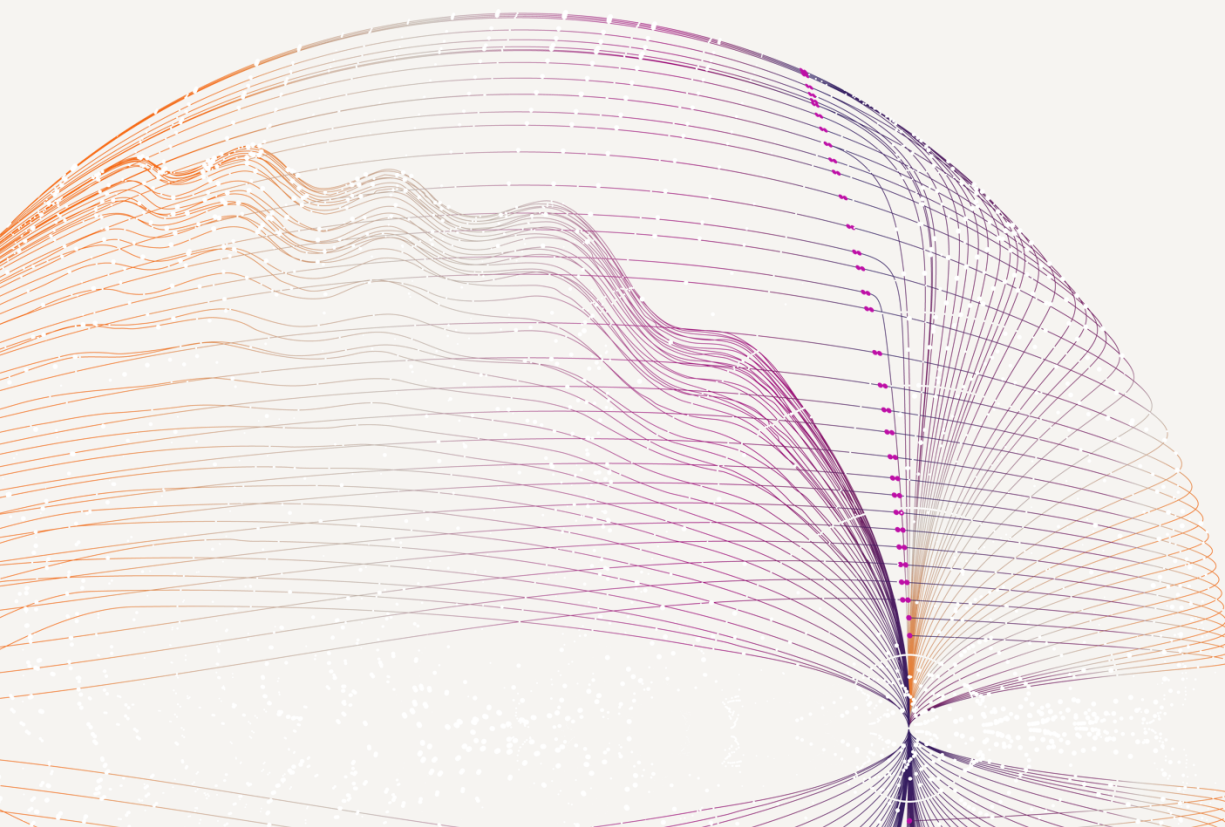**NORC** Global

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

AN ANALYSIS OF OPINION POLL DATA

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Acronyms

CBP	Customs and Border Protection
ERT	Episodes of Regime Transformation
GDP	Gross domestic product
LAC	Latin America and The Caribbean
NORC	NORC at the University of Chicago
RQ	Research Question
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy

Executive Summary

Research Goals

This study examines the connection between democratic backsliding and migration intentions in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region using opinion poll data. The goal of the overall project is to examine whether democratic erosion contributes to increased migration to the U.S. and other countries in the LAC region, after accounting for other push and pull factors that also influence migration trends.

To answer this question, the research team examined multiple data sources, including public opinion survey data on migration intentions, data on migration flows to the U.S. and other countries in the LAC region, and alternative measures from Google and Twitter. This report presents results based on analysis of opinion poll data[1] and includes in-depth case studies of two priority countries: Nicaragua and El Salvador. The second report presents results based on analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data on encounters at the U.S. Southern border, complemented by data on refugee applications in Costa Rica and Google Trends analysis. The third report summarizes the use of Twitter data to estimate migration trends, while the fourth report summarizes the findings of this research project. All reports are available here.

Methodology

This report uses survey data to examine whether migration intentions increase in response to democratic backsliding, the gradual erosion of democratic procedures, institutions, and norms by popularly elected leaders. The rationale for focusing on survey-based measures is two-fold. First, prior research using data from more than 160 countries shows that there is a strong association between migration intentions expressed in surveys and actual migration flows.[2] Second, the availability of high-quality opinion poll data allows for detailed analysis of how various factors – including democratic erosion – affect migration intentions, a valuable precursor to actual population movement.

The analysis in this report is based on survey data from 10 survey waves, spanning a nearly two-decade period from 2004 to 2023 and including 22 countries. The extraordinary depth and breadth of the surveys – which track migration intentions using the same question across countries and years – allows for an exceptionally rich investigation of trends over a period when many LAC countries experienced democratic reversals. According to the Varieties of

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[1] The field work was conducted by reputable opinion polling firms in many LAC countries. NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) did not collect primary survey data for this research project.
[2] Tjaden, Jasper, Daniel Auer, and Frank Laczko. "Linking Migration Intentions with Flows: Evidence and Potential Use." *International Migration* 57, no. 1 (2019): 36-57.

Democracy Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset, 10 of the 22 countries included in the analysis experienced backsliding episodes during the period under investigation.

The report uses a three-pronged analytic strategy. First, we use regression modeling to estimate the relationship between backsliding – measured in various ways – and migration intentions across the LAC region with data from all countries and all years. We treat the results as suggestive given that there are important limitations in the ability to account for time-varying confounds – particularly changes in economic and security conditions – that may be associated with backsliding. Given these limitations, the second strategy relies on case studies that examine two priority countries, Nicaragua and El Salvador, that have experienced significant, on-going democratic crises. The case study analysis complements the statistical investigation by offering a more nuanced examination of the types of backsliding events that contribute to migration and teases apart – to the extent possible – the complex inter-relationships between democratic erosion and other causes of migration in the region. Finally, we take advantage of a natural experiment in El Salvador that offers greater causal leverage on the relationship between backsliding and migration intentions. One of the key backsliding events in El Salvador – the regime's removal of the attorney general and dismissal of five Supreme Court justices – occurred on May 1, 2021 at roughly the mid-point of the 2021 survey field work in El Salvador. By comparing respondents interviewed after this event to those interviewed before it, we can identify the effects on migration intentions and other related attitudes, offering insight into how citizens react to major anti-democratic events.

Main Findings

The analysis documents a *conditional relationship* between democratic backsliding and migration intentions, consistent with the findings in Report 2 based on analysis of CBP and Google Trends data. Taken together, the results from multiple data sets and analytic strategies show that while democratic declines are not uniformly related to migration pressures, backsliding does increase migration intentions – and actual migration – when it affects livelihoods through widespread repression and/or by causing deterioration in other root causes of migration, particularly economic and security conditions.

The case study analysis illustrates the conditional effects of backsliding on migration intentions. The strongest evidence of a direct effect comes from Nicaragua, where the government crackdown on public protests in mid-2018 and subsequent repression produced a rise in migration intentions that corresponds with a sharp increase in actual migration to Costa Rica and the U.S. The crackdown caused a decline in tourism and foreign investment, contributing to a larger surge in out-migration in following years. However, earlier periods of democratic erosion in Nicaragua prior to 2018 and the more recent experience in El Salvador since 2019 show no evidence that democratic erosion increased migration intentions. In Nicaragua, the steady erosion of democratic freedoms under Ortega had no discernible effect on migration intentions prior to 2018. Many citizens experienced improving economic prospects during this period, and survey data show rising presidential approval and democratic satisfaction, despite the descent

toward authoritarianism. Likewise, in El Salvador, we observe no general uptick in migration intentions following Bukele's anti-democratic reforms, and some initiatives – particularly the suspension of due process justified as necessary to combat gang violence since 2022 – enjoy widespread public support. Analysis of these cases suggests that democratic erosion increases migration pressures when it affects individual livelihoods through repression and/or deteriorating economic or security conditions.

Consistent with the insights from the case study analysis, the region-wide statistical analysis shows no general association between backsliding and migration intentions throughout the LAC region as a whole. Our explanation for these null results is that most backsliding episodes in LAC have little direct effect on individual livelihoods. While citizens may disapprove of incumbents' efforts to enhance executive authority, limit the competitiveness of elections, and restrict the independence of legislatures and judiciaries, such reforms generally do not cause significant deterioration in material well-being for most citizens. Given the high cost of migration, diffuse concerns about the quality of democracy are unlikely to motivate large-scale shifts in migration. Because potential migrants can expect to face significant challenges in gaining entry and building new lives in the U.S. and many other countries, most citizens are unlikely to emigrate because they disapprove of the current political regime – particularly if other root causes of migration are unaffected by democratic erosion.

1. Introduction

Goals and Research Questions

NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) is using multiple analytic approaches and data sources to understand whether and how democratic backsliding affects migration in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, with a particular interest in two priority countries, Nicaragua and El Salvador, that have experienced sustained crises of democratic governance in parallel with rising out-migration to the U.S. and other countries in the region. The primary goal of this research activity is to shed light on whether democratic erosion contributes to increased migration to the U.S. and other countries in the LAC region, after accounting for other push and pull factors that also influence migration trends. Additionally, the activity seeks to assess alternative data sources for studying country-to-country migration.

To expand the evidence base for investing in programming designed to increase and sustain democracy in the region, the research team conducted complementary analysis using multiple data sources and analytic techniques. This report covers the first component of the project, which examines migration intentions using opinion poll data[3] throughout the LAC region and in two priority countries: Nicaragua and El Salvador. The second report examines migration trends to the U.S. with data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), complemented by analysis of Google Trends data. Given the well-known limitations with administrative data on cross-border migration, the third report explores potential uses of alternative strategies for measuring migration intentions and population movement using social media (Twitter) data. Finally, the fourth report summarizes the findings of this research project. All reports are available [here](#).

The outputs from the studies provide a stronger evidence base for understanding the connection between backsliding and migration. While recent events in the region suggest a clear link, prior studies have yet to substantiate this relationship using rigorous research methods and high-quality data sources. This activity also advances the use of alternative data sources for studying migration trends and developing effective real-time responses. While data from Twitter and Google Trends hold considerable potential for studying country-to-country migration, research exploiting these sources is still in its infancy. By advancing methods that leverage these data, the activity develops tools that have multiple potential future uses, including developing early warning systems, tracking the origin and travel routes of migrant caravans, and providing alternative datasets on cross-national movement in LAC and elsewhere.

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[3] The field work was conducted by reputable opinion polling firms in many LAC countries. NORC did not collect primary survey data for this research activity.

The overall activity is guided by three specific Research Questions (RQs) listed below. This report focuses solely on RQ1.

RQ1: Does democratic backsliding in the LAC region increase migration to the U.S. and/or other countries in the region?

RQ2: What are the challenges related to using CBP data from the United States and other receiving countries for studying the connection between democratic backsliding in LAC countries and out-migration? What best practices should be adopted for using this data? What alternative sources should be used as complements to the CBP data?

RQ3: Can alternative methods and data sources be used to estimate country-to-country migration trends and intentions to migrate for countries in the LAC region? What methods should be adopted for using these alternative data sources?

Report Structure

The structure of this report is as follows. Section 2 offers a definition of democratic backsliding and provides a summary of existing literature on the relationship between backsliding and migration intentions. Section 3 describes the data and methods used for the region-wide statistical analysis, including definitions of backsliding indicators and migration intentions. Section 4 presents results from the regression analysis, noting that the data show no evidence of a general, unconditional relationship between democratic erosion and migration intentions across the LAC region. Sections 5 and 6 present findings from case studies in Nicaragua and El Salvador, showing that while many common types of backsliding do not contribute to an upsurge in migration pressures, events that entail widespread repression and/or trigger a deterioration in economic and security conditions can cause a spike in migration intentions. We conclude with a summary of findings in Section 7.

2. Prior Literature

The existing literature on North-South migration has traditionally emphasized several key push and pull factors that affect migration trends: economic deprivation, war and insecurity, social networks in receiving countries, environmental crises, and others.[4] More recently, studies have also examined the effects of crime and gang violence in the LAC region,[5] as well as policy shifts in receiving countries.[6] However, less attention has been devoted to domestic political factors. While it is well understood that major political upheavals can spark mass refugee flows, few

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[4] Massey, D. S., J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, and A. Pellegrino. *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium.* Clarendon Press, 1999.

[5] Hiskey, J. T., A. Córdova, M. F. Malone, and D. M. Orcés. "Leaving the Devil You Know: Crime Victimization, US Deterrence Policy, and the Emigration Decision in Central America." *Latin American Research Review 53*, no. 3 (2018): 429-447. Clemens, Michael A. "Violence, Development, and Migration Waves: Evidence from Central American Child Migrant Apprehensions." *Journal of Urban Economics* 124 (2021).

[6] E.g., Holland, A. C., and M. E. Peters. "Explaining Migration Timing: Political Information and Opportunities." *International Organization* 74, no. 3 (2020): 560-583.

studies have examined whether the more gradual process of democratic backsliding affects migration. This is a potentially significant omission since many countries in the LAC region, including Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Venezuela, have experienced sustained democratic reversals in the last two decades and many others have experienced periods of democratic decline.[7]

As illustrated in Figure 1, democratic backsliding is defined as the gradual dismantling of democracy from the inside by popularly elected leaders. Erosion typically occurs through executive aggrandizement whereby anti-democratic leaders expand their power by undermining checks and balances including independent judiciaries, legislatures, bureaucracies, civil society, and the media. Backsliding often includes measures to restrict opposition parties and candidates and reforms that remove term limits or undermine electoral integrity. It may also include restrictions on public expression, popular protests, and human rights. Democratic erosion is often a gradual process, occurring through a series of incremental reforms, but can occur more quickly. In some cases, backsliding has resulted in autocratic systems, while in other instances democratic declines have yielded semi-democracies that retain aspects of both democracy and authoritarianism.

Figure 1. Key Aspects of Democratic Backsliding in LAC[8]
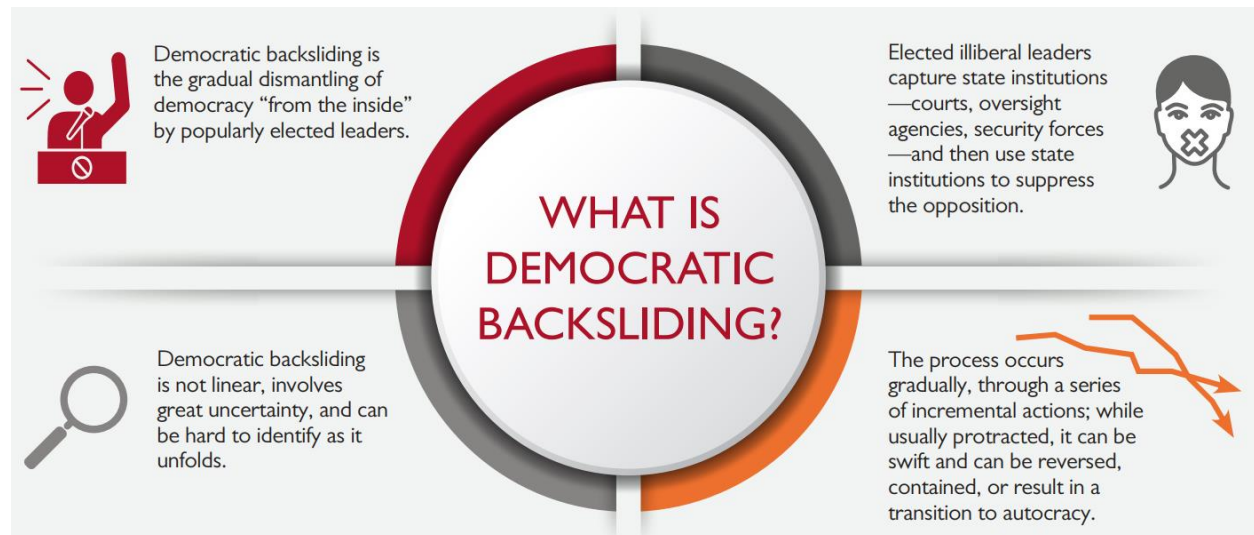
While democratic backsliding is a global phenomenon that has affected all world regions, concerns about democratic erosion are particularly acute in LAC, where recent events have undermined progress toward democratic consolidation in several countries.[9] These trends can

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[7] Mainwaring, Scott, and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. "Why Latin America's Democracies Are Stuck." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 156-170.
[8] This figure was created to summarize key insights from a roundtable on backsliding in Latin America convened by NORC at the University of Chicago on April 28, 2022. Additional information is available at: https://www.norc.org/research/projects/democratic-backsliding-and-authoritarian-resurgence-in-latin-america.html.
[9] Zovatto, D. "The Rapidly Deteriorating Quality of Democracy in Latin America." *Order from Chaos*. Brookings Institution, March 9, 2022. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/28/the-rapidly-deteriorating-quality-of-democracy-in-latin-america/.

be seen in Figure 2, which plots democracy ratings from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project since 1980 for the LAC region as a whole and for the two priority countries in this study.

In Nicaragua, democratic erosion began with Daniel Ortega's return to power in 2006. Since then, Ortega and loyalists in the Sandinista National Liberation Front have consolidated control over all branches of government, eliminated opposition voices, and silenced regime critics. As described below, Ortega's regime has become increasingly repressive following public protests in 2018 that erupted in response to planned reductions in social services.

In El Salvador, erosion is more recent, beginning after Nayib Bukele came to power in 2019. President Bukele has reduced institutional constraints, strong-armed the legislature into supporting his initiatives, and removed Supreme Court Judges and the Attorney General. In May 2022, he imposed a state of emergency that allows security services to detain individuals suspected of being gang members without due process. Reports suggest that over 50,000 individuals have been detained so far, including many thought to be falsely accused.[10]

Figure 2. Democracy in the LAC Region, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (1980-2022)
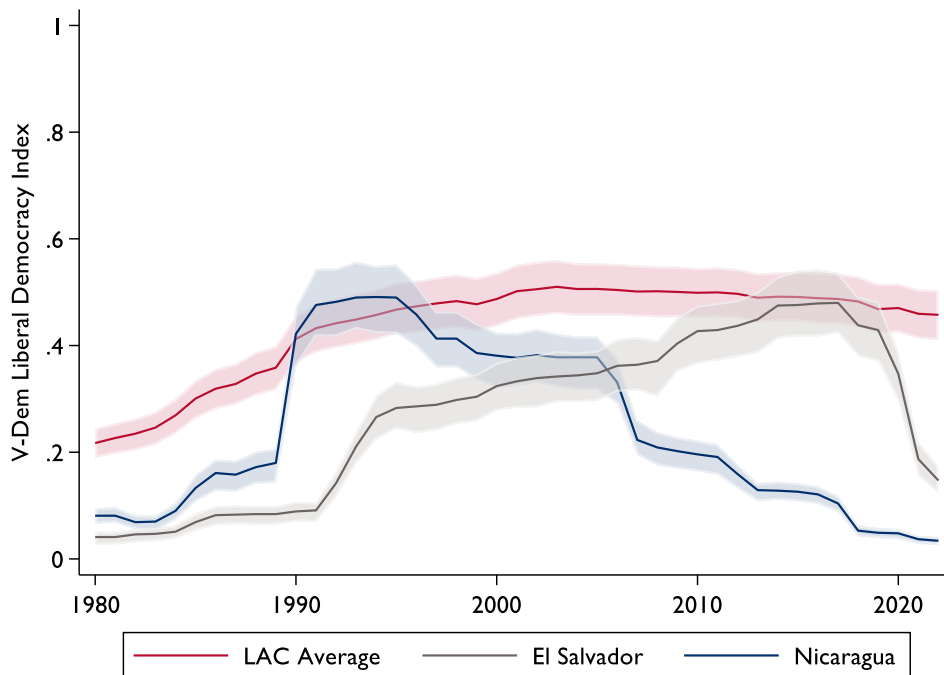
Some literature suggests a possible connection between backsliding and out-migration in the LAC region. In particular, Hiskey, Montalvo, and Orcés (2018) use survey data from the 2008 *AmericasBarometer* to show that migration intentions are lower in more democratic countries.[11]

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[10] "Arrest Tally in El Salvador Gang Crackdown Reaches 50,000." *France 24*, August 17, 2022. https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220817-arrest-tally-in-el-salvador-gang-crackdown-reaches-50-000.
[11] Hiskey, J., J. D. Montalvo, and D. Orcés. "Democracy, Governance, and Emigration Intentions in Latin America and the Caribbean." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 49, no. 1 (2014): 89-111.

The authors propose a simple explanation for these findings: in more democratic political systems, citizens have institutionalized avenues for expressing their political demands. Where such avenues are blocked, a larger number of citizens may conclude that they need to leave the country to improve their lives. This implies that as democracies erode, the share of citizens seeking to emigrate should increase due to political discontent and frustration.

However, there are at least two reasons to doubt that backsliding will uniformly cause increased migration pressures in the LAC region. First, most forms of backsliding have little direct effect on individual livelihoods. The main form of backsliding globally and in the LAC region is executive aggrandizement, whereby incumbent leaders implement reforms that limit the autonomy of other branches of government, particularly legislatures and judiciaries, and undermine electoral competition.[12] These reforms may heighten political discontent, particularly among opposition supporters and those most attached to democratic values. However, given the costs associated with emigration and the challenges that most migrants can expect to face in the U.S. and other countries, most citizens are unlikely to leave merely because they disapprove of the current political regime – particularly if other root causes of migration are unaffected by democratic erosion. For this reason, political backsliding may be distinct from other factors that drive migration – including poverty, violence, and natural disasters – that have more direct effects on the material well-being of individuals and their families.

Second, a substantial literature demonstrates that citizens often fail to sanction leaders for anti-democratic actions, implying that we should not expect all instances of backsliding to increase political discontent that might fuel a desire to emigrate. In the LAC region, backsliding has often been justified as necessary to remove impediments that stand in the way of policies aimed at addressing major societal problems. For example, in El Salvador, Bukele's rationale for dismissing five Supreme Court judges in May 2021 was that they had obstructed his efforts to enforce critical measures needed to combat Covid-19. Likewise, the imposition of a state of emergency in 2022 was justified as a necessary measure to fight endemic gang violence. These examples resonate with research showing that voters frequently rationalize anti-democratic behavior that promotes desired policies or outcomes.[13] The upshot is that if anti-democratic reforms do not generate widespread public discontent, we should not expect an increase in migration intentions.

To summarize, existing research implies a *conditional* relationship between backsliding and migration: democratic erosion should increase migration intentions when it has direct negative effects on a substantial share of citizens, e.g., by causing a deterioration in security or economic

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[12] Bermeo, Nancy. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19. Svolik, M. W. (2019). "Polarization versus Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*, *30*, no. 20. Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. (2021). "The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4, 27-41. Pérez-Liñán, Aníbal, Nicolás Schmidt, and Daniela Vairo. "Presidential Hegemony and Democratic Backsliding in Latin America, 1925–2016." *Democratization* 26, no. 4 (2019): 606-625. Mainwaring, Scott, and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán. "Why Latin America's Democracies Are Stuck." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 156-170.
[13] Svolik, M. W. (2019). "Polarization versus Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 20. Krishnarajan, Suthan. "Rationalizing Democracy: The Perceptual Bias and (un)Democratic Behavior." *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 2 (2023): 474-496. Hahl, O., M. Kim, and E. W. Zuckerman Sivan. "The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy." *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 1 (2018): 1-33.

conditions. Common forms of executive aggrandizement – absent such direct effects on citizens – generally will not produce substantial increases in migration intentions.

3. Data and Statistical Methods

This section provides an overview of the opinion poll data, our approach to measuring backsliding, and the statistical methods used to examine the connection between backsliding and migration intentions. The analytic approach builds on prior research on migration intentions in LAC by Hiskey, Montalvo, and Orcés (2018). We extend the analytic framework by including 10 rounds of data and focusing on backsliding, rather than levels of democracy, as the key explanatory variable. We make available the technical details related to data, measurement, and statistical methods in this section for interested readers; others may prefer to skip to the next section, which presents the findings.

Survey Data

To examine migration intentions, we draw on opinion poll data from 10 survey rounds conducted in 22 LAC countries between 2004 and 2023. Table 4 in the Appendix 1 shows the countries and survey rounds included in the analysis.[14]

The measure of migration intentions comes from a question that asks, "Do you have any intention of going to live or work in another country in the next three years?" This question (and similar variants) has been used widely to study migration intentions and the factors that contribute to them in countries around the world. The downside of survey-based measures is that they are an imperfect proxy for actual migration trends, since many respondents who express an interest in leaving their country will subsequently not do so due to the costs of emigration. Despite this, prior research shows that there is an association between survey-based measures and official emigration flows globally.[15]

Measuring Backsliding

In the statistical analysis that follows, we operationalize backsliding in two ways, defined as "backsliding episodes" and "major backsliding years." Backsliding episodes are multi-year periods in which a country experiences democratic erosion. Major backsliding years are single years in which a country experiences especially severe backsliding, as defined below. Backsliding can take many forms, including restrictions on opposition leaders and parties, steps to limit the autonomy of the judiciary or legislature, reforms that limit election quality, limitations on media and civil society, and other actions. Both of the backsliding measures used here are

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[14] We exclude surveys conducted in island nations and small countries with populations less than 500,000, and Canada and the U.S.
[15] Tjaden, Jasper, Daniel Auer, and Frank Laczko. "Linking Migration Intentions with Flows: Evidence and Potential Use." *International Migration* 57, no. 1 (2019): 36-57.

designed to capture these various forms of democratic erosion through aggregate annual measures of democratic procedures and institutions.

Backsliding episodes: We use the V-Dem Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset to define backsliding episodes. The dataset defines a backsliding episode as a cumulative decline of 0.10 or more in V-Dem's electoral democracy index, which ranges from 0 to 1. This index is a summary measure based on information about voting rights, election processes, freedom of association and expression, and whether key positions in the executive and legislature are subject to election.[16] The index reflects the total value of positive and negative changes on any of these sub-components. The start year for backsliding episodes is defined by an annual decline of at least 0.01, with the end year defined as the last year in which democracy values continue to decline (see Maerz et al. 2021 for detailed coding rules).

Major backsliding years: The second measure of backsliding captures the magnitude of year-to-year erosion. We expect that minor declines will have little effect on migration intentions, whereas more substantial erosions might affect migration pressures more consistently. We define *major backsliding years* as those in which the V-Dem electoral democracy index declined by -0.027 or more relative to the prior year. This cut-off represents the 10th percentile in the distribution of year-to-year drops, meaning that only 10 percent of country-years had a decline this large or greater. All other country-years are coded as not being major backsliding years.

As an example, Figure 3 plots the V-Dem electoral democracy index and backsliding measures for Nicaragua. The shaded area represents the backsliding episode that started in 2006 and continues through 2022, the final year in the V-Dem data. The red triangles represent major backsliding years. Thus, in the statistical analysis that follows, each year from 2006 to 2022 is coded as being in a backsliding episode. Five years are coded as major backsliding years (2006, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2018) during the period under study (2004 to 2023) that experience especially large declines relative to the prior year.

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[16] Coppedge, Michael et al. V-Dem Codebook V-13. Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. March 2013. Accessed at: https://v-dem.net/documents/24/codebook_v13.pdf.

Figure 3. Example: Backsliding Measures for Nicaragua, 1980-2022
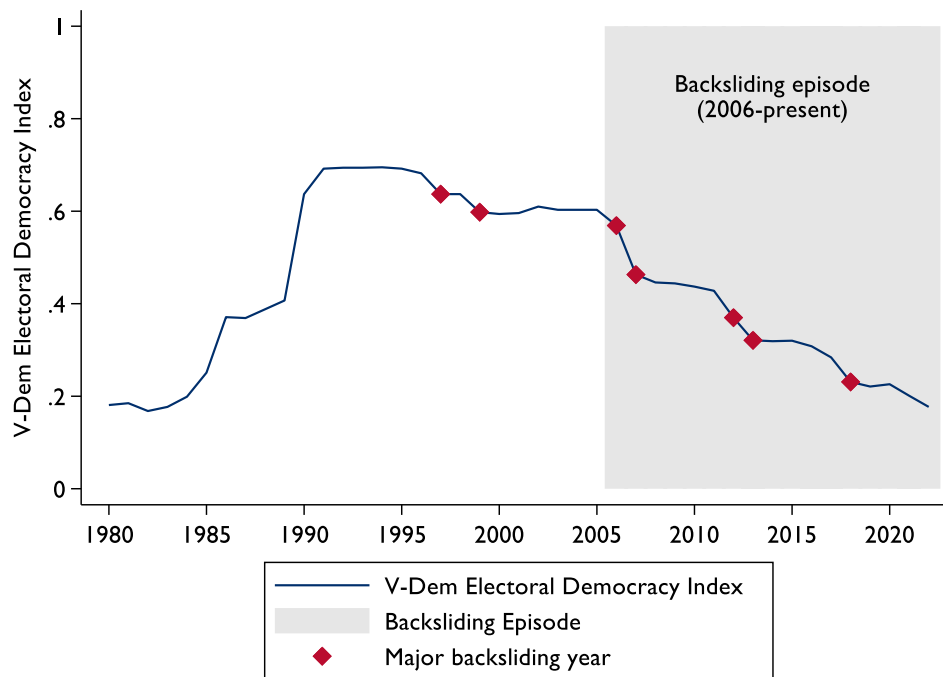
The main advantage of the V-Dem ERT data is that it is based on consistent coding rules that are applied systematically across all countries and years. There is, however, one important limitation: the ERT dataset does not distinguish between different types of backsliding. Thus, we have no way of testing in the region-wide statistical analysis whether some types of backsliding events – for example, government repression of public protests – exert a greater influence on migration intentions relative to others, such as executive aggrandizement or reforms that limit the competitiveness of elections.

Statistical Methods and Control Variables

We use a regression framework to examine the relationship between backsliding and migration intentions. This approach allows for the inclusion of control variables to account for potentially confounding factors. Specifically, we estimate a series of linear probability models using ordinary least squares with a multi-level structure to account for country- and individual-level factors.

The dependent variable in all models is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for respondents who indicate an intention to emigrate in the next three years (0 otherwise). Models test for the effects of backsliding in two ways. As described above, the first operationalization (*backsliding episode*) is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for years during which countries experienced backsliding episodes, as defined by the V-Dem ERT dataset. The second

(*major backsliding year*) is a dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for years in which the V-Dem electoral democracy index declined by -0.027 or more relative to the prior year.

Models include a set of country-level controls to account for economic and security conditions that might be associated with both backsliding and migration intentions: gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, the GDP per capita growth rate, the inflation rate, and the country's migrant stock (defined as the share of the population residing outside the country). All country-level variables are lagged by one year to ensure that annual measures are taken prior to the survey waves. Models include a set of individual-level demographic variables (age, education, gender) along with household wealth (based on an asset index) and urban/rural location. We also include measures of whether respondents are unemployed at the time of the survey and have been the victims of crime in the prior year. Models include country and year fixed effects to account for factors specific to individual countries that do not change over time and time-specific shocks that affect all cases. We include a linear time trend to account for the general increase in migration trends across the region. Appendix 1 provides data sources and definitions for all variables used in the regression models.

4. Overall Findings

Preliminary Analysis

We observe considerable variation across countries in the LAC region and some important country-specific trends over time. Overall, a quarter of all respondents (25.0 percent) in the sample indicate an intention to migrate. Figure 4, which plots country trends, shows that migration intentions are relatively stable over time in most countries, with a handful experiencing significant increases during the period under study (Honduras, Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Jamaica) and a smaller number experiencing sustained declines (Paraguay and Guyana). We observe wide variation in mean migration intentions across countries: at the high-end, 62.6 percent of respondents in Haiti register an intention to migrate, while at the low end only 12.7 percent in Chile do so.

Shaded areas in Figure 4 indicate backsliding episodes, as defined by the V-Dem ERT dataset. Ten of the 22 countries included in this analysis experienced backsliding episodes, as defined by the ERT dataset, during the period under study: Bolivia (2006-2020); Brazil (2016-2022); Ecuador (2007-2013); El Salvador (2019-2022); Guatemala (2018-2022); Guyana (2019-2022); Haiti (2011-2022); Honduras (2006-2010); Nicaragua (2006-2022); Uruguay (2015-2022); and Venezuela (1998-2022).

Figure 4. Migration Intentions and Backsliding Episodes, 2004-2023
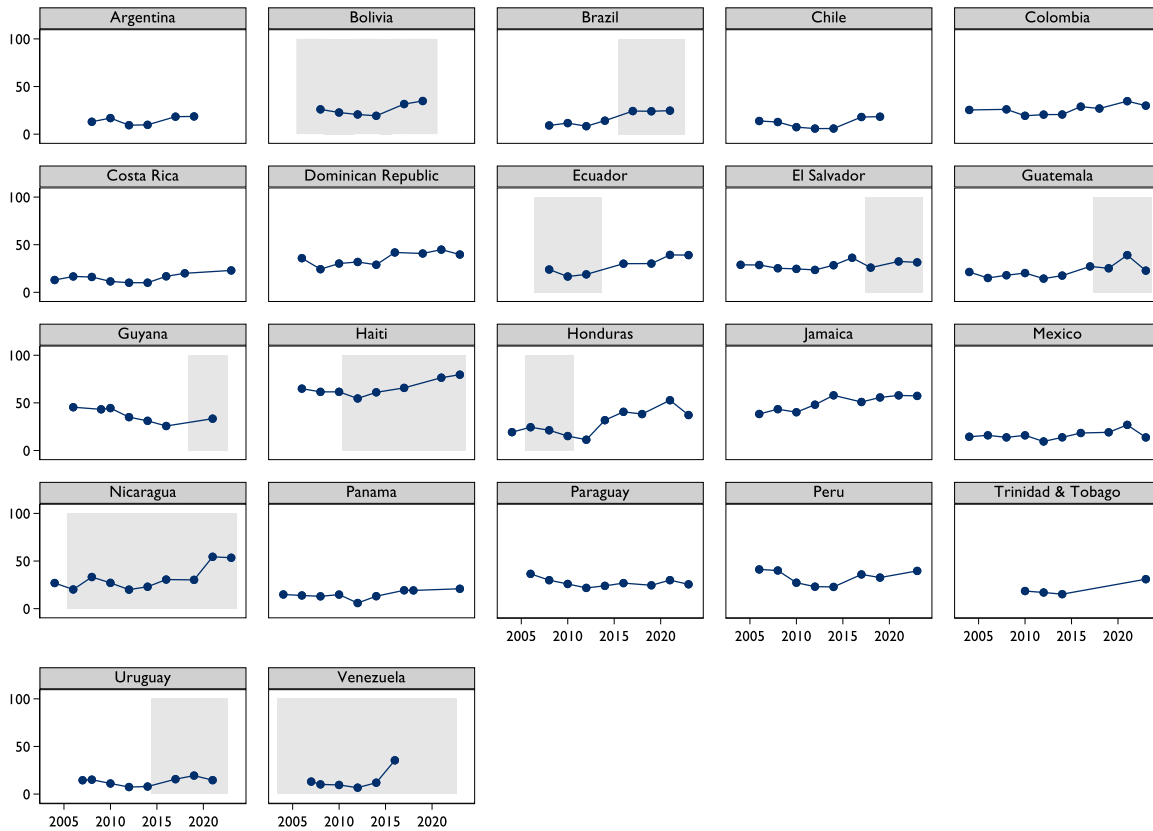
As a first step in the analysis, we test whether there is a significant difference in the percentage of citizens who intend to migrate during backsliding episodes compared to non-episode year in eight countries for which relevant data is available: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Uruguay, Brazil, and Haiti. Table 1 shows average migration intentions during the episodes, relative to other years. There is no consistent pattern. In three cases (Brazil, Guatemala, and Uruguay) intentions to migrate are significantly *higher* during backsliding spells, while in two countries (Honduras and Ecuador) intentions are significantly *lower* during backsliding periods. In three others (El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Haiti), we observe no significant difference.

Table 1. Comparison of Migration Intentions During and Outside Backsliding Episodes

Country / Backsliding Period	No Backsliding	During Backsliding	Difference
Brazil (2007-2023)	10.9	24.7	13.8**
Ecuador (2008-2014)	31.6	20.1	-11.5**
El Salvador (2019-2023)	28.0	28.0	0.00
Guatemala (2019-2023)	19.2	28.8	9.6**
Haiti (2012-2023)	62.0	63.0	1.0
Honduras (2007-2011)	30.7	20.3	-10.4**

Country / Backsliding Period	No Backsliding	During Backsliding	Difference
Nicaragua (2007-2023)	26.9	28.0	1.1
Uruguay (2016-2023)	11.2	16.8	5.6**

Notes: Differences are computed as two-sided difference-of-means tests using bivariate regression models to account for sample weights. Tests do not include survey data from 2023 because the V-Dem ERT dataset does not include values for 2023. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

The variation observed among this set of countries likely stems from differences in how other root causes of migration, mainly economic and security conditions, evolved over time. For example, in Nicaragua, where migration intentions on average are no higher during the backsliding episode, erosion coincided with a period of rising economic prosperity and relatively low crime rates, likely blunting the effects of democratic decline on migration pressures – until a government crackdown on public protests in 2018 that raised new security fears and undermined economic growth. Likewise, in El Salvador, backsliding is associated with a decline in homicide rates caused by the government's anti-gang strategy – an initiative that has been widely criticized by human rights groups but that has won considerable praise among voters.[17]

Regression results

To examine this relationship more carefully, we turn to the regression results. Table 2 shows the results from four regression models using the two alternative operationalizations of the backsliding variable. Models 1 and 2 do not include the crime victimization variable because it was not asked in some of the 2021 surveys. Models 3 and 4 include the crime victimization variable, but the overall sample size drops due to the exclusion of some data from 2021.

The coefficients on *backsliding episode* in models 1 and 3 and *major backsliding year* in models 2 and 4 are all close to zero and are not statistically significant. In other words, we find no evidence that migration intentions are higher (or lower) during backsliding episodes or following major backsliding years.

Results for other variables are generally consistent with prior survey-based research. Across model specifications, more educated and urban respondents express higher migration intentions, while women and older respondents are less interested, consistent with Hiskey, Montalvo, and Orcés (2018). Specifically, based on Model 1, a 1-unit increase in education category (e.g., from secondary to tertiary) is associated with a 2.4 percentage point increase in migration intentions, and urban residents are 3.2 points more likely to express an intention to migrate. Women are 6.5 points less likely to be interested in migrating, and each additional year of age is associated with a 0.6 point decline. In contrast to Hiskey, Montalvo, and Orcés (2018), which finds that wealthier respondents are less likely to seek to migrate, we find no relationship between wealth and migration intentions. Lastly, we observe that being unemployed and crime

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[17] Amnesty International. "El Salvador: One Year into State of Emergency, Authorities Are Systematically Committing Human Rights Violations." April 3, 2023. Accessed at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/el-salvador-state-emergency-systematic-human-rights-violations/. Human Rights Watch. "El Salvador: "Widespread Abuses under State of Emergency." December 7, 2022. Accessed at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/07/el-salvador-widespread-abuses-under-state-emergency.

victimization are both associated with increasing intention to migrate, by 11.7 points and 7.6 points, respectively. These findings cohere with research showing poverty and insecurity to be important drivers of migration in the LAC region (e.g., Amuedo-Dorantes and Puttitanun 2016; Clemens 2021).

Results for country-level variables also generally conform to expectations based on prior literature. GDP per capita is negatively associated with migration intentions, meaning that more economically developed countries in the region have lower migration intentions, after controlling for other push and pull factors. This is consistent with a large body of literature showing that poverty and deprivation contribute to international migration.[18] Results show that GDP per capita growth is also associated with lower migration intentions, though this relationship is only statistically significant in Models 1 and 2. Surprisingly, inflation is not linked to migration intentions. Migrant stocks (the portion of the population that resides outside the county) are positively related to migration intentions in most specifications, consistent with research showing that social networks that extend to destination countries serve as an important pull factor.[19]

Table 2. Regression Models of Migration Intentions, 2004-2023

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Backsliding episode	-0.013		-0.003	
	(0.019)		(0.018)	
Major backsliding year		-0.019		-0.005
		(0.017)		(0.016)
Level of education	0.024**	0.023**	0.021**	0.021**
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Age	-0.006**	-0.006**	-0.006**	-0.006**
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Female	-0.065**	-0.065**	-0.062**	-0.063**
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Wealth index	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Urban	0.032**	0.032**	0.028**	0.029**
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Unemployed	0.117**	0.119**	0.116**	0.118**
	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.014)
Crime victim in prior year			0.076**	0.076**
			(0.004)	(0.004)
GDP per capita (1,000 USD)	-0.017**	-0.018*	-0.017**	-0.016*
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)

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[18] For an overview, see: Boswell, Christina, and Jeff Crisp. *Poverty, International Migration and Asylum*. United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER). Policy Brief No. 8, 2004. Prior literature also provides evidence of an "inverted-U" relationship, whereby economic development initially increases migration before declining at higher levels of development. See De Haas, Hein. 2007. "Turning the Tide? Why Development Will Not Stop Migration." *Development and Change* 38: 819-841. Clemens, Michael A. 2014. "Does Development Reduce Migration?" in Robert E.B. Lucas, ed., *International Handbook on Migration and Economic Development*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
[19] Massey, D. S., J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, and A. Pellegrino. *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*. Clarendon Press, 1999.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
GDP per capita growth	-0.002**	-0.002**	-0.000	0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Inflation	-0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Migrant stock	0.015	0.017*	0.019*	0.019*
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Constant	0.503**	0.506**	0.486**	0.482**
	(0.065)	(0.066)	(0.065)	(0.065)
Observations	256,831	250,204	238,257	231,664
R-squared	0.164	0.165	0.168	0.168

Notes: Models include country and year fixed effects and a linear time trend. Country-level variables are lagged one year. Robust standard errors clustered by country are shown in parentheses. ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$, + $p<0.1$

To summarize, the main finding in Table 2 is that there is no unconditional association between backsliding and an increase in migration intentions in the LAC region. However, this null finding should not be taken to mean that backsliding never causes increases in migration intentions. As noted above, prior literature suggests a conditional relationship whereby some types of erosion will cause increased migration while others will not. We are unable to test this conditional hypothesis using regression modeling due to the limited availability of data on different types of erosion for the full sample of countries and years included in the analysis in Table 2. We therefore turn to case studies, which allow for a more nuanced examination of whether some types of backsliding events contribute to migration pressures while others do not.
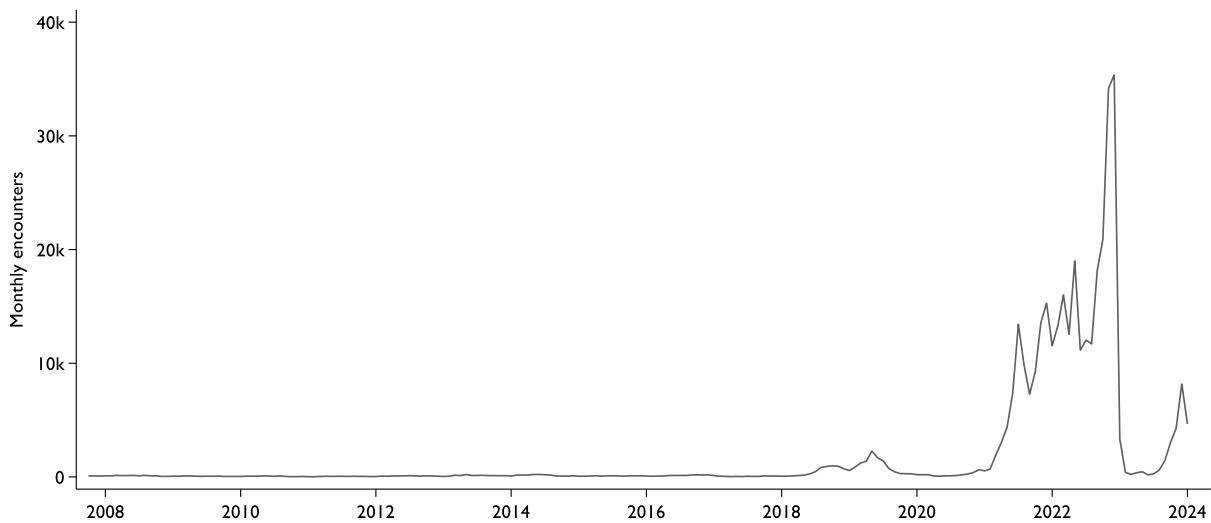
5. Nicaragua Case Study Findings

Nicaragua serves as a particularly useful case for examining the effects of backsliding on migration intentions. The long duration of democratic erosion that began after Ortega's return to power in 2006 makes it possible to exploit within-case variation to examine the effects of distinct types of backsliding in different periods.

To provide context for this case, Figure 5 shows migration trends to the U.S. using CBP data from October 2007 to January 2024. The plot shows that 2018 was a pivotal year: following the government crackdown on protests, the number of encounters jumped significantly to 1,102 per month between July 2018 and July 2019, up from an average of 92 per month in the prior decade. Migration dipped in 2020 and due to border closures and other travel restrictions resulting from Covid-19.[20] Subsequently, encounters spiked to their highest level, 8,920 per month from January 2021 to January 2024.

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[20] https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/03/16/2020-05578/suspension-of-entry-as-immigrants-and-nonimmigrants-of-certain-additional-persons-who-pose-a-risk-of

Figure 5. CBP Encounters at U.S. Southwest Land Border, 2007-2024

The analysis in this section provides insight into these long-term trends by examining migration intentions from 2004 to 2023. The clearest evidence of a direct connection between democratic erosion and migration intentions comes from comparing the 2019 survey data to prior waves. In the aftermath of the 2018 crackdown that erupted following the administration's plans to cut social services and raise taxes, migration intentions spike among regime opponents.[21] The government's brutal repression heightened fears of indiscriminate violence and contributed to an economic crisis as foreign direct investment and tourism plummeted due to the instability – consistent with other data showing the initial out-migration in 2018-2019 was primarily driven by fears about government reprisals in urban areas. Subsequently, we observe a major increase in migration intentions, with more than half of all respondents in the 2021 and 2023 survey waves expressing an intention to leave Nicaragua. It is, however, more difficult to isolate the effects of Nicaragua's prolonged political crisis during the more recent period, since other external factors also influence migration intentions. The analysis suggests that the spike in migration pressures in recent years is partially attributable to democratic erosion and the economic dislocation it caused, as well as several other factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic and two major hurricanes.

This section first provides a brief overview of backsliding in Nicaragua since 2006. It then examines migration intentions in three distinct periods. In Period 1, from Ortega's election in 2006 to the government crackdown in 2018, we observe no general increase in migration intentions despite significant backsliding, suggesting that erosion does not increase migratory pressures unless it affects individual livelihoods. In Period 2, following the 2018 crackdown through 2019, we observe an uptick in migration intentions that appears to be concentrated among opposition supporters. Finally, in Period 3, from 2019 to 2023, we observe a major

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[21] As described below, we define regime supporters as those who approve of the president's job performance in each survey wave; regime opponents are defined as those who disapprove.

increase in migration intentions attributable to Nicaragua's prolonged political/economic crisis and other factors.

Backsliding: 2006 - 2023

The main period of democratic backsliding in Nicaragua began after the 2006 election that returned Ortega to power. In subsequent years, the Ortega regime weakened the electoral system, undermined independent institutions, and restricted media and civil society.[22] The brutal suppression of public protests from April to July 2018 marked a turning point in the erosion of democratic freedoms. The protests erupted on April 18 in response to government plans to cut social security benefits and raise taxes to reduce budget deficits following the withdrawal of Venezuelan aid.[23] The protests built on popular mobilization that began on April 12 in reaction to the government's slow response to a wildfire in the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve in southeast Nicaragua.[24] The government's heavy-handed response to the initial public outcry generated further protests that were met with increasingly violent tactics enforced by parapolice units tied to the police force. An especially brutal episode occurred on May 30 (Mother's Day in Nicaragua) when government forces attacked a march led by mothers, resulting in 15 deaths. Over the three-month period from April to July, hundreds of people were killed and thousands more were injured or detained by government forces. By October, the protests had dwindled, subdued by the government's response.

Figure 6 plots democracy trends using V-Dem's electoral democracy index from 1980 to 2022. The data highlight the precipitous decline after 2006. By the time of the 2018 crackdown, Nicaragua was already rated near the bottom of the V-Dem scale. Thus, in these data, the 2018 crackdown does not appear as a turning point. However, public opinion data shown below confirm that among Nicaraguan citizens the crackdown was viewed as a critical rupture that marked an important departure from the relatively long period of political stability and economic growth that preceded it.[25] Despite the gradual erosion of democratic procedures and institutions, public views of Ortega and the broader political system had been relatively positive prior to 2018, suggesting that many citizens were willing to overlook the regime's assault on democracy as long as livelihoods were improving.

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[22] i Puig, Salvador Martí, and Macià Serra. "Nicaragua: De-democratization and Regime Crisis." *Latin American Politics and Society* 62, no. 2 (2020): 117-136. Thaler, Kai M., and Eric Mosinger. "Nicaragua: Doubling Down on Dictatorship." *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (2022): 133-146.

[23] International Crisis Group. "A Road to Dialogue after Nicaragua's Crushed Uprising." Latin America Report No. 72. December 19, 2018.

[24] https://aida-americas.org/en/blog/the-flame-that-ignited-nicaragua-s-protests

[25] Ibid.

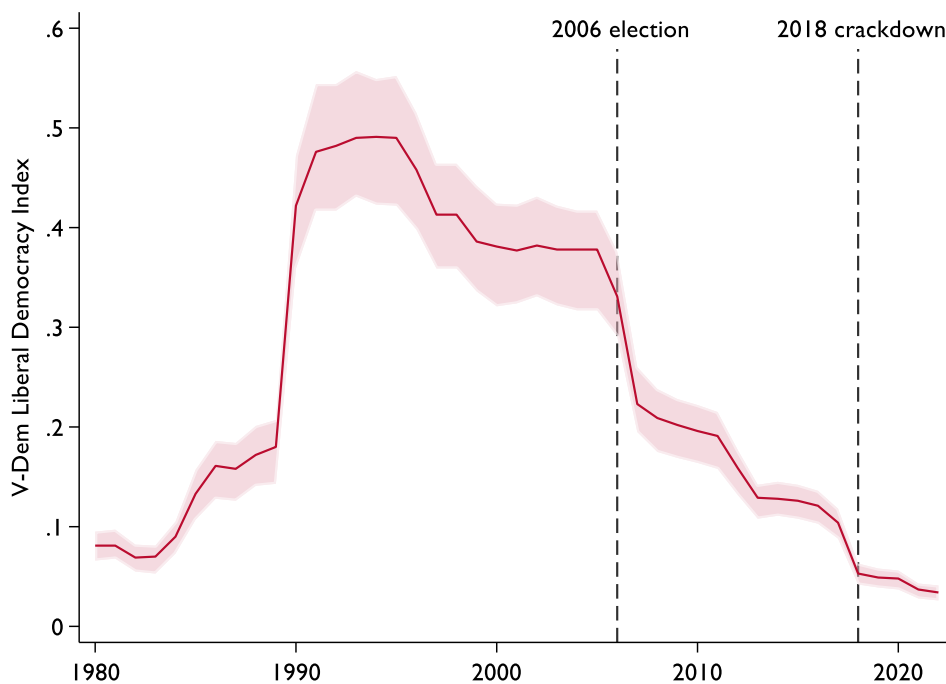**Figure 6. V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index for Nicaragua, 1980-2022**

Figure 7 shows a decline in domestic public opinion following the 2018 crackdown. The figure plots trends on three variables: presidential approval, satisfaction with democracy, and rights protection.[26] Notably, scores on all three variables increased, in some cases by a substantial margin, following Ortega's return to power, despite the steady erosion of democracy reflected it the V-Dem scores after 2006. Presidential approval leapt from just 8 percent in 2006 to more than 60 percent in the 2012, 2014, and 2016 survey waves. Satisfaction with democracy and rights protection followed the same trend, though with more muted increases. A sharp decline is observed after the 2018 government crackdown, particularly for presidential approval, which declined from 65 percent to 34 percent between 2016 and 2019, a drop of 31 percentage points. Declines are also observed for democratic satisfaction and to a lesser extent rights protection, signaling that the crackdown marked the end of an era. All three variables declined further in the most recent survey conducted in 2023, indicating that public support for the Ortega regime has substantially eroded during the prolonged political and economic crisis that began in 2018.[27]

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[26] The question wording is as follows. *Presidential approval*: **"**Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President [NAME]?" *Rights protection*: "To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are well protected by the political system of (COUNTRY)?" *Democratic satisfaction*: "In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the form of democracy in [COUNTRY]?"

[27] Trust in the president also declined dramatically in the wake of the 2018 government crackdown. The mean rating on a seven-point scale (1-7) fell to 3.6 and 3.1 in the 2019 and 2023 surveys, relative to 4.7 in the 2016 survey.

Figure 7. Presidential Approval, Democratic Satisfaction, Rights Protection in Nicaragua, 2004-2023
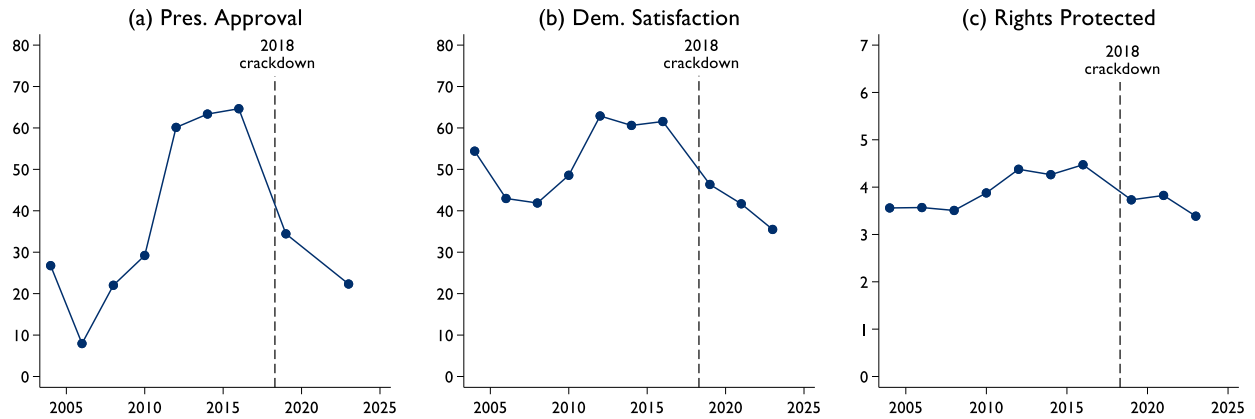
Notes: Figure (a) shows the percentage of respondents who rated the president's job performance as good or very good. Figure (b) shows the percentage of respondents who were satisfied or very satisfied with the "form of democracy" in Nicaragua. Figure (c) shows mean ratings on a 1-7 scale.

Migration Intentions

Figure 8 plots migration intentions – the share of respondents expressing an intention to leave the country in the next three years – from 2004 to 2023. For most of the time series, migration intentions ranged from about 20 percent to 32 percent, on par with regional averages. In the 2021 wave, intentions spiked to 54.5 percent, an increase of nearly 25 percentage points over the 2019 survey, and remain at 53.4 percent in the 2023 wave.

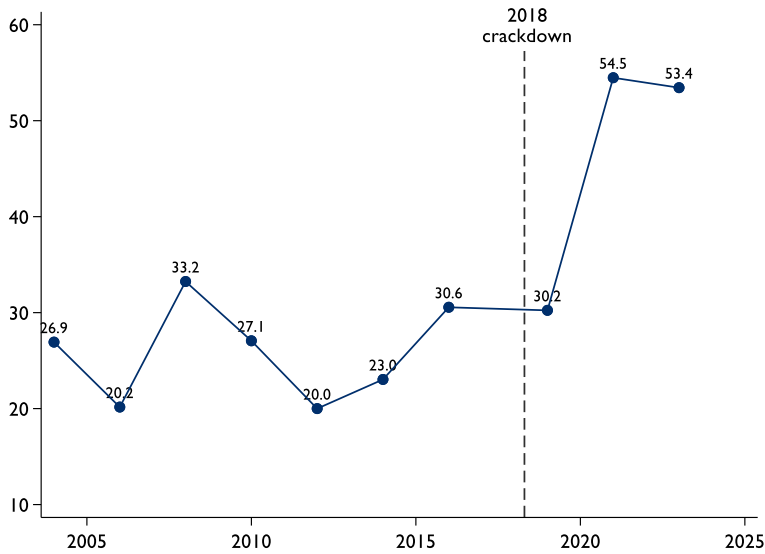**Figure 8. Migration Intentions in Nicaragua, 2004-2023**

Figure 9 shows that migration intentions spiked starting in the 2021 survey wave for all major population groups disaggregated by urban/rural location, age, gender, and education. We also observe some important shifts among particular sub-groups that upended historical patterns. By 2021 the gap between urban and rural respondents had disappeared, and in the 2023 wave rural citizens were more likely to express an interest in migrating than urban residents. The education gap closed by 2021, and in 2023 less educated citizens had a higher desire to leave. A spike among women between 2019 and 2021 meant that women were more likely to register an intention to migrate in 2021, reversing the trend observed in all prior surveys. Only the age gap persisted in the most recent survey, with older citizens (35+) considerably less likely to express a desire to migrate in all survey rounds.

Figure 9. Migration Intentions Disaggregated by Sub-groups in Nicaragua, 2004-2023
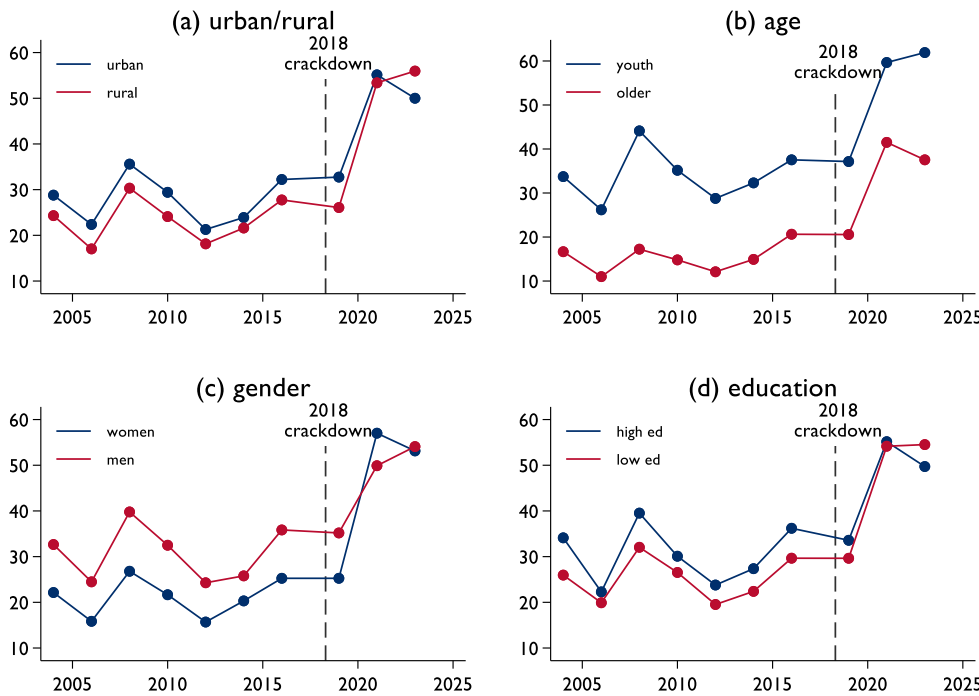
Notes: In Figure (b) youth are defined as 18-35. In Figure (d), high education is defined as tertiary and above.

In the following sub-sections, we describe how the relationship between backsliding and migration in Nicaragua changed in three broad periods: from 2006 – 2018, 2018 – 2019, and 2019 – 2023.

Period 1 (2006 - 2018): Prosperity keeps migration intentions stable

From 2006 to 2018, we do not observe an association between migration intentions and democratic erosion, despite the steady descent into authoritarianism following Ortega's return to power. While there is some meaningful variation in migration intentions across survey waves, there is no general trend between 2006 and 2018. Data suggest this is because prior to 2018, backsliding coincided with a period of rising economic prosperity and relatively low crime, especially in comparison to nearby countries, and anti-democratic reforms had limited direct effects on citizen's day-to-day welfare.

After coming to power, Ortega presided over a period of broad economic expansion, with annual increases in GDP per capita ranging from 3 to 5 percent for most years between 2006 and 2018.[28] These achievements are often attributed to the regime's pro-business stance that encouraged a substantial increase in foreign investment, government efforts to stabilize the exchange rate and devaluations that benefited the export sector, and an infusion of foreign

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[28] World Bank World Development Indicators available at https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators.

assistance from Venezuela in the form of discounted oil.[29] While Nicaragua remains one of the poorest countries in the LAC region, this period of rising growth had tangible effects on livelihoods, with the poverty rate falling from 48.3 percent in 2005 to 24.9 percent in 2016, lifting nearly a quarter of the population above the poverty line in a decade.[30]

These trends are reflected in survey questions that probe economic conditions. Figure 10 plots the share of respondents who report that their economic situation is better, the same, and worse than it was a year ago.[31] The share reporting improved conditions grows steadily from 10 percent in 2008 to 31 percent in 2016, with concomitant declines in the share reporting that their situation had worsened in the past year. These trends are matched by an enormous jump in presidential approval, as noted in Figure 7. These data suggest that rising economic prospects led many citizens to overlook – or support – Ortega's political transgressions, muting any potential connection between backsliding and out-migration.

Figure 10. Perceived Economic Conditions in Nicaragua, 2006-2023
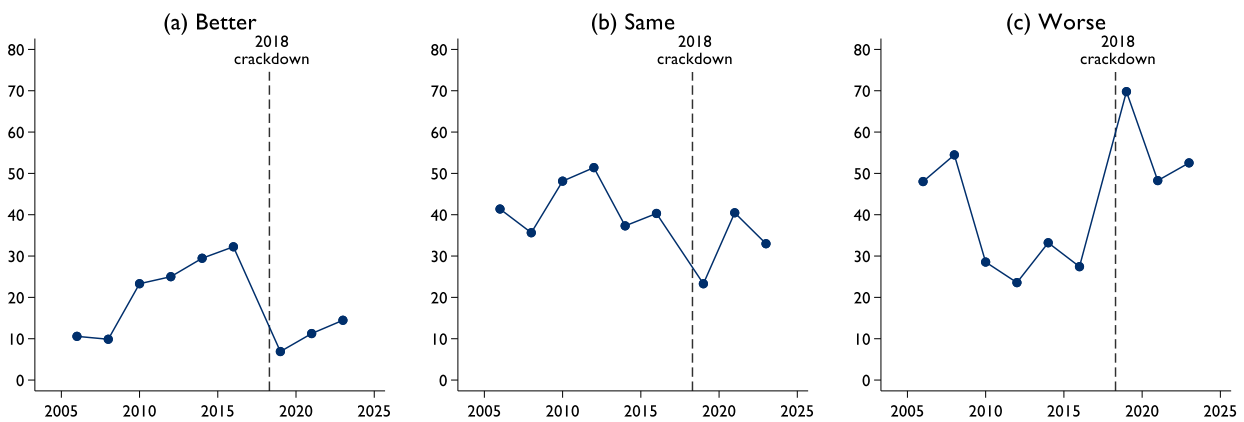
Period 2 (2018-2019): A crackdown increases intentions to migrate

While the 2018 government crackdown did not generate an across-the-board increase in migration intentions, we observe a substantial increase among regime opponents, suggesting that reactions to the regime's heavy-handed tactics varied across partisan lines. The aggregate survey data show no change in migration intentions following the 2018 crackdown: as seen in Figure 8, migration intentions in the 2019 survey (30.2 percent) are nearly identical to the 2016 survey (30.6 percent). These findings are surprising given the sharp declines observed in political and economic attitudes shown in Figures 7 and 10 for the same period. They are also surprising in light of the well-documented surge in refugees to both Costa Rica and the U.S., the

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[29] The Dialogue. "The Economy vs. Democracy in Ortega's Nicaragua." June 24, 2016. Accessed at: https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2016/06/the-economy-vs-democracy-in-ortegas-nicaragua/
[30] This is based on the poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line (% of population) provided by the World Bank's World Development Indicators.
[31] The question is as follows: "Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?"

two major destinations for Nicaraguan migrants, starting in mid-2018. Figure 11 plots monthly refugee applications submitted by Nicaraguans in Costa Rica during 2018 (left side) and encounters by the U.S. CBP agency (right side) for the same period.[32] We observe a substantial increase in refugee applications starting in June, suggesting an immediate out-migration following the crackdown in April and May. The U.S. CBP data likewise indicate a steady growth in encounters, peaking in August to November – a delay that likely reflects the greater difficulty of making the journey to the U.S. Southern border.

**Figure 11. Migrant Flows from Nicaragua to Costa Rica and the U.S., 2018**
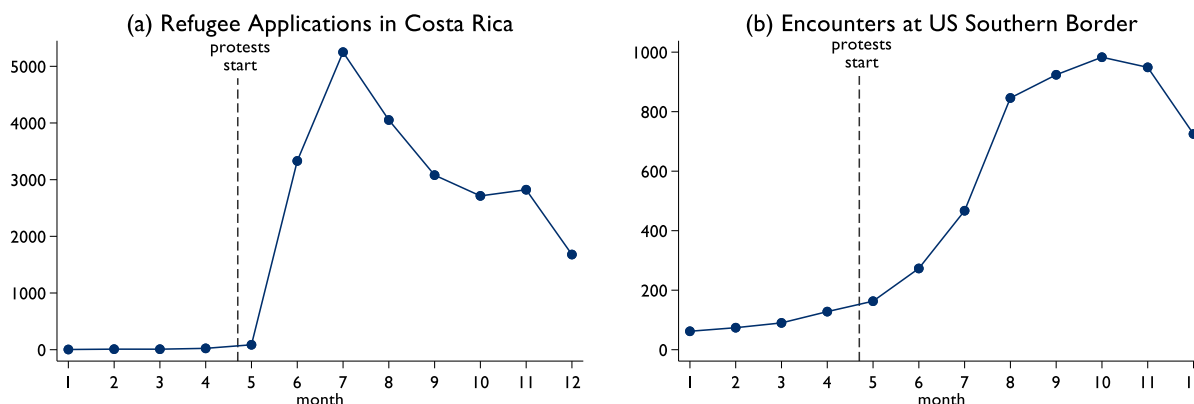
Additional analysis suggests that the aggregate survey results obscure significant polarization along partisan lines in the immediate aftermath of the 2018 crackdown. Figure 12 plots migration intentions among regime supporters (defined as those who approve of the president's job performance) against regime opponents (those who disapprove of his performance). It is important to bear in mind that the composition of these groups shifts across survey waves, and some of the divergence between groups may be attributable to the sorting of those more likely to leave the country into the opposition camp.[33] Nonetheless, the data suggest that the 2018 government crackdown may have contributed to a spike in migration intentions among those who disapprove of the president that was offset by a drop among regime supporters. Specifically, among regime opponents, migration intentions increased from 35.5 percent in 2016 to 46.2 percent in 2019, while among supporters, intentions declined from 27.2 percent to 18.1 percent during the same period. Subsequently, between 2021 and 2023, intentions among both groups jumped significantly, suggesting that common factors – including the worsening

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[32] Data on refugee applications in Costa Rica is from the Costa Rican General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (DGME). It is important to note that this data only includes information on individuals who file an asylum application and does not include those who enter the country illegally and/or fail to submit an application. Data on encounters at the U.S. Southern border is from the U.S. CBP agency, obtained by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University.

[33] The share of regime opponents (those who disapproved of the president's performance) grew from 7 percent in 2016 to 30 and 44 percent in 2019 and 2023. There is some evidence that younger and more urban respondents disproportionately shifted into the opposition camp during this period, which may partially explain why migration intentions spiked among opposition supporters. However, additional analysis shows that opposition support remains a significant predictor of migration intentions after accounting for various demographic factors.

economic crisis – affected both groups, unlike during the 2018-2021 period during which political dynamics differentially affected these sub-populations.

Figure 12. Migration Intentions by Presidential Approval in Nicaragua, 2004-2023
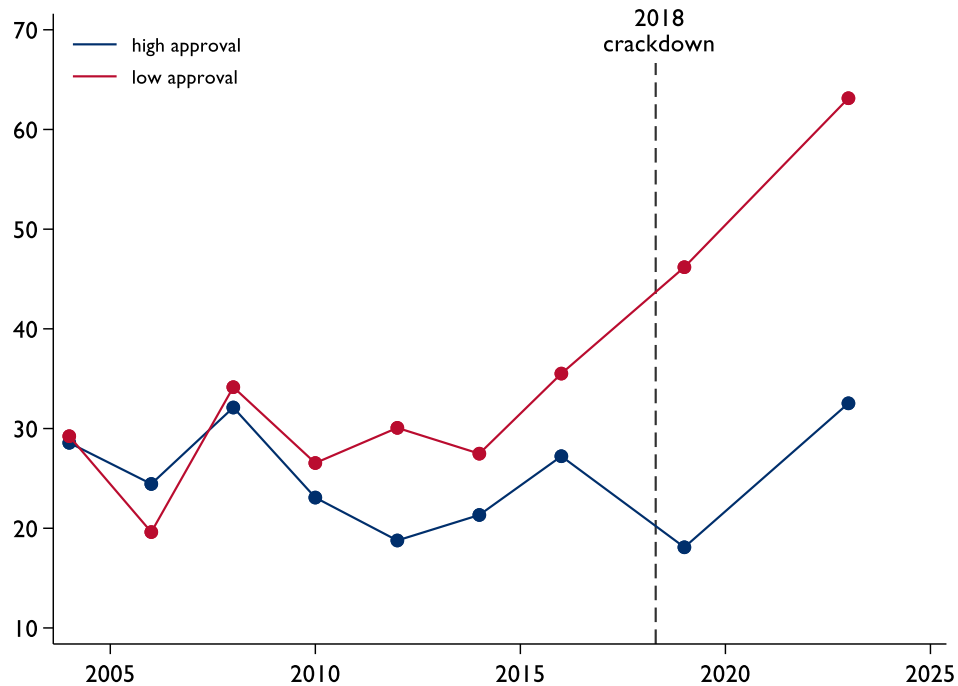
Notes: Figure shows migration intentions for those who approve of the president's job performance (blue line) and those who do not (red line). Figure does not include respondents who rated job performance as neither good nor bad.

Other evidence suggests that out-migration in the immediate aftermath to the 2018 crackdown was mainly confined to regime opponents, particularly those who feared government reprisals during and after the government's suppression of the protests. Accounts of government repression indicate that the regime's methods posed a direct threat to opposition supporters. Based on interviews with exiles in Costa Rica in September 2018, the International Crisis Group observed that, "mass detentions aimed at people suspected of manning the barricades forced prominent anti-government leaders into hiding or led them to flee to neighboring Costa Rica to avoid prosecution on terrorism charges."[34] The U.S. State Department noted that, "beginning in August [2018] the Ortega government instituted a policy of 'exile, jail, or death' for anyone perceived as opposition, amended terrorism laws to include prodemocracy activities, and used the justice system to characterize civil society actors as terrorists, assassins, and coup-

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[34] International Crisis Group. "A Road to Dialogue after Nicaragua's Crushed Uprising." Latin America Report No. 72. December 19, 2018. Page 10.

mongers."[35] By State Department estimates, these policies contributed to at least 52,000 exiles in neighboring countries by November 2018.[36]

In addition, survey data collected in Costa Rica among Nicaraguan asylum seekers in April-June 2019 indicates that the initial wave of out-migration was primarily from urban areas and most asylees were relatively well-educated.[37] When asked about their motives for leaving Nicaragua, respondents overwhelmingly noted the general political situation (75 percent), direct threats (51 percent), and/or fear of being attacked for political reasons (48 percent). Because the sample includes many respondents who were in the process of submitting asylum requests, it is possible that respondents may have overstated political threats. However, it is noteworthy that only 7.1 percent cited economic reasons as among the factors that contributed to their decision to leave Nicaragua. Nearly all respondents reported that they were employed (74 percent) or in school (10 percent) prior to leaving Nicaragua, suggesting that economic factors were not the primary motivation for out-migration during this period.

Period 3 (2019 – 2023): A spike in migration intentions due to prolonged political and economic crisis and other external factors

Migration intentions jumped by nearly 25 percentage points from 30.2 percent in 2019 to 54.5 percent in 2021, one of the largest increases from one survey round to the next observed for any country and time period, comparable in magnitude only to the jump from 12.0 percent in Venezuela in 2014 to 35.4 percent in 2016. Migration intentions subsequently remained elevated, with 53.4 percent of respondents expressing a desire to leave in 2023. This was matched by an enormous increase in migrants to the U.S. In fiscal year 2020, more than 160,000 Nicaraguans were apprehended at the U.S. Southern border, relative to less than 10,000 in 2020.[38] Several factors contributed to the spike in migration intentions – and actual migration – during this period, including the direct effects of the regime's increased repression and the indirect effect of repressive policies on economic conditions. External factors, particularly the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and two hurricanes that struck Nicaragua in 2020, also contributed to out-migration.

The period following the suppression of the 2018 protests was marked by further attacks on democratic procedures and institutions.[39] In advance of the 2021 election, the Ortega regime arrested and detained key opposition figures, employing newly-adopted laws that made it

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[35] U.S. Department of State. Nicaragua 2018 Human Rights Report, page 1.

[36] These reports are consistent with journalistic accounts from 2018. See, for example: Tom Phillips. "'If I Go Back They'll Kill Me': Nicaraguan Dissenters Flee South to Survive." *The Guardian*. July 30, 2018. Accessed at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/29/nicaragua-refugees-costa-rica-daniel-ortega-violence. Kirk Semple. "'There's No Law': Political Crisis Sends Nicaraguans Fleeing." *New York Times*. August 6, 2018. Accessed at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/06/world/americas/nicaragua-ortega-crisis.html.

[37] Instituto de Fomento y Asesoria Municipal. "Estudio Preliminar de Flujos Migratorios Mixtos Nicaragüenses, April 2018-Junio 2019." San José, Costa Rica.

[38] Charles G. Ripley III. "Crisis Prompts Record Emigration from Nicaragua, Surpassing Cold War Era." Migration Policy Institute. March 7, 2023. Accessed at: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/record-emigration-nicaragua-crisis.

[39] Human Rights Watch. "Nicaragua: Events of 2021." Accessed at: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/nicaragua.

possible to keep those deemed to be "traitors" from standing for office.[40] This followed the passage of other laws designed to stifle online communications and silence opponents following the 2018 protests. The 2021 elections were widely dismissed as a sham that was marred by opposition boycotts and low turnout.[41] The government also deepened repression of regime critics, the media, and civil society.[42] Since 2021, the government has closed more than 2,000 non-profit organizations, jailed prominent media and human rights figures, and retained hundreds of protest leaders in detention. In 2022 the government arrested prominent figures in the Catholic Church, including Bishops Rolando Álvarez and Enrique Martínez Gamboa, along with several other priests and seminarians. The government also closed or has taken control of 27 private universities, affecting as much as half of the student population.[43] As shown in Figure 5, democratic satisfaction declined sharply in response to the government's repressive actions, dropping to just 36 percent in the 2023 survey from 62 percent in 2016.

While it is difficult to isolate the effects of backsliding on migration intentions during this period due to the multitude of other contributing factors, accounts suggest that increasing repression played an important role for at least some citizens. For example, an assessment by the Center for Transdisciplinary Studies of Central America concluded that the government's seizure of private universities helped to fuel out-migration, noting that young people face "extremely reduced opportunities, both in the workplace and in education, with a system that pushes them to migrate in search of better conditions for themselves and their families."[44] Moreover, the opinion poll data show that disapproval of the government's human rights record is associated with greater migration intentions. For example, the 2021 data show that respondents below the median on assessments of how well the government protects citizens' rights were about 11 percentage points more likely to express a desire to migrate, relative to those who rated rights protection more favorably (59 percent vs. 48 percent).

The wave of government repression since 2018 also fueled out-migration indirectly by contributing to Nicaragua's prolonged economic crisis. While external factors – including the onset of Covid-19 and two major hurricanes – played important roles, government repression sparked a precipitous drop in tourism and foreign direct investment. Macro-economic indicators show the cumulative effects of these factors on Nicaragua's economy. Figure 13 shows that the number of tourists, which had risen steadily in prior years, dropped by nearly 30 percent in 2018 and then declined precipitously in 2020 and 2021. In November 2020 Hurricanes Eta and Iota pounded Nicaragua, affecting as many as three million people, nearly half the country's population.[45] As a result of these and other factors, GDP growth rates were negative in 2018 to

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[40] Human Rights Watch. "Nicaragua: Law Threatens Free, Fair Elections." December 22, 2020. Accessed at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/22/nicaragua-law-threatens-free-fair-elections.

[41] Oliver Stuenkel. "Nicaragua's Farcical Election Marks Consolidation of Ortega's Autocracy." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. November 8, 2021. Accessed at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/08/nicaragua-s-farcical-election-marks-consolidation-of-ortega-s-autocracy-pub-85733.

[42] Human Rights Watch. Nicaragua: Events of 2022. Accessed at: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/nicaragua

[43] https://confidencial.digital/english/nicaraguas-state-universities-impose-the-ortega-truth/

[44] Ibid.

[45] Arturo Castellanos-Canales. "The Reasons behind the Increased Migration from Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua." National Immigration Forum. February 9, 2023. Accessed at: https://immigrationforum.org/article/the-reasons-behind-the-increased-migration-from-venezuela-cuba-and-nicaragua/.

2020 – after sustained annual growth above 4 percent in prior years. Likewise, the unemployment rate jumped sharply, peaking at 11.1 percent in 2021, up from just 3.7 percent in 2017.

Figure 13. Economic Indicators for Nicaragua, 2010-2022
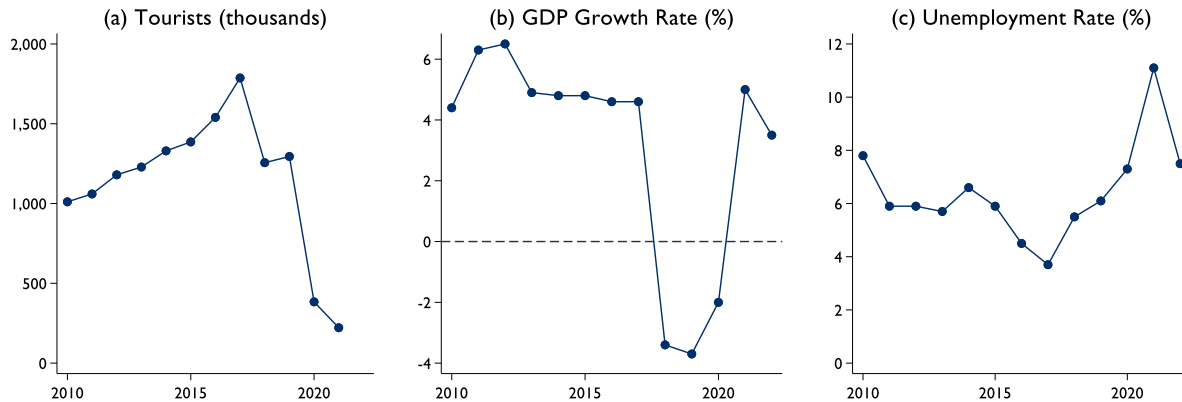
Survey data suggest that Nicaragua's economic crisis led to a rise in extreme poverty that contributed to out-migration. Nearly 40 percent of respondents in 2023 indicated that they had been without food at least once in the three prior months, up from 34 and 32 percent in 2021 and 2019, respectively. Citizens experiencing extreme poverty express increased intentions to migrate. For example, the 2021 survey data show that those who had gone without food at least once in the prior three months were about 10 percentage points more likely to register an intention to migrate than those who did not (61 percent vs. 51 percent). Moreover, among those who reported an interest in migrating in the 2021 survey, the largest share (53 percent) cited limited economic opportunities as the principal reason for considering departure.[46] While only 2.4 percent of those expressing an interest in migrating explicitly cited "the political situation" as their main motivation, it is important to bear in mind that, as noted above, political factors contributed to Nicaragua's economic crisis, indirectly fueling migration.

6. El Salvador Case Study Findings

In El Salvador, backsliding since 2019 has not produced an uptick in migration intentions. Since coming to office, Bukele has undermined the independence of the judiciary and legislature, put in place a state of emergency that suspends due process for suspected gang members, and eroded constitutional constraints.[47] Yet, these actions have not generated a spike on out-migration intentions, largely because the reforms – particularly Bukele's iron fist policies on gangs – have led to perceived improvements in the incidence of violence, contributing to

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[46] Cohen, Mollie. "Intenciones de Emigrar en Nicaragua." In Cruz, José Miguel y Mariana Rodríguez (Eds.) 2021. *Cultura Política de la Democracia en Nicaragua y en las Américas 2021: Tomándole el Pulso a la Democracia.* Nashville, TN: LAPOP.

[47] Meléndez-Sánchez, Manual. 2021. "Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador." *Journal of Democracy* 32(3): 19-32.

overwhelming public support for Bukele. Moreover, public opinion data show that satisfaction with "democracy" and perceptions that rights are well protected have actually improved during this period of democratic erosion, suggesting that citizens may not view the administration's actions as contrary to democratic principles.

To provide context for this analysis, Figure 14 plots CBP data on monthly encounters by Salvadorian nationals at the U.S. Southern border from 2007 to 2024. Consistent with our analysis of opinion poll data, we do not observe systematic evidence of an increase since Bukele came to power, nor in response to key backsliding events. While the average number of encounters in the four years after Bukele came to office is slightly higher than in the preceding four years (5,710 vs 4,809 per month), this comparison is likely misleading since much of the period following Bukele's initial election corresponded to the implementation of Title 42 restrictions that increased repeat crossing rates by as much as 35 percent in some years. Moreover, the data show that since peaking in August 2021, encounters have steadily declined, despite the regime's attack on judicial independence in May 2021 and the imposition of the state of emergency in May 2022. These observations, while not based on causal analysis, are consistent with analysis of opinion poll data below that shows that migration intentions have not increased since Bukele's election.

Figure 14. CBP Encounters at U.S. Southwest Land Border, 2007-2024
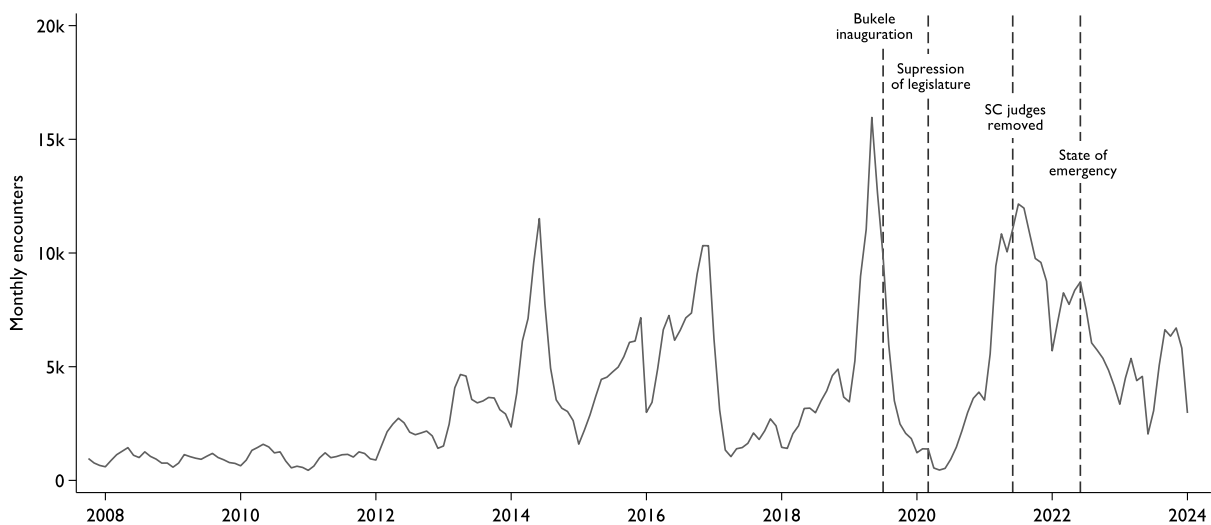
This section first provides a brief description of democratic backsliding in El Salvador since 2019, then relates migration trends to economic and security conditions. The final section leverages the timing of the 2021 survey round to examine reactions to Bukele's removal of the attorney general and dismissal of supreme court judges on May 1, 2021 – a key event in the erosion of democratic constraints.

Backsliding: 2019 - 2023

For nearly two decades following the conclusion of El Salvador's civil war in 1992, the country's political system operated as a semi-democracy. While elections were held at regular intervals, competition was limited to two main political parties and high-level corruption pervaded the system – fueling discontent with the political status quo and creating an opening for an anti-regime outsider.[48] Bukele's election in 2019 represented a public rejection of the post-war political order. Since coming to office, Bukele has used his widespread popularity to curtail democratic institutions and procedures. Key anti-democratic actions include strong-arming the legislature to vote in favor of new lending in February 2020, replacing the attorney general and packing the Constitutional Court with allies in May 2021, enforcing a state of emergency that suspended due process in March 2022, and ignoring constitutional provisions that prohibit re-election.

Figure 15 plots the sharp drop in democracy ratings starting in 2019 using the V-Dem electoral democracy index. In spite of El Salvador's democratic decline, Figure 16 shows that large shares of respondents approve of Bukele's job performance: 81 and 77 percent in 2021 and 2023, respectively. Satisfaction with "democracy" has followed the same trend. Perceptions that rights are well protected by the government have also increased since Bukele came to office, increasing from 3.4 on a 7-point scale in 2018 to 4.4 in 2021. This measure improved further – to 4.7 – in 2023, following the imposition of the state of emergency. This suggest that for most citizens, the state of emergency is not understood to be impinging on basic rights, perhaps suggesting that citizens are willing to trade off abstract democratic principles for security improvements.

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[48] Ibid.

Figure 15. V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index for El Salvador, 1980-2022

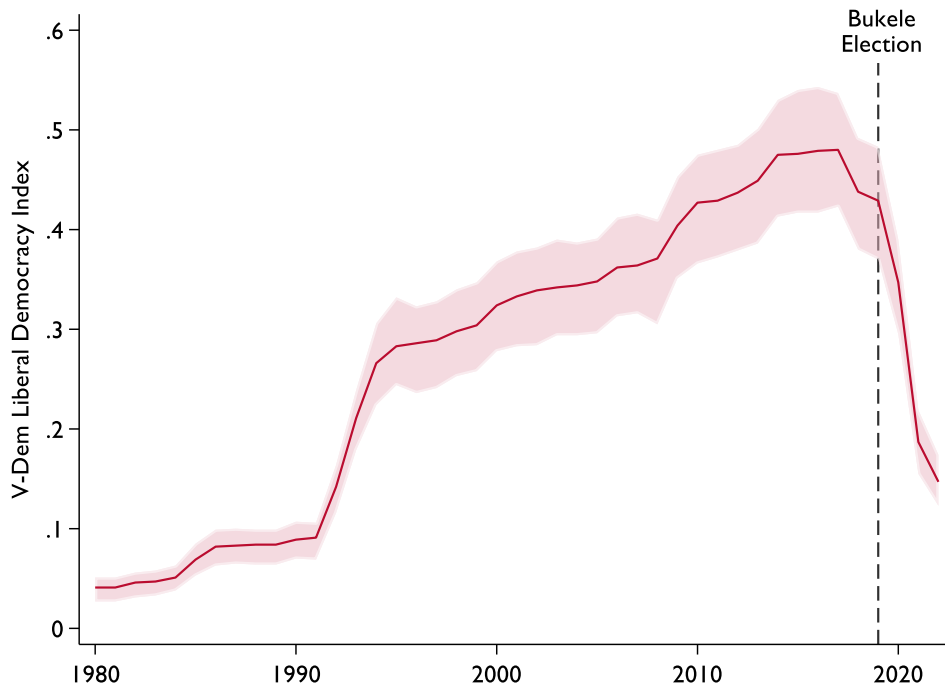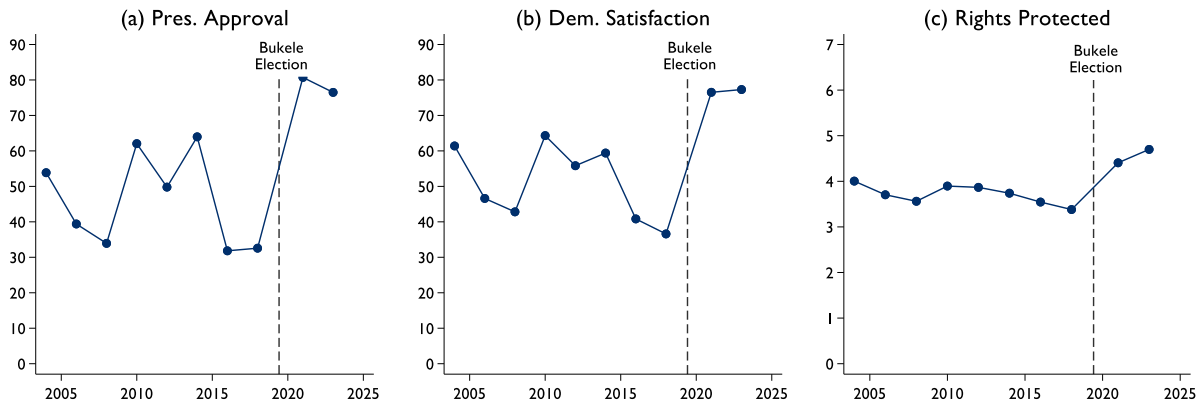**Figure 16. Presidential Approval, Democratic Satisfaction, and Rights Protection in El Salvador, 2004-2023**

Notes: Figure (a) shows the percentage of respondents who rated the president's job performance as good or very good. Figure (b) shows the percentage of respondents who were satisfied or very satisfied with the "form of democracy" in El Salvador. Figure (c) shows mean ratings on a 1-7 scale.

Migration Intentions: 2004 - 2023

Migration intentions over a nearly 20-year period from 2004 to 2023 are shown in Figure 17. Historically, about a quarter of the population has expressed an intention to leave El Salvador, on par with the mean for other countries in the LAC region. A steady increase is observed between 2012 and 2016, from 23.5 percent to 36.3 percent. There is, however, little evidence of a sustained increase related to backsliding following Bukele's 2019 election. While the data show a small increase from 2018 to 2021 (26.0 percent to 32.4 percent), this is likely attributable to the economic dislocations associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused the economy to contract by 7.9 percent in 2020. Most telling is that we do not observe an increase in migration intentions following the 2022 state of emergency, often viewed as a critical turning point in the regime's rejection of basic democratic rights.

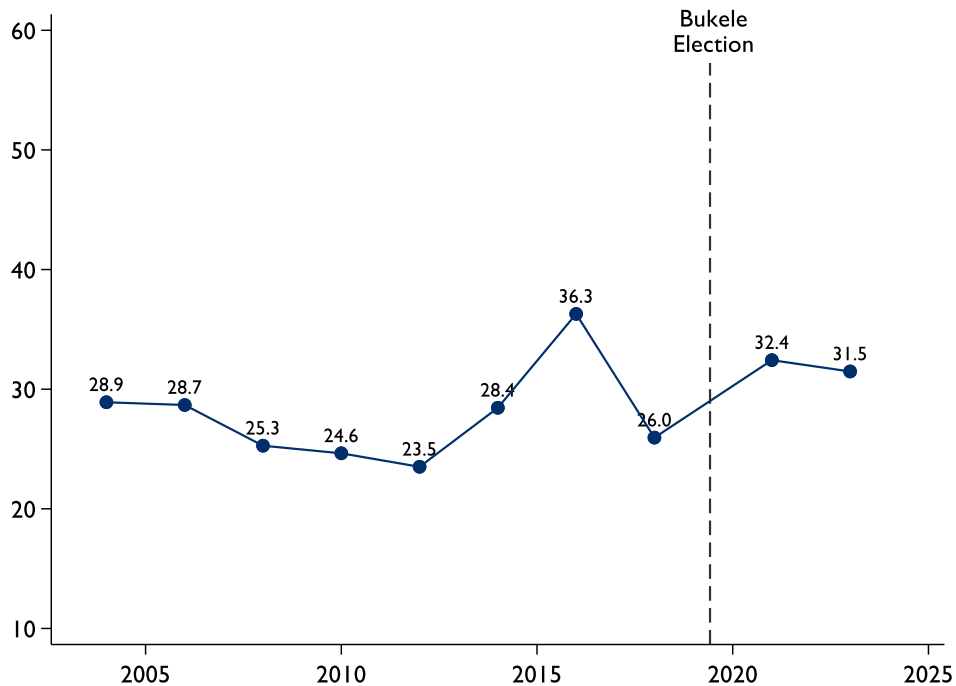**Figure 17. Migration Intentions in El Salvador, 2004-2023**

Figure 18 shows migration intention trends disaggregated by key demographic sub-groups. In recent years, the urban/rural divide disappeared, as migration intentions declined between 2021 and 2023 among urban respondents and increased among rural respondents. The size of the age gap widened, as migration intentions continued an upward trend for youth (18-35) and declined considerably among older respondents, perhaps because these groups responded differently to the government crackdown on gangs. Older citizens may benefit more from improving security conditions and are less likely to be targeted by police forces. Overall, however, we find no evidence that backsliding is associated with a major increase in migration intentions for any of the sub-groups examined here.

Figure 18. Migration Intentions by Sub-group in El Salvador, 2004-2023
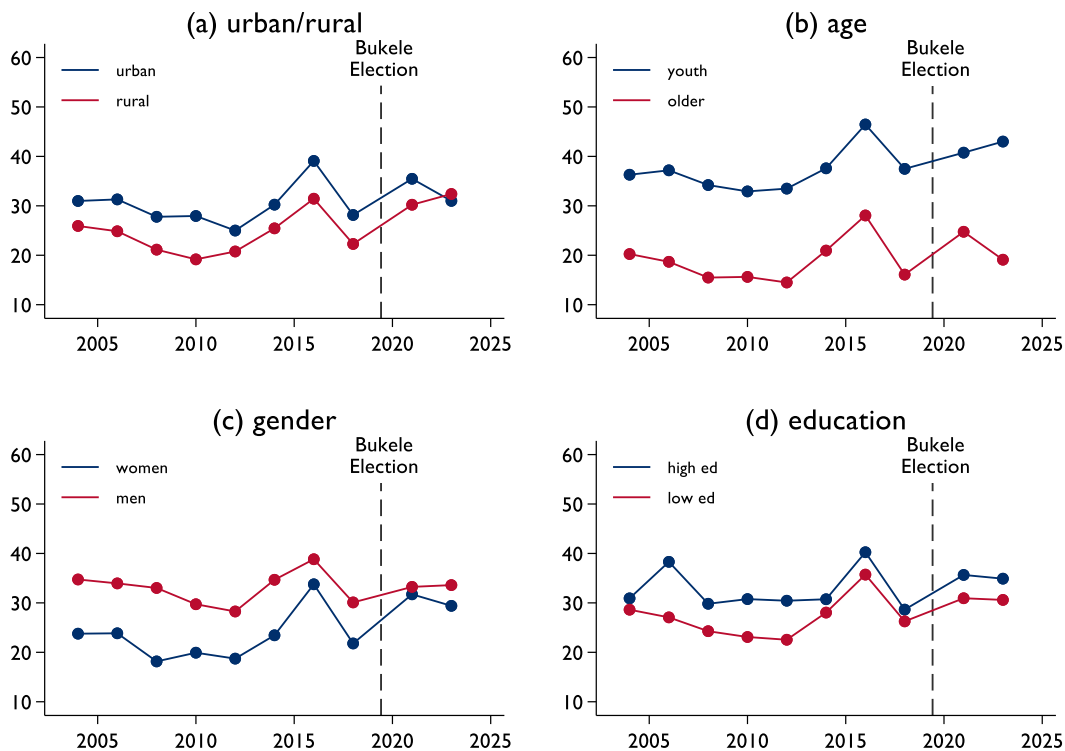
*Notes:* In Figure (b) youth are defined as 18-35. In Figure (d), high education is defined as tertiary and above.

Root Causes: Economic and Security Conditions

In contrast to Nicaragua's 2018 crackdown, democratic erosion in El Salvador since 2019 has not caused a deterioration in other root causes of migration related to economic or security conditions. Data suggest that economic factors have largely remained stable under Bukele, except during the economic downturn caused by Covid-19, while security conditions have improved.

Data on economic perceptions in Figure 19 show a significant increase in the share of respondents who report that their personal economic situation has improved over the prior year since Bukele's election, jumping from 11.9 percent in 2018 to 18.3 percent and 27.5 percent in 2021 and 2023. These numbers likely reflect the steady recovery of the economy coming out of the pandemic, rather than economic reforms attributable to Bukele. Regardless, they indicate that democratic erosion has not been accompanied by declining economic conditions. The contrast with Nicaragua is instructive. As noted above, the 2018 government crackdown led to a sharp decline in tourism and foreign investment. Backsliding in El Salvador has not provoked

similar instability, and while El Salvador experienced a sharp drop in tourist visits due to Covid-19, by 2023 the number of inbound tourists rebounded by pre-pandemic levels.[49]

Figure 19. Economic Perceptions – El Salvador, 2006-2023
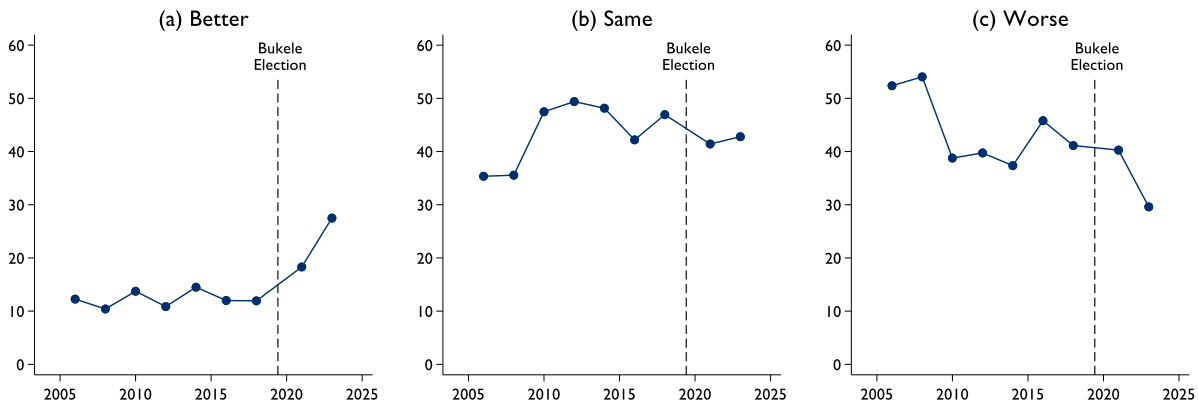
On security perceptions, the survey shows significant improvement since Bukele came to office and particularly following the state of emergency. Figure 20 shows that the share of respondents who feel somewhat or very safe in their neighborhoods increased to 84.3 percent in 2023, from 60.3 percent in 2021 and 54.5 percent in 2018.[50] It is important to note that human rights groups have widely criticized the mass arrests conducted by the regime, in which more than 62,000 individuals have been detained.[51] It is also difficult to assess whether the arrests have yielded a significant decline in domestic crime. The Bukele administration reports that the homicide rate has dropped from 107 per 100,000 people in 2015 to 7.8 in 2022.[52] While observers remain skeptical about the quality of government data, and while homicide rates were already decreasing significantly prior to the State of Exception, surveys show that the policy is widely supported by citizens.[53]

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[49] El Salvador Perspectives. "Tourism is growing steadily in El Salvador." Accessed at: https://www.elsalvadorperspectives.com/2023/02/tourism-is-growing-steadily-in-el.html.

[50] The question wording is as follows: "Speaking of the neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?"

[51] Amnesty International. "El Salvador: One Year into State of Emergency, Authorities Are Systematically Committing Human Rights Violations." April 3, 2023. Accessed at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/el-salvador-state-emergency-systematic-human-rights-violations/. Human Rights Watch. "El Salvador: "Widespread Abuses under State of Emergency." December 7, 2022. Accessed at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/07/el-salvador-widespread-abuses-under-state-emergency.

[52] https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/el-salvador-registra-el-promedio-de-homicidios-mas-bajo-de-centroamerica/

[53] Sara Acosta. "Un Año de Régimen de Excepción en El Salvador entre Denuncias y Aprobación." Swissinfo.ch. March 24, 2023. Accessed at: https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/el-salvador-violencia_un-a%C3%B1o-de-r%C3%A9gimen-de-excepci%C3%B3n-en-el-salvador-entre-denuncias-y-aprobaci%C3%B3n/48389180.

Figure 20. Perceived Neighborhood Security
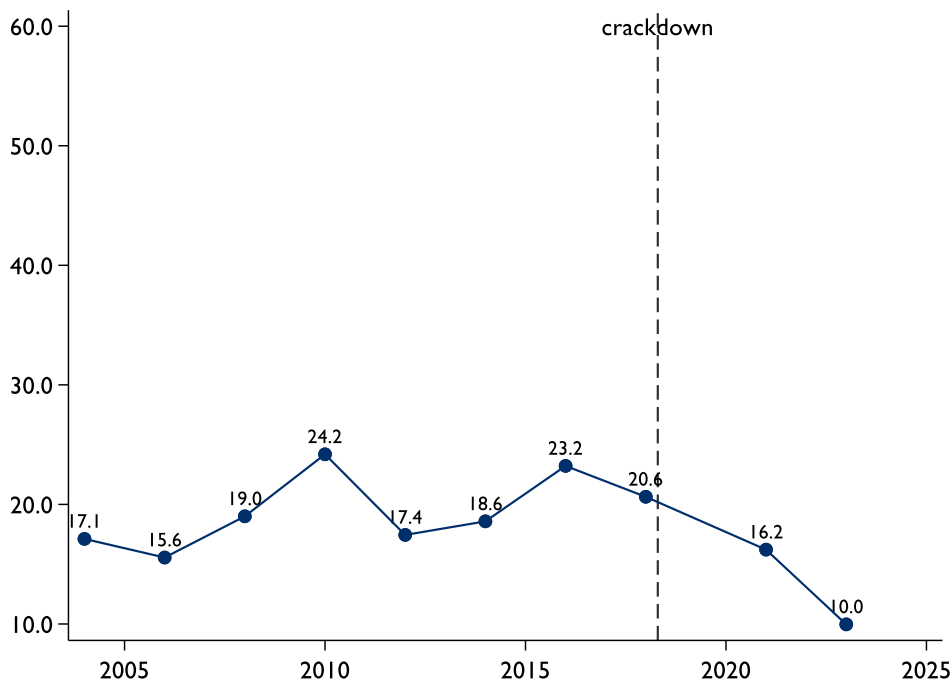
A natural experiment: public reactions to the erosion of judicial autonomy

The analysis of migration intentions suggests that there is no relationship between democratic erosion and out-migration intentions since Bukele came to office in El Salvador. To strengthen this conclusion, we leverage the timing of the 2021 survey, which was in the field in El Salvador when the Bukele government dismissed the attorney general and replaced five members of the Constitutional Court with allies on May 1. These events have been widely criticized as an unconstitutional attempt to reduce judicial independence and remove constraints on executive authority.[54] The moves occurred at roughly the half-way point in the 2021 survey, which was conducted between April 21 and June 4. By comparing responses among those interviewed after May 1 to those interviewed previously, we can conduct a clean test of how citizens responded to a critical backsliding event.[55]

Table 3 shows that the Bukele government's judicial interventions had no effect on migration intentions: among those interviewed before May 1, 32.9 percent expressed an intention to leave, relative to 31.7 percent among those interviewed after May 1, a minor difference that is

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[54] Due Process of Law Foundation. "Muzzled Justice: The Capture of El Salvador's Justice System." No date. Accessed at: https://dplf.org/sites/default/files/executive_summary_-_muzzled_justice_-_capture_justice_el_salvador.pdf.
[55] Because the survey was administered by phone using random digit dialing, respondents interviewed before/after May 1 are well balanced on demographic variables including age, gender, education, ethnicity, and marital status.

not statistically significant. Results on other questions suggest voters did not view the reforms as undermining democracy. At the time, Bukele and other government leaders justified the dismissal of the five judges as a necessary measure to combat Covid-19, following the Court's ruling against Bukele's stay-at-home order in 2020.[56] The dismissal of the attorney general was justified based on having been appointed by the previous ruling party, ARENA, and allegedly serving its interests.[57] The survey data, as seen in Table 3, show that an overwhelming majority of citizens – 78.6 percent – viewed El Salvador as a democracy prior to these moves, and this figure was unchanged in response to the May 1 events. Likewise, we observe no change in the perception that individual rights are protected. Notably, confidence in the Supreme Court increased significantly after the judges' removal, likely indicating that many citizens were persuaded by the government's criticism of the judiciary. Historically, public trust in the judicial system has been low due to weaknesses and corruption that have undermined public confidence.[58] For example, a survey conducted by the World Justice Project found that in 2018 only 13 percent of the public had some or a lot of confidence in judges and magistrates.[59] Bukele was able to exploit public contempt for the judiciary in the same way that he played on contempt for the country's traditional political parties to launch his bid for power in the 2019 election. The finding that confidence in the Supreme Court increased after Bukele's actions on May 1 is consistent with the broader literature showing that citizens often rationalize beliefs about anti-democratic reforms implemented by popular incumbents and in service of favored policy goals (Krishnarajan 2023).

Table 3. Effects of May 1, 2021, Backsliding Events on Attitudes

Variable	Before May 1	After May 1	Difference
Intend to migrate	32.9%	31.7%	-1.2
Country is a democracy	78.6%	78.1%	-0.5
Rights are protected	4.37	4.45	0.08
Confidence in Supreme Court	3.49	3.92	0.43**

Notes: Differences are computed using two-sided t-tests. ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.1

7. Conclusions

This report uses multiple data sources and analytic strategies to examine the connection between democratic backsliding and migration intentions in the LAC region. We find a conditional relationship: backsliding leads to increases in migration intentions when it entails

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[56] BBC. "US Concerned over Removal of Top Salvadorean Judges." May 3, 2021. Accessed at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56970026.

[57] Jimmy Alvarado, Roxana Lazo, and Sergio Arauz. "Bukele's Legislative Assembly Ousts Supreme Court Magistrates and Attorney General." *El Faro.* May 2, 2021. Accessed at: https://elfaro.net/en/202105/el_salvador/25452/New-Legislative-Assembly-Ousts-Supreme-Court-Magistrates-and-Attorney-General.htm.

[58] Jackson, Donald W., J. Michael Dodson, and L. Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy. "Protecting Human Rights: The Legitimacy of Judicial System Reforms in El Salvador." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 18.4 (1999): 403-421.

[59] World Justice Project. "The Rule of Law in El Salvador: Key Findings from the General Population Poll 2021." Washington DC: World Justice Project. Accessed at: https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/El%20Salvador.pdf.

substantial public repression and/or affects other root causes of migration, particularly economic and security conditions.

Case studies examining two priority countries – Nicaragua and El Salvador – illustrate the conditional relationship between backsliding and migration intentions. In Nicaragua, the data show a substantial spike in migration intentions following the government's brutal crackdown on mass protests in 2018. In this instance, backsliding entailed widespread repression targeting protest participants and contributed to a subsequent decline in economic conditions that affected significant numbers of citizens. However, we observe no increase in intentions during the preceding period of democratic decline from 2006 to 2018, suggesting that anti-democratic changes had no bearing on citizen attitudes as long as the Ortega regime delivered on economic improvements. Likewise, in El Salvador democratic erosion has not prompted an upsurge in intentions because some reforms – particularly the crackdown on gangs – have led to perceived improvements in security conditions and because other reforms are not viewed as anti-democratic among much of the public. Finally, region-wide statistical tests using survey data from a large sample of LAC countries show that there is no unconditional relationship between democratic erosion and migration intentions.

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Appendix 1

Table 4. Public Opinion Surveys Included in the Analysis

Country	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016/17	2018/19	2021	2023
Mexico	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Guatemala	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
El Salvador	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Honduras	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Nicaragua	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Costa Rica	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Panama	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Colombia	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ecuador			x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Peru		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Bolivia			x	x	x	x	x	x		
Paraguay		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Chile		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Uruguay		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Brazil		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Venezuela		x	x	x	x	x	x			
Argentina			x	x	x	x	x	x		
Dominican Republic		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Guyana		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	
Haiti		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Jamaica		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Trinidad & Tobago				x	x	x				x

Table 5. Data Sources and Variable Definitions for Statistical Analysis

Variable	Data source	Definition
Migration intentions	Public opinion surveys	Dummy variable equals 1 if respondent expresses an intention to live or work in another country in the next three years (q14).
Backsliding episode	V-Dem ERT	Dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for country-years that fall within a backsliding episode, defined by the V-Dem ERT dataset.
Backsliding years – major	V-Dem	Dummy variable that takes a value of 1 for years that experienced a decline of -0.27 or more in the V-Dem electoral democracy index, relative to the prior year.
Level of education	Public opinion surveys	Categorical variable: (0) none; (1) primary; (2) secondary; (3) tertiary or above.
Age	Public opinion surveys	Self-reported age.
Female	Public opinion surveys	Self-reported gender.
Wealth index	Public opinion surveys	Principal component analysis of asset ownership: refrigerator, landline, washing machine, microwave, computer.
Urban	Public opinion surveys	Dummy variable equals 1 for medium city, large city, or national capital (0 for small city and rural area) in 2004–2019 surveys. For 2021, equals 1 for a city or a town in a hinterland area (0 for a village in a rural area or the hinterland/remote area).
Unemployed	Public opinion surveys	Dummy variable equals 1 for respondents who report that they are looking for a job (ocup4a).
Crime victim in prior year	Public opinion surveys	Dummy variable equals 1 for respondents who indicate that they have been the victim of a crime in the last 12 months (vic1ext).
GPD per capita	World Bank world development indicators	Measured in constant 2015 USD.
GDP per capita growth	World Bank world development indicators	Change relative to prior year
Inflation	World Bank world development indicators	Change relative to prior year
Migrant stock	United Nations Population Division Department of Economics and Social Affairs	Share of population living outside the country, measured every five years.