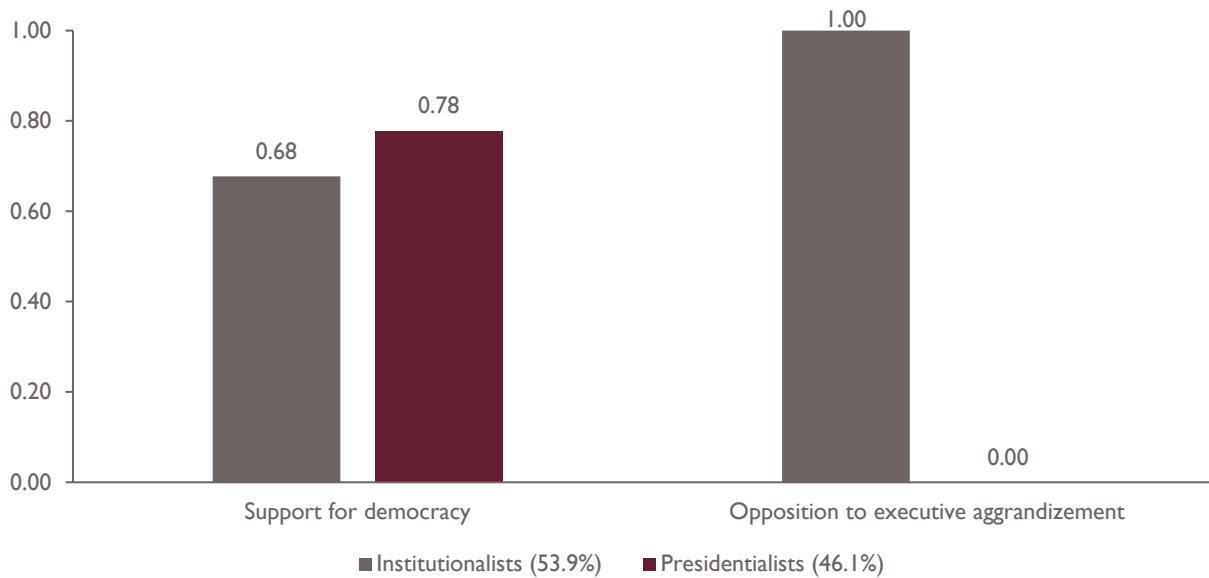
of people (i.e., they are not the same individuals) because the AmericasBarometer survey is not a panel survey and the attitudes used for classification are not the same.

Institutionalists: These Salvadorans have high support for democracy and very high opposition to executive aggrandizement. Institutionalists represent 53.9 percent of the population.

Presidentialists: These Salvadorans are characterized by null opposition to executive aggrandizement. However, they also have—on average—higher support for democracy among the two clusters identified. Presidentialists compose 46.1 percent of the population.

Figure 2 shows how these groups compare to each other in terms of their democratic attitudes, which range from zero (least democratic) to one (most democratic).

Figure 2. Profiles of Democratic Attitudes in El Salvador – 2021 Wave



Below we describe the main differences between Institutionalists and Presidentialists in terms of socio-demographic and other characteristics. **Error! Reference source not found.** reports the breakdown of Salvadorans in each cluster across categories of a given characteristic.

Institutionalists are older than Presidentialists. The share of Salvadorans who are between 18 and 29 years old is significantly lower (29 vs. 41 percent) among Institutionalists than among Presidentialists, while the share of Salvadorans who are 60+ years old is significantly higher (14 vs. 9 percent).

Institutionalists are less likely to be female than Presidentialists (45 vs. 57

INSTITUTIONALISTS' CHARACTERISTICS

- Female: 45 percent
- Young (18–29 y.o.): 29 percent
- Elderly (60+ y.o.): 14 percent
- White: 23 percent
- Mestizo: 40 percent
- Rural: 10 percent
- Two poorest quintiles: 36 percent
- Tertiary education: 20 percent
- Number of corruption instances experienced in the past 12 months: 0.03
- Approves of the performance of the President: 76 percent

percent). Also, the share of Salvadorans who live in rural areas is significantly lower among Institutionalists than among Presidentialists (10 vs. 15 percent).

The clusters also differ when it comes to racial identity. The percentage of Salvadorans who self-identify as Mestizo is significantly higher among Institutionalists than among Presidentialists (40 vs. 32 percent), and the percentage of Salvadorans who self-identify as White is significantly lower among Institutionalists than among Presidentialists (23 vs. 31 percent).

On average, Institutionalists are wealthier and more educated than Presidentialists. The difference between the shares of Institutionalists and Presidentialists in the second-poorest quintile is statistically significant (16 vs. 22 percent). The differences between the shares of Institutionalists and Presidentialists with secondary and tertiary education are also statistically significant (49 vs. 56 percent and 20 vs. 11 percent, respectively).

A high percentage of Salvadorans in both clusters approves of the performance of the President. However, the share of Salvadorans who have a favorable opinion of the President is significantly lower among Institutionalists than among Presidentialists (76 vs. 95 percent).

PRESIDENTIALISTS' CHARACTERISTICS

- Female: 57 percent
- Young (18–29 y.o.): 41 percent
- Elderly (60+ y.o.): 9 percent
- White: 31 percent
- Mestizo: 32 percent
- Rural: 15 percent
- Two poorest quintiles: 44 percent
- Tertiary education: 10 percent
- Number of corruption instances experienced in the past 12 months: 0.06
- Approves of the performance of the President: 95 percent

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the data we have, democratic attitudes appear to have declined precipitously in El Salvador between 2018 and 2021. While 27.8 percent of Salvadorans were identified as belonging to one of two authoritarian clusters in 2018 (Ambivalent Presidentialists or Military Interventionists), the cluster analysis identifies more than half of Salvadorans as Presidentialists in 2021. There are many methodological differences between the two survey waves, but the decline in democratic attitudes is driven by responses to one question asked in both waves: “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?” Whereas 79 percent of Salvadorans said this would not be justified in 2018, only 43 percent did so in 2021. This dramatic shift in a fundamental democratic norm is very likely linked to the political upheavals of the past two years.

At the same time, we must emphasize that two major sets of methodological changes between the 2021 wave and prior waves of the AmericasBarometer make comparisons difficult. The first is survey mode. Although the AmericasBarometer has historically been conducted using face-to-face survey interviews, LAPOP chose to conduct its 2021 wave by phone for the first time, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the 2021 data are weighted to match the demographics of the 2018 data, the difference in survey mode likely introduced differences into the population that are difficult to measure and not fully accounted for by the weights. The

second major difference relates to questionnaire. Only three of the 12 survey questions we analyzed in 2018 were also available in 2021, and we were only able to use two of the three because the questions about opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement were administered in a split population.

Despite these limitations, the magnitude of the differences we have uncovered, as well as our deeper analysis of attitudes regarding executive aggrandizement, suggests that there has been a major shift in democratic culture in El Salvador in three short years. The possibly growing group of authoritarians is likely to be younger, poorer, and somewhat more rural, and most importantly, more approving of the performance of President Bukele than other Salvadorans.

ANNEX I: CONNECTING DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS

What citizen attitudes bolster Latin American democracy? Answers to this question build on the idea of “legitimacy”: citizens’ abstract and wide-reaching belief that the political system in which they live is right and proper, deserving of respect and obedience. Illegitimate political systems, the thought goes, foster rebellion, which puts a strain on state resources and weakens institutions. A century ago, in his seminal essay “Politics as a Vocation,” Max Weber argued that legitimacy was critical for “organized domination” in modern, bureaucratic states.⁴ Following World War II, scholars anxious about the stability of new and reestablished democracies built on Weber’s work to insist that regime legitimacy was, as Seymour Martin Lipset put it, “a social requisite of democracy.”⁵ Samuel Huntington argued that when democratic governments perform badly, high legitimacy encourages citizens to channel their frustration through voting, rather than attacking the system.⁶

Today, scholarship on legitimacy builds on a critical insight of David Easton, who argued that legitimacy can be either “diffuse” or “specific.”⁷ “Specific support” refers to support for the particular politicians holding office and to approval of actually existing institutions. It should rise and fall as government offices change party control and as specific officeholders do well or poorly. By contrast, “diffuse support” or “legitimacy” refers to support for the broader institutions and principles governing the country and should be relatively stable over time. It constitutes a “reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate [government] outputs to which they are opposed.”⁸

The AmericasBarometer studies and the body of research on Latin American political culture founded by Mitchell Seligson build on Easton’s distinction between diffuse and specific support. In their 2009 book, for instance, John Booth and Mitchell Seligson assess the multidimensional nature of legitimacy using 2004 AmericasBarometer data from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama, and Colombia.⁹ They argue that legitimacy has six dimensions, which span from “diffuse” to “specific”: 1) existence of a political community, 2) support for regime principles, 3) support for regime institutions, 4) evaluation of regime performance, 5) support for local government, and 6) support for political actors or authorities.

⁴ Weber, Max. (1919). “Politics as a Vocation.” In H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (pp. 77-128). Oxford University Press.

⁵ Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba. (1989). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Sage Publications; Dahl, Robert. (1956). *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Dahl, Robert. (1956). *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. University of Chicago Press; Easton, David. (1965). *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. John Wiley; Easton, David. (1975). “A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support.” *British Journal of Political Science* 5, 435-437; Gamson, William A. (1968). *Power and Discontent*. Dorsey Press; Lipset, Seymour Martin. (1959). “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy.” *American Political Science Review*, 53(1), 69-105.

⁶ Huntington, Samuel P. (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press.

⁷ Easton, 1965; Easton, 1975.

⁸ Easton 1965, p. 273.

⁹ Booth, John A., and Mitchell A. Seligson. (2009). *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Political Support and Democracy in Eight Latin American Nations*. Cambridge University Press.

The USAID reports from the AmericasBarometer, however, commonly focus on one particular dimension from the middle of that spectrum: support for regime institutions. What LAPOP calls the “system support” index examines the extent to which citizens believe their political system is just and deserves respect. The index is based on responses to a series of five survey questions about matters such as whether the courts in one’s country guarantee a fair trial.¹⁰ Seligson explains that these questions “attempt to tap Easton’s generalized notion of ‘diffuse support’ and Lipset’s notion of ‘legitimacy’ rather than specific support for any given administration.”¹¹ Research shows that the system support index predicts a wide range of citizens’ political behaviors, from electoral choices to participation in protest.¹²

Like system support, “satisfaction with democracy” is a facet of legitimacy that is midway between diffuse and specific. This attitude is generally measured with a question such as the following: “In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in your country?”¹³ Since even the authoritarian regimes of Latin America claim to be democratic, satisfaction with democracy can provide a sense of the extent to which citizens believe their political systems are living up to the systems’ most fundamental goals. One important body of scholarship shows that when citizens’ preferred parties lose elections, they can become less satisfied with democracy—with potentially serious consequences.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the attitude has been subject to substantial academic critique.¹⁵ The problem is that citizens need to know what “democracy” means to answer the question. As a result, responses vary based on how individuals define democracy—for instance, whether they think it means economic equality or instead checks and balances. In addition, responses vary

¹⁰ These questions ask to what extent the respondent believes that “the courts in [their country] guarantee a fair trial,” that “citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system” of their country, and that “one should support the political system” of the country. The remaining items ask, “To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country]?” and “To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of [country]?” This scale is adapted from Muller, Edward N. (1979). *Aggressive Political Participation*. Princeton University Press.

¹¹ See Seligson, Mitchell A. (2002). “Trouble in Paradise?: The Erosion of System Support in Costa Rica, 1978-1999,” *Latin American Research Review*, 37(1), 160-185.

¹² Booth and Seligson, 2009. Booth, John A., and Mitchell A. Seligson. (2005). “Political Legitimacy and Participation in Costa Rica: Evidence of Arena Shopping.” *Political Research Quarterly*, 58(4), 537-550; Smith, Amy Erica. (2009). “Legitimate Grievances: Preferences for Democracy, System Support, and Political Participation in Bolivia.” *Latin American Research Review* 44(3), 102-126.

¹³ This is the wording of AmericasBarometer item PN4.

¹⁴ This is known as the “loser’s consent” literature; for the seminal work, see Anderson, Christopher J., André Blais, Shaun Bowler, Todd Donovan, and Ola Listhaug. (2005). *Losers’ Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ For analyses and critiques of the “satisfaction with democracy” item, see Canache, Damarys, Jeffery J. Mondak, and Mitchell A. Seligson. (2001). “Meaning and Measurement in Cross-National Research on Satisfaction with Democracy,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 65(4), 506-528; Ferrín, Mónica. (2016). “An Empirical Assessment of Satisfaction with Democracy.” In Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi (Eds.), *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy* (pp. 283-306). Oxford University Press; Linde, Jonas, and Joakim Ekman. (2003). “Satisfaction with Democracy: A Note on a Frequently Used Indicator in Comparative Politics.” *European Journal of Political Research*, 42(3): 391-408. For a response defending the item, see Anderson, Christopher J. (2005). “Good Questions, Dubious Inferences, and Bad Solutions: Some Further Thoughts on Satisfaction with Democracy.” Working Paper.

cross-nationally depending on the content of civic education and culturally based conceptions of democracy.

However, neither system support nor satisfaction with democracy measure attitudes toward democracy itself. Citizens might continue to express high system support even while democracy crumbles around them—as happened, for instance, in Venezuela during Chavismo’s gradual takeover.¹⁶ Similarly, new research finds that in countries undergoing autocratization, people who benefit from the new authoritarian regime continue to express high satisfaction with democracy.¹⁷ As a result, we need more than these two common measures to indicate whether citizens are willing to support and defend democracy.

Instead, our study relies on survey questions from the “diffuse” end of the legitimacy spectrum. The most famous of the attitudes we study is *support for democracy* in the abstract, which provides a good first approximation of what Booth and Seligson call “attitudes toward regime principles.” In the AmericasBarometer, “support for democracy” is measured with the “Churchillian” question asking to what extent respondents agree or disagree that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” Combining a wide range of similar questions from many different cross-national surveys, Christopher Claassen finds that citizen support for democracy affects countries’ actual level of democracy.¹⁸ When support for democracy falls, the level of democracy is likely to fall in subsequent years, as measured by efforts such as the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) initiative; when support for democracy rises, so too will a country’s V-DEM scores rise. This effect is observed only in electoral democracies, which are more responsive to citizens’ views than authoritarian regimes.

Nonetheless, general questions on “support for democracy” have also been criticized. The problem is the same one we highlighted earlier when we discussed “satisfaction with democracy”: citizens have to know what democracy means before they can decide whether they support it. Research shows that citizens define democracy in a tremendous variety of ways. Analyzing open-ended questions from surveys they administered in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Guatemala, for instance, Siddhartha Baviskar and Mary Fran Malone categorize citizens’ definitions of democracy as referring either to “means” or “ends”—that is, procedures such as elections or outcomes such as low economic inequality.¹⁹ Excluded groups, including women and respondents of lower social classes, tend to emphasize outputs over procedures. Other research confirms that citizens who are relatively advantaged in society tend to define

¹⁶ Rhodes-Purdy, Matthew. (2017). “Beyond the Balance Sheet: Performance, Participation, and Regime Support in Latin America.” *Comparative Politics*, 49(2), 252-286.

¹⁷ Singer, Matthew. (Forthcoming). “Fiddling While Democracy Burns: Partisan Reactions to Weak Democracy in Latin America.” *Perspectives on Politics*.

¹⁸ Claassen, Christopher. (2020). “Does Public Support Help Democracy Survive?” *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(1), 118-134.

¹⁹ Baviskar, Siddhartha, and Mary Fran Malone. (2004, April). “What Democracy Means to Citizens—and Why It Matters.” *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*.

democracy in ways that support the status quo; similarly, those who benefit from the current democratic system express greater preference for democracy in the abstract.²⁰

Because of this research, we also include several other attitudes dealing with support for less ambiguous regime principles. All involve attitudes toward democratic procedures and practices—the “means” side of the means-versus-ends dichotomy. Our second attitude is *opposition to military coups*. Here, we use a long-standing AmericasBarometer series that asks respondents whether it would be justified for the military to take power in a military coup in certain circumstances. Research shows that responses to these questions strongly predict democratic outcomes: both voting for authoritarian populist leaders and actual coups.²¹

We also include attitudes toward other institutional threats to democracy. Military coups are no longer the most common way Latin American democracies fall—instead, a new generation of authoritarian leaders such as Hugo Chávez and Daniel Ortega win power democratically and then slowly dismantles democratic checks and balances from the inside. As a result, our third attitude is *opposition to “executive aggrandizement”*—a term political scientists use to refer to presidents who gradually expand their power until democracy is no longer recognizable.²² We measure this using AmericasBarometer questions that ask respondents whether it would be justified for the president to close and govern without Congress and the Supreme Court. New research finds that support for executive aggrandizement grew dramatically among supporters of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro after he was elected and inaugurated, providing a support base for Bolsonaro’s attempts to eliminate checks on his power.²³

Democracy, however, involves more than just procedures for transferring and checking power; it also requires protections for citizens. These include universal suffrage and the freedoms of speech, assembly, and conscience necessary for full practice of democratic citizenship. To guide our analysis, we draw on two research projects. First, Ryan Carlin and Matthew Singer’s use AmericasBarometer data to identify four dimensions of citizen support for democracy, of which two are focused on citizens: support for “public contestation” and “inclusive participation.”²⁴ The former entails opposition to censorship and to suppression of public protest; the latter

²⁰ Ceka, Besir, and Pedro C. Magalhaes. (2016). “How People Understand Democracy: A Social Dominance Approach.” In Mónica Ferrín and Hanspeter Kriesi (Eds.), *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy* (pp. 90-110). Oxford University Press; Sarsfield, Rodolfo, and Fabián Echegaray. (2006). “Opening the Black Box: How Satisfaction with Democracy and Its Perceived Efficacy Affect Regime Preference in Latin America.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 18(2), 153-173.

²¹ Cohen, Mollie J., Amy Erica Smith, Mason W. Moseley, and Matthew Layton. (Forthcoming). “Winners’ Consent: Citizen Commitment to Democracy When Illiberal Candidates Win Elections.” *American Journal of Political Science*. http://amyericasmith.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CohenEtAl_AJPS_ConditionalAcceptance.pdf; Cassell, Kaitlen J., John A. Booth, and Mitchell A. Seligson. (2018). “Support for Coups in the Americas: Mass Norms and Democratization.” *Latin American Politics and Society*, 60(4), 1-25. Similarly, Muller and Seligson argued that “support for revolutionary change” inhibited democratization in Latin America in the 1981–1990 period; see Muller, Edward N., and Mitchell A. Seligson. (1994). “Civic Culture and Democracy: The Question of Causal Relationships.” *American Political Science Review*, 88(3), 635-652.

²² For a brief overview, see Bermeo, Nancy. (2016). “On Democratic Backsliding.” *Journal of Democracy*, 27(1), 5-19; Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. (2018). *How Democracies Die*. Crown.

²³ Cohen et al., Forthcoming.

²⁴ Carlin and Singer draw on Robert Dahl’s famous normative framework that he labeled “polyarchy.” Carlin, Ryan E., and Matthew M. Singer. (2011). “Support for Polyarchy in the Americas.” *Comparative Political Studies*, 44(11).

involves tolerance for the participation of historically excluded and disliked groups. Similarly, Andreas Schedler and Rodolfo Sarsfield identify four dimensions of “support for liberal democracy,” of which two are focused on citizens: support for “freedom of expression” and support for “political equality.”²⁵

Building on these two studies, the fourth attitude we consider is *tolerance of protest and regime critics*. In our analysis, this is based on responses to five AmericasBarometer questions that gauge respondents’ support for the right to demonstration and the political rights of regime critics—i.e., those “who only say bad things” about a country’s system of government. Finally, our fifth attitude is *support for democratic inclusion*. In the AmericasBarometer data, we focus on two questions dealing with the political participation of historically excluded demographic groups: women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities.

Do these five attitudes affect democratic stability in Latin America? As we discussed above, prior research shows that the first three attitudes—support for democracy in the abstract, support for military coups, and support for executive aggrandizement—help predict episodes of democratization and democratic backsliding. There are also strong reasons to believe the fourth and fifth attitudes can lead to democratic change. Citizens who approve of others’ right to protest may resist would-be authoritarian leaders who crack down on dissent. At the other extreme, citizens who are most intolerant might even support large-scale state violence against dissenters. And while inclusion of women and LGBT groups in political leadership is not a minimum requirement of democracy, high-quality democracies are distinguished in part by incorporating these groups. We lack quantitative, cross-national and over-time analysis of whether these attitudes predict democratic change. However, intolerance of dissent and opposition to inclusion are elements of the psychological trait of authoritarianism, which research shows predicts voting for authoritarian candidates across Latin America, the United States, and Europe.²⁶

Table 1 presents the full wording of the AmericasBarometer questions we use to measure each democratic attitude in our analysis. We use these questions to create attitudinal scores, ranging from zero (least democratic attitude) to one (most democratic attitude). When more than one question is available for a given democratic attitude, we calculate the attitudinal score by averaging responses.

Table 1. AmericasBarometer Items and Underlying Democratic Attitudes

Democratic Attitude	Questions	2018 Survey ¹	2021 Survey ²
Support for democracy	ING4. Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of	✓	✓

²⁵ Schedler, Andreas, and Rodolfo Sarsfield. (2007). “Democrats with Adjectives: Linking Direct and Indirect Measures of Democratic Support.” *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(5), 637-659.

²⁶ Cohen, Mollie J., and Amy Erica Smith. (2016). “Do Authoritarians Vote for Authoritarians? Evidence from Latin America.” *Research & Politics*, 3(4); Hetherington, Marc, and Jonathan Weiler. (2018). *Prius or Pickup?: How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America’s Great Divide*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; Smith, Amy Erica, Mollie J. Cohen, Mason W. Moseley, and Matthew Layton. (2021). “Rejecting Authoritarianism: When Values Are Endogenous to Politics.” http://amyericasmith.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Smith-et-al_Rejecting-Authoritarianism_2.19.21.pdf.

Democratic Attitude	Questions	2018 Survey ¹	2021 Survey ²
	government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? <i>Response options: Seven-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree.</i>		
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 <i>Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.</i>	✓	
	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 <i>Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.</i>	✓	✓
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? <i>Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.</i>	✓	✓
	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? <i>Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.</i>	✓	
Tolerance of protest and regime critics	E5. Of people participating in legal demonstrations. How much do you approve or disapprove? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve. Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i>	✓	
	D1. There are people who only say bad things about the form of government of El Salvador, 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. <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve. Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i>	✓	
	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. <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve. Response options: Ten-point</i>	✓	

Democratic Attitude	Questions	2018 Survey ¹	2021 Survey ²
	<i>scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i>		
	D3. Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the form of government of El Salvador, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i>	✓	
	D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i>	✓	
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? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i>	✓	
	VB50. Some say that in general, men are better political leaders than women. Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree? <i>Response options: (1) Strongly agree; (2) Agree; (3) Disagree; (4) Strongly disagree.</i>	✓	

¹ In the 2018 round of the AmericasBarometer in El Salvador, items JC10 and JC13 were administered in a split population so that each respondent was asked only one of the two questions. To conduct cluster analysis using the full population of Salvadorans, we combined these two items into a single variable after confirming that: 1) the responses to the items were similarly distributed and 2) the items had similar patterns of correlation with other items.

² In the 2021 round of the AmericasBarometer in El Salvador, items JC13 and JC15A were administered in a split population so that each respondent was asked only one of the two questions. We decided to use JC15A for cluster analysis as we believe that executive aggrandizement currently represents a greater threat to democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean than military coups. We do not use JC13.

ANNEX 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH CLUSTER – 2018 WAVE

Variable	Institutionalists (52.3% of Salvadorans)	Military Interventionists (24.6% of Salvadorans)	Ambivalent Presidentialists (3.2% of Salvadorans)
Female	50.89%	51.08%	48.98%
Age: 18-29	28.23%***	41.67%***	53.06%***
Age: 30-59	53.8%**	47.04%	40.82%
Age: 60+	17.97%**	11.29%***	6.12%***
Race: white	21.77%	25.27%	36.73%*
Race: mestizo	41.14%	45.43%**	28.57%**
Race: indigenous	4.18%	4.3%	2.04%
Race: black	6.84%	6.18%	6.12%
Race: others	26.08%*	18.82%***	26.53%
Lives in rural area	40.13%**	34.68%	40.82%
Wealth index quintile: 1 (Poorest)	26.32%	27.17%	28.26%
Wealth index quintile: 2	12.84%	12.23%	21.74%
Wealth index quintile: 3	22.08%***	17.93%	13.04%
Wealth index quintile: 4	20.67%	23.1%	19.57%
Wealth index quintile: 5 (Richest)	18.1%	19.57%	17.39%
Years of educational attainment	8.93	9.48**	9.25
Was victim of a crime in the past 12 months	16.71%***	30.38%***	12.24%*
People in neighborhood who were victim of a crime	20.4%	21.25%	18.11%
Number of corruption instances experienced in the past 12 months	0.16	0.20	0.18
People in neighborhood who experienced at least one corruption instance	12.36%	12.02%	13.35%
Approves of the performance of the President	34.5%*	23.1%***	44.9%
Believes that they understand important political issues	51.29%**	57.57%	53.06%
Believes that those who govern are interested in what people think	31.66%	32.26%	46.94%*
Voted in the last presidential elections	68.48%**	62.1%*	57.14%
Participated in a demonstration or protest in the past 12 months	1.9%***	2.42%	2.04%
Attended a city council meeting in the past 12 months	8.61%	9.14%	2.04%***
Attends meetings of a community improvement association	28.61%	30.11%	30.61%

Note: Tests of statistical significance between individuals in a given cluster vs. all other individuals. Bootstrapped std. errors with 500 replications. * = $p < 0.1$, ** = $p < 0.05$, *** = $p < 0.01$.

ANNEX 3: CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH CLUSTER – 2021 WAVE

Variable	Institutionalists (53.9% of Salvadorans)	Presidentialists (46.1% of Salvadorans)
Female	45.06%***	57.2%***
Age: 18-29	29.17%***	41.01%***
Age: 30-59	56.56%*	49.79%*
Age: 60+	14.27%**	9.20%**
Race: white	23.15%**	30.6%**
Race: mestizo	40.43%**	31.75%**
Race: indigenous	4.06%	4.22%
Race: black	6.47%	5.10%
Race: other	25.89%	28.33%
Rural area	10.21%*	15.43%*
Wealth Index Quintile - Poorest	20.11%	21.6%
Wealth Index Quintile - 2	16.35%*	22.27%*
Wealth Index Quintile - 3	20.55%	19.43%
Wealth Index Quintile - 4	21.33%	19.1%
Wealth Index Quintile - Richest	21.65%	17.6%
Level of education: None	8.49%	10.52%
Level of education: Primary	22.5%	22.49%
Level of education: Secondary	48.95%*	56.03%*
Level of education: Tertiary	20.05%***	10.95%***
Number of corruption instances experienced in the past 12 months	0.03	0.06
Approves of the performance of the President	75.66%***	94.79%***

Note: Tests of statistical significance between individuals in a given cluster vs. all other individuals. Bootstrapped std. errors with 500 replications. * = $p < 0.1$, ** = $p < 0.05$, *** = $p < 0.01$.

