



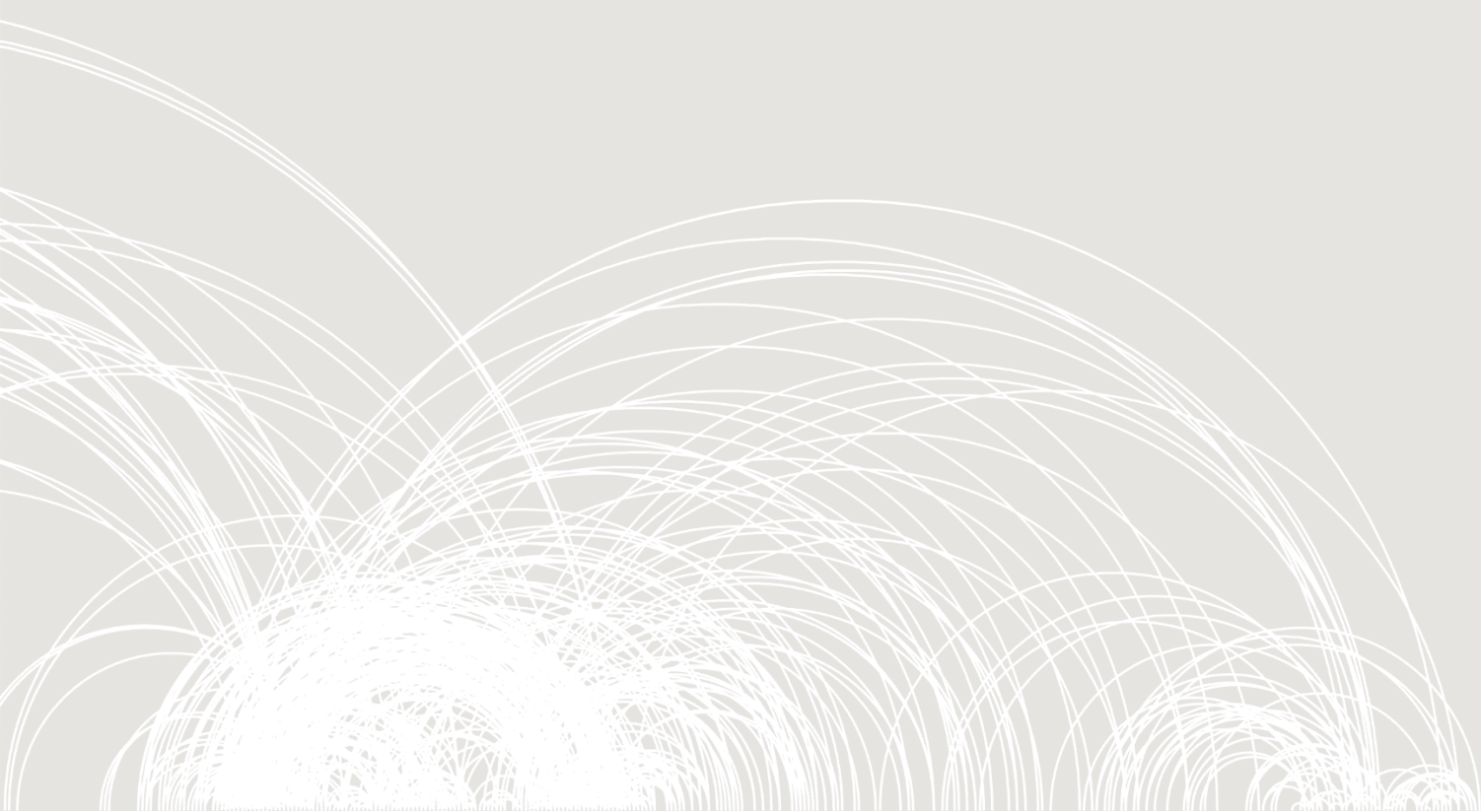
**FINAL REPORT**

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# **Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: El Salvador Report**

**Presented by:**

NORC at the University of Chicago



# Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: El Salvador Report

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## Acronyms

ARENA	Nationalist Republican Alliance
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
HDBScan	Hierarchical Density-Based Clustering
IUDOP	Academic Public Opinion Institute (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública)
LAPOP	Latin American Public Opinion Project
TSE	National Electoral Tribunal
USD	United States Dollar

# Presentation

In recent years, governance, political crises, insecurity, and longstanding issues of corruption, inequality, and lackluster economic performance have eroded democratic legitimacy and trust in government in Latin America. Indeed, the 2019 Pulse of Democracy report from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) states that “the region has settled into a malaise with respect to public views of democracy.”<sup>1</sup> Support for and satisfaction with democracy declined sharply in 2016 compared to prior survey rounds and remained low in 2018-2019. While support for democracy remained steady between 2018-2019 and 2021, support for centralizing power in the executive increased in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

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

To respond to the challenge of eroding democratic attitudes in cooperating countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) conducted a study that examines how democratic attitudes have evolved in the recent past. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- Can the citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean be classified into groups with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes?
- What are the most salient attitudinal, economic, and other characteristics of the citizens in each group, and especially those groups that hold worrisome democratic attitudes?
- How have the groups and democratic attitudes evolved in the past ten years? What system-level, contextual factors have contributed to changes over time in patterns of democratic attitudes?

To answer the first two questions, NORC identified trends in democratic attitudes between 2012 and 2021 using cluster analysis, a classification technique described in greater detail below, to group citizens into “clusters” with distinct democratic attitudes. The team then identified the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics differentiating the citizens in

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<sup>1</sup> Castorena, Oscar, and Sarah L. Graves. 2019. “Support for Electoral Democracy.” In Zechmeister, Elizabeth J., and Noam Lupu (Eds.). *Pulse of Democracy*. Nashville, TN: LAPOP, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Lupu, Noam, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2021. “The Pulse of Democracy in 2021.” In Lupu, Noam, Mariana Rodríguez, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Eds.). *Pulse of Democracy*. Nashville, TN: LAPOP, p. 2-5.

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each cluster from the rest of the population using data from the last five waves of the AmericasBarometer<sup>3</sup> (2012, 2015, 2016-2017, 2018-2019, 2021) for each country. To address the third question, NORC recruited experts in the politics of each country to make sense of the cluster analysis results and examine the relationship between democratic attitudes and political, economic, and social developments over time.<sup>4</sup>

This report presents the analysis for El Salvador. It was authored by Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez (Doctoral Candidate, Department of Government, Harvard University). Study coordinators Luis A. Camacho, Mollie Cohen (Assistant Professor, Department of International Affairs, University of Georgia), and Ingrid Rojas (Research Scientist, NORC at the University of Chicago) revised the report to ensure alignment with the study objectives.

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<sup>3</sup> The AmericasBarometer by the LAPOP Lab, [www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop).

<sup>4</sup> NORC recruited experts through an open call for contributors issued in December 2021. The call targeted academics and researchers with advanced degrees in political science or other social science at institutions in LAC and beyond. Subsequent targeted recruiting efforts relied on NORC's academic and professional networks. NORC ultimately recruited experts for 12 of 16 countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru.

# Introduction

El Salvador transitioned to democracy in the first half of the 1990s. In January 1992, representatives of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrilla organization and the Salvadoran government, who were bitter rivals in a civil war that had been raging since the early 1980s, met in Mexico City to strike a peace agreement. The Chapultepec Peace Accords ended the Salvadoran Civil War and called for the FMLN's full incorporation into the "civil, political, and institutional life of the country."<sup>5</sup> In 1994, the FMLN participated in elections for the first time and forced a run-off against the incumbent Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), the conservative party that had first won the presidency in 1989.

For the next 25 years, ARENA and the FMLN formed the backbone of Salvadoran democracy. ARENA won consecutive presidential elections in 1994, 1999, and 2004; the FMLN followed suit in 2009 and 2014. During this period, the two parties also dominated the Legislative Assembly and local governments. The result was one of the most stable party systems in Latin America. This party system, in turn, helped sustain a remarkably stable democracy, especially for a country emerging from five decades of military rule and a vicious civil war.

However, as Salvadoran democracy entered its third decade, the sustained electoral dominance of the two major parties masked growing public dissatisfaction with the political system. Organized crime emerged as a major issue in the early 2000s and by the mid-2010s, El Salvador had one of the world's highest homicide rates. Successive governments from both major parties adopted a range of anti-crime policies, but all ultimately failed to make El Salvador safer. At the same time, ARENA and the FMLN, once clear ideological opposites, became increasingly indistinguishable in the eyes of many voters. A series of high-profile corruption scandals beginning in 2013 further exacerbated public dissatisfaction with the two major parties and with the democratic system with which they had become synonymous. As a result of these developments, Salvadorans' satisfaction with democracy, trust in political institutions, and identification with traditional parties all declined significantly between 2012 and 2018.

These trends contributed to the election of President Nayib Bukele in 2019. Combining populist and authoritarian appeals, Bukele ran for the presidency on an anti-establishment platform designed to capitalize on voters' frustrations with the traditional parties. He won the presidency with 53.1 percent of the vote, becoming the first candidate from outside ARENA and the FMLN to win since 1984. Two years later, Bukele's allies secured a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly, as well as control of 179 of the 262 local governments.

Bukele's rise has had paradoxical consequences for Salvadoran democracy. On one hand, Bukele and his allies have used their control over the presidency and the legislature to undermine checks and balances, most notably by removing judges from and then packing the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice, El Salvador's highest court. The result has been a process of democratic backsliding. At the same time, Bukele's election appears to

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<sup>5</sup> Gobierno de El Salvador. 1992. *Acuerdos de paz*. San Salvador: Gobierno de El Salvador, p. 54.

have improved the Salvadoran public's views about democracy: for example, between 2018 and 2021, the share of Salvadorans who said they were satisfied with democracy rose significantly, while the number of Salvadorans who said they did not trust elections plummeted. In other words, it appears that Salvadorans have become increasingly satisfied with their system of government, perceived to be democratic, precisely as democracy is being dismantled.

What explains this apparent paradox? The evidence examined below suggests that Salvadorans' attitudes toward democracy are increasingly shaped by their perceptions of a single actor: the chief executive. Positive evaluations of Bukele, more than policy outcomes or the quality of institutions, are closely associated with greater satisfaction with democracy, higher levels of institutional trust, and lower opposition to executive overreach. Viewed this way, changes in public opinion since 2018 reflect not a growing commitment to democracy per se but rather overwhelming support for the Salvadoran president. Given Bukele's track record of undermining checks and balances and violating democratic norms, this interpretation does not bode well for the future of Salvadoran democracy.

This study describes the evolution of democratic attitudes in El Salvador between 2012 and 2021 and identifies the system-level, contextual factors that have contributed to changes in attitudes over time. To describe the evolution of democratic attitudes, it draws on NORC's cluster analysis, which uses AmericasBarometer data to identify groups of citizens with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes, and additional descriptive analysis of AmericasBarometer data. To identify the contextual factors that have contributed to changes in attitudes, the study traces linkages between recent political developments and public opinion.

This report is organized in three sections. The first section describes in greater detail how attitudes toward democracy in El Salvador evolved between 2012 and 2021. The second section examines how anti-crime policies, partisan brand dilution, and high-level corruption investigations contributed to the deterioration of democratic attitudes between 2012 and 2018 and how Bukele's election and overwhelming popularity help explain the apparent resurgence of "pro-democratic" sentiment between 2018 and 2021. The third section examines how declining support for democracy between 2012 and 2018 contributed to the collapse of El Salvador's traditional parties and the rise of Bukele. The final section concludes.

## Trends

### Cluster Analysis

NORC used cluster analysis to classify Salvadorans into groups with distinct attitudinal profiles using their responses to the AmericasBarometer surveys. The aim of this analysis is to maximize similarity *within* each cluster while maximizing dissimilarity *between* clusters. One advantage of cluster analysis compared to other classification schemes is that it is highly inductive, meaning that it lets surveyed Salvadorans speak for themselves without making



assumptions in advance about how to group them. Annex 1 provides detailed information regarding the study's methodology. NORC included five democratic attitudes in the cluster analysis:

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

All five attitudes were included in the analysis of the first four waves of AmericasBarometer data (2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018). The cluster analysis for the 2021 AmericasBarometer wave only included support for democracy and opposition to executive aggrandizement.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the cluster analysis results for 2021 should be interpreted with caution, particularly when making comparisons to results from previous years. Annex 2 presents the main cluster analysis results for all waves.

The cluster analysis identified three clusters in 2012 and 2014 and four clusters in 2016 and 2018. It also identified a small share of respondents who were not classified into any cluster. Unclustered individuals are dissimilar from each other and from those included in other clusters. To facilitate comparisons over survey waves, the resulting clusters can be grouped into four families that share a set of defining characteristics:

- *Institutionalists*: Individuals in this cluster family are characterized by full opposition to military coups and executive aggrandizement. They represent “ideal” democratic citizens compared to the other cluster families. Clusters in this family are “institutionalists” and “democratic institutionalists.”
- *Military Interventionists*: Individuals in this cluster family exhibit full opposition to executive aggrandizement but less-than-full opposition to coups.
- *Presidentialists*: Individuals in this cluster family exhibit full opposition to coups but less-than-full opposition to executive aggrandizement.

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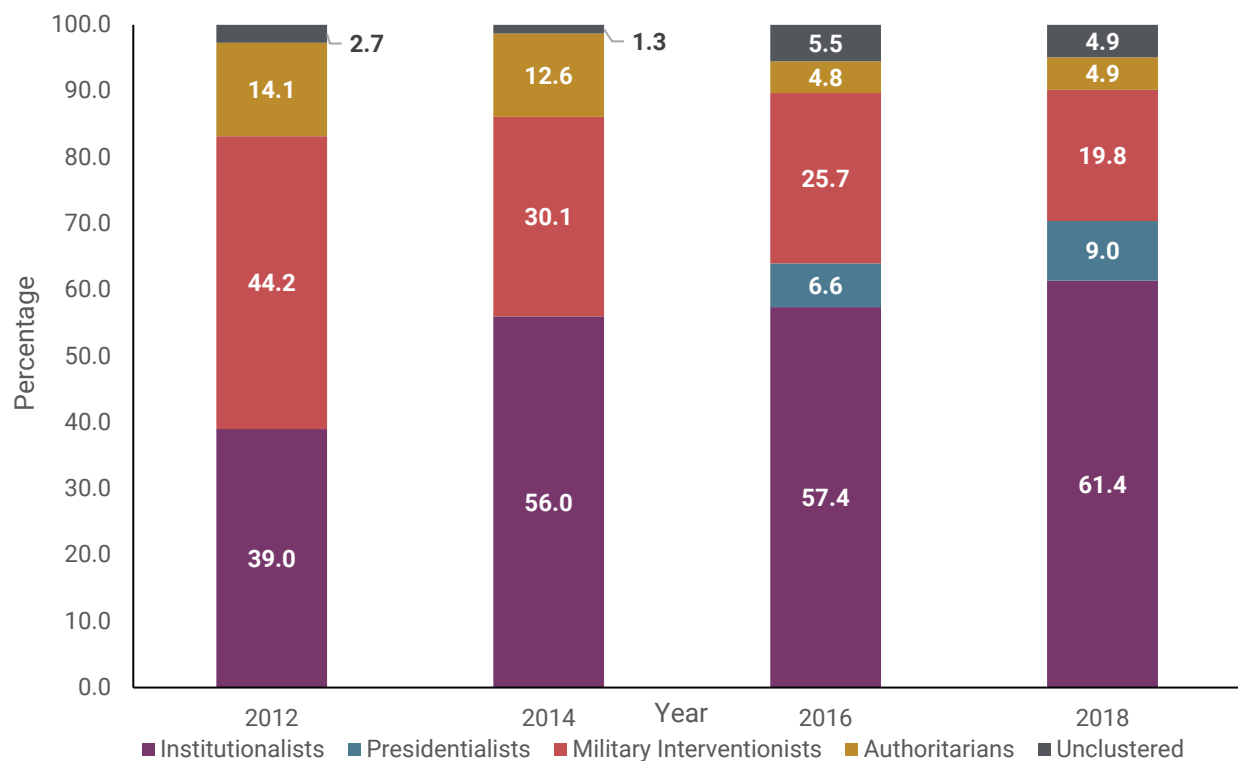
<sup>6</sup> This is due to changes in the AmericasBarometer questionnaires. Data for the other three attitudes were not collected in 2021.

- *Authoritarians*: Individuals in this cluster family are characterized by less-than-full opposition to both coups and executive aggrandizement. Clusters in this family include authoritarians and ambivalent-military interventionist presidentialists.

Interestingly, the cluster families are not clearly differentiated by their expressed support for democracy. Across the fourteen initial clusters and four cluster families, variation in support for democracy was limited: support was generally moderate in all clusters. The cluster families were also not easily differentiated by their levels of tolerance of protest and regime critics or support for democratic inclusion.

Figure 1 shows how the relative size of the cluster families evolved between 2012 and 2018. Several findings are noteworthy. First, institutionalists were the largest cluster family across all but one survey cycle (2012), and the share of institutionalists grew significantly between 2012 and 2018, from about two-in-five Salvadorans in 2012 to over three-in-five in 2018. Second, the share of respondents qualifying as authoritarians has generally been small, and it declined significantly between 2012 and 2018, from about one-in-seven to about one-in-twenty. Both patterns are healthy for democracy: institutionalists oppose both coups and executive aggrandizement, while authoritarians have a high tolerance for both. A third trend is less promising from the perspective of democratic durability: the cluster analysis suggests that a significant share of Salvadorans have, historically, been military interventionists. Over two-in-five Salvadorans were classified as military interventionists in 2012; by 2018, one-in-five were.

**Figure 1: Evolution of Cluster Families 2012–2018**



Results from 2021 are omitted from Figure 1 because changes to the AmericasBarometer questionnaires make comparisons between that survey round and previous waves difficult. As Figure A2.5 in Annex 2 shows, Salvadorans appeared by 2021 to be almost evenly split between institutionalists (53.9 percent) and presidentialists (46.1 percent). To the extent that executive overreach represents the central threat to Salvadoran democracy today, the rise of presidentialists, who oppose military coups but express limited opposition to executive aggrandizement, is a bad omen for Salvadoran democracy.

NORC also analyzed the clusters in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including gender, age, wealth, years of education, and level of political engagement. Interestingly, there were few, if any, clear and consistent patterns in the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the clusters, particularly across survey waves. This suggests that the composition and changes in public attitudes cannot easily be reduced to respondents' individual characteristics.

Overall, the cluster analysis appears to provide an optimistic image of public attitudes toward democracy in El Salvador. The analysis suggests that institutionalists, who oppose both coups and executive overreach, are the dominant group among the Salvadoran public. However, this result also appears incompatible with recent events. Not only did Salvadorans overwhelmingly elect a president with clear authoritarian tendencies in 2019, but they have also overwhelmingly supported his subsequent efforts to undermine checks and balances. For example, in May 2021, after President Bukele packed the Constitutional Chamber and the Attorney General's office—a clear act of executive aggrandizement—over 70 percent of Salvadorans said they supported the move.<sup>7</sup>

These observations suggest that the results from the cluster analysis results may mask important trends in Salvadorans' attitudes toward democratic institutions. The section below complements the cluster analysis with a description of aggregate-level trends in public opinion, providing a more nuanced picture of how Salvadorans think about democracy.

## Aggregate Level Trends

In Annex 3, we examined aggregate-level trends for support for democracy, opposition to military coups, opposition to executive aggrandizement, tolerance of protests and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion in El Salvador. The focus was on variables that were available for at least four of the five survey rounds and, where possible, on expanding the list of variables beyond those used in the cluster analysis. The aim was to facilitate comparisons across time that may be missed by the cluster analysis.

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<sup>7</sup> Disruptiva Media. 2012. "Los salvadoreños evalúan dos años de gobierno de Nayib Bukele ... todo va a estar bien." *Disruptiva Media*, June 7, 2012. <https://www.disruptiva.media/los-salvadorenos-evaluan-los-dos-anos-de-gobierno-del-presidente-nayib-bukele-todo-va-a-estar-bien/>.

The analysis identifies four important patterns:

1. Even though most Salvadorans have consistently agreed that democracy is the best form of government, trust in a series of institutions that are central to democracy—the presidency, the legislature, the courts, elections, and political parties—decreased significantly between 2012 and 2018. Additionally, levels of satisfaction with democracy declined significantly during this period. These trends suggest that, while support for democracy in the abstract appears to have remained relatively stable during this period, support for and satisfaction with democratic institutions in practice declined significantly.
2. Salvadorans became significantly less likely to support military coups under conditions of high corruption or high crime between 2012 and 2018, even as crime and high-profile corruption remained major issues.
3. Though Salvadorans demonstrate relatively low levels of tolerance for the political rights of government critics, tolerance levels did increase meaningfully between 2012 and 2018.
4. Between 2018 and 2021, there were major reversals in public attitudes. Support for and satisfaction with democracy increased significantly. Additionally, trust in elections saw a major increase, while opposition to the president governing without other branches of government plummeted. Together, these changes suggest that there was a major shift in public attitudes between 2018 and 2021, whereby Salvadorans' general views about democracy improved on the back of a popular authoritarian president.

## Explaining Changes in Public Attitudes

### Decline in Trust and Satisfaction, 2012–2018

Three main factors contributed to declining levels of institutional trust and satisfaction with democracy between 2012 and 2018: the consequences of anti-crime policies, a string of unprecedented high-profile corruption investigations, and the dilution of party brands. Together, these factors convinced a growing number of Salvadorans that politicians could not solve the country's most pressing problems, established political parties did not represent their interests, and elections could not deliver results.

### Crime and Anti-Crime Policies

Criminal groups, particularly the Mara Salvatrucha, commonly known as MS-13, and Barrio 18 gangs, loom large over Salvadoran society. These groups are responsible for high levels of violence and use their coercive capacity to exercise control over hundreds of neighborhoods

across the country.<sup>8</sup> As a result, insecurity has generally remained the most salient issue in Salvadoran politics: in every survey cycle between 2012 and 2018 AmericasBarometer respondents identified security as the country's most serious problem.

During the 2012–2018 period, the most important development with respect to the issue of crime was a non-aggression pact brokered between the Salvadoran government, led by then-President Mauricio Funes, and the country's major gangs.<sup>9</sup> The pact was negotiated covertly and went into effect in March 2012. Leaders of MS-13 and Barrio 18 agreed to a ceasefire and vowed to curtail violence both between criminal factions and against the general population. In exchange, the government relaxed repressive policing tactics and offered benefits to incarcerated gang members.<sup>10</sup> In June 2013, the pact began to fray following a shakeup of the presidential security council. In January 2015, Funes' successor, Salvador Sanchez Cerén, announced that the government would not continue negotiating with gangs. The truce had lasted 34 months. By 2016, amid public outcry, the Legislative Assembly outlawed gang negotiations and state authorities ordered the arrest of over 20 individuals who had helped broker and enforce the truce.<sup>11</sup>

The pact generated extreme fluctuations in violence levels and its collapse led to the highest levels of gang violence on record. As Figure 2 shows, homicide rates fell from 70 deaths per 100,000 people to a low of 40 deaths per 100,000 people at the pact's height in 2013. As the pact began to deteriorate, however, violence escalated.<sup>12</sup> By 2015, when the pact had fully collapsed, homicide rates reached 105 deaths per 100,000 people, the highest level on record. Beginning in 2016, homicide rates reverted to pre-pact levels, in part thanks to a new non-aggression pact between the two gangs that excluded the government.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Córdova, Abby. 2019. "Living in Gang-Controlled Neighborhoods: Impacts on Electoral and Nonelectoral Participation in El Salvador." *Latin American Research Review* 54: 201-221.

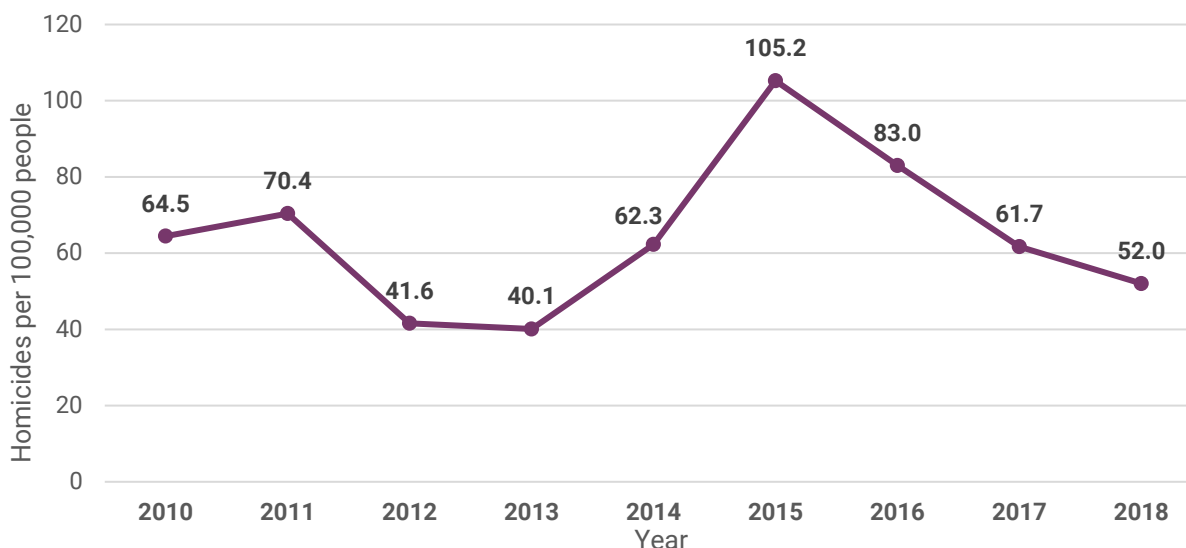
<sup>9</sup> Cruz, José Miguel, and Angélica Durán-Martínez. 2016. "Hiding Violence to Deal with the State: Criminal Pacts in El Salvador and Medellín." *Journal of Peace Research* 53: 197-210.

<sup>10</sup> Martínez, Óscar, et al. 2012. "Government Negotiates Reduction in Homicides with Gangs." *El Faro*, May 14, 2012. <https://elfaro.net/es/201203/noticias/8061/>.

<sup>11</sup> Tabory, Sam. 2016. "El Salvador arresta funcionarios en investigación sobre tregua pandillas." *InSight Crime*, May 5, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Homicide data are from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2019 Global Study on Homicide.

<sup>13</sup> Martínez, Carlos. 2016. "Gangs Find Common Ground in El Salvador Crackdown." *InSight Crime*, July 11, 2016. <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/gangs-find-common-ground-in-el-salvador-crackdown/>.

**Figure 2: Homicide Rates, 2010–2018**

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Evidence from a variety of settings suggests that crime and insecurity weaken public support for democracy and strengthen authoritarian attitudes.<sup>14</sup> Survey results suggest that this may have happened in El Salvador. Between 2014 (when the pact, though deteriorating, was still in effect) and 2016 (after the pact collapsed and violence skyrocketed), the share of AmericasBarometer respondents who said they were satisfied with democracy dropped from 59.4 percent to 40.8 percent. The share of respondents who said they were very dissatisfied with democracy more than doubled, from 4.5 percent in 2014 to 11.3 percent in 2016 (see Figure A3.2 in Annex 3).<sup>15</sup>

An initial analysis of individual responses to the AmericasBarometer surveys suggests that these changes were driven at least in part by rising homicide rates. Table A4.1 in Annex 4 shows the results of a logistic regression of several factors on whether a respondent said they were satisfied with democracy. The results suggest that perceptions of insecurity diminished satisfaction with democracy in both 2014 and 2016. Moreover, the regression results suggest that the negative effect of insecurity on satisfaction was greater in 2016 compared to 2014. One interpretation of this change is that, after the collapse of the pact, Salvadorans were more likely to blame the political system for insecurity: before the pact, politicians had failed to curb violence, and after the pact, they had helped exacerbate it.

<sup>14</sup> Bateson, Regina. 2012. "Crime Victimization and Political Participation." *American Political Science Review*, 106: 570-587; Carreras, Miguel. 2013. "The Impact of Criminal Violence on Regime Legitimacy in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 48: 85-107; Visconti, Giancarlo. 2020. "Policy Preferences After Crime Victimization: Panel and Survey Evidence from Latin America." *British Journal of Political Science* 50: 1481-1495.

<sup>15</sup> The timing of the AmericasBarometer survey rounds is important for understanding these results. The 2014 survey was conducted between March and April 2014, before the truce had begun to fray in earnest, and therefore captures attitudes at a time when homicide rates remained relatively low compared to the 2015 high. The 2016 survey was conducted between October and December 2016. By this point, the pacifying effects of the 2016 agreement had begun to set in, but violence remained at very high levels.

Two additional aspects of the pact likely influenced perceptions of the political system’s ability to address the crime problem. First, separate from their response to changing homicide rates, most Salvadorans rejected the basic principle behind the pact: in a November 2014 survey, 76.2 percent of respondents said they did not agree with the government negotiating with criminals in exchange for a reduction in homicides.<sup>16</sup> This, combined with the lack of transparency around the 2012–2014 negotiations, likely contributed to declining trust in the executive. Second, the pact’s failure meant that crime remained rampant despite successive governments from both major parties adopting a range of anti-crime policy alternatives, from repression to negotiation. Salvadorans likely increasingly believed that existing institutions could not provide an answer to what over 60 percent of the population identified as the country’s most important problem.

## High-level Corruption

Historically, Salvadorans have overwhelmingly believed that politicians are corrupt. In each of the AmericasBarometer rounds between 2012 and 2018, at least 63.1 percent of respondents said that corruption was either somewhat or very widespread among politicians. In 2016 and 2018, over 80 percent of respondents said they believed that half or more of all politicians were involved in corruption.

Between 2014 and 2016, however, Salvadoran authorities launched an unprecedented string of corruption investigations against some of the country’s most visible politicians. During this period, three former Presidents, a former President of the Legislature, a former First Lady, and a former Attorney General were investigated for corruption (Table 1).

**Table 1: High-Profile Corruption Cases in El Salvador**

Year	Name	Role	Party
2013–2014	Francisco Flores	President (1999–2004)	ARENA
2016	Antonio Saca	President (2004–2009)	ARENA/Grand National Alliance
	Luis Martínez	Attorney General (2012–2015)	
	Ana Ligia Mixco	First Lady (2004–2009)	
2017	Sigfrido Reyes	President of the Legislature (2011–2015)	FMLN
2018	Mauricio Funes	President (2009–2014)	FMLN

In principle, high-profile corruption investigations can strengthen support for democracy by showing voters that democratic institutions are able to hold even powerful politicians accountable. But in practice, efforts to combat high-level corruption can instead *weaken* support

<sup>16</sup> Academic Public Opinion Institute (IUDOP). 2014. “Evaluación del país a finales de 2014.” San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana José Matías Delgado. <https://www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/144.pdf>. p. 11.



for democratic institutions by revealing the true nature and extent of corruption and by convincing voters that “the whole system is rotten.”<sup>17</sup>

During this period, overall perceptions of corruption among public officials seem to improve slightly: the share of AmericasBarometer respondents who said corruption was either “somewhat” or “very” widespread decreased from 69.9 percent in 2012 to 65.6 percent in 2018, a difference of four percentage points. On a more granular level, however, important trends emerge. The share of respondents who said corruption among public officials was *very* widespread increased significantly, from 35.6 percent in 2012 to 48.1 percent in 2018. By 2018, 32.5 percent thought more than half of all politicians were involved in corruption and 31.7 percent believed *all* politicians were corrupt. This suggests that, whereas Salvadorans *overall* became less suspicious of corruption during the period of high-profile investigations, a very significant *subset* of them became more convinced that corruption was endemic to the political system.

Moreover, many Salvadorans believed that existing institutions could not hold politicians sufficiently accountable for acts of corruption, even when corruption investigations resulted in politicians spending time behind bars. In late 2018, former President Antonio Saca was found guilty of embezzling United States Dollar (USD) 351 million and sentenced to ten years in prison. According to a poll conducted after the sentencing, 65.5 percent of Salvadorans believed that Saca should have received a harsher sentence. In the same poll, 91.9 percent of respondents said they would support the creation of an international anti-corruption commission, a sign that many Salvadorans did not fully trust their own institutions to uncover and fairly punish corruption.<sup>18</sup>

These attitudes toward corruption appear to have a significant correlation with attitudes toward democratic institutions. As Figure 3 shows, those who believed that corruption was endemic were less satisfied with democracy and expressed less trust in elections, the executive, and political parties than those who believed corruption was less widespread.<sup>19</sup> To the extent that these high-profile corruption investigations convinced many Salvadorans that corruption was endemic and not just present, they may have contributed to declining overall levels of trust in key institutions and satisfaction with the democratic system.

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<sup>17</sup> Mayka, Lindsay, and Amy Erica Smith. 2018. “Could Corruption Investigations Undermine Democracy in Latin America?” *Vox*, May 17, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2018/5/17/17363436/corruption-latin-america>.

<sup>18</sup> IUDOP. 2018c. “Los salvadoreños y salvadoreñas evalúan la situación del país a final de 2018 y opinan sobre las elecciones presidenciales de 2019.” San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana José Matías Delgado. p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Respondents were considered to perceive corruption as being high if they said more than half of politicians were involved in corruption or if they said that corruption was very widespread. All other respondents were placed in the “low” corruption category.



**Figure 3: Perceptions of Corruption and Attitudes Toward Democracy, 2018**

Source: AmericasBarometer.

## Partisan Brand Dilution

Party brands are voters' perceptions about what and who parties stand for.<sup>20</sup> When parties have clear and well-differentiated brands, voters are able to distinguish between what different parties have to offer and to develop strong partisan attachments. Strong partisan attachments are essential for supporting well-functioning party systems and buttressing democracy. When party brands dilute and voters become unable to identify meaningful differences between what different parties have to offer, partisan attachments wither. Voters may then lose faith in the ability of political parties to represent their interests.

Beginning in 2009, but extending into 2012–2018, the Salvadoran party system experienced a process of brand dilution. Between 1992 and 2009, ARENA and FMLN had strong and clearly differentiated brands rooted in part in the Salvadoran civil war (1979–1992). During this period, ARENA, which remained in control of the presidency until 2009, aligned itself closely with business elites and other conservative constituencies. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the party advocated neoliberal economic reforms, most notably the adoption of the USD as the national currency in 2001, and a hardline approach against organized crime. In contrast, the FMLN fiercely opposed ARENA's economic and security policies, instead advocating progressive alternatives, and quickly punishing members who crossed the party line. In the

<sup>20</sup> On party brands, see Lupu, Noam. 2015. *Party Brands in Crisis: Partisanship, Brand Dilution, and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

words of one scholar, “The concern over ideological dilution ran so deep that the FMLN continued to sacrifice electoral victory for purity” as late as 2004.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, both parties continued to use wartime-era symbols and, with a limited number of exceptions, to nominate candidates closely linked to their respective core constituencies. The result was a pair of clearly differentiated party brands that offered voters two distinct electoral alternatives and formed the foundation for partisan attachments.

In 2009, when the FMLN won the presidency for the first time, party brands began to dilute. The FMLN, which had cultivated its strong party brand in large part by opposing ARENA’s economic and security policies, favored policy continuity over reform. Contrary to its longstanding promises, the party did not move to de-dollarize the economy, nationalize key industries, or intensify redistribution once in power; instead, President Funes set the tone for his presidency by announcing a “government austerity plan” during his first month in office.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in 2014, after experimenting with alternative approaches to security, Funes embraced the gang crackdowns that had been pioneered by ARENA governments. Moreover, during the Funes administration, the FMLN forged an unlikely alliance in the legislature with the Grand National Alliance, a center-right party that had formed as a splinter of ARENA in 2009. As a result, the FMLN’s political brand became increasingly indistinguishable from ARENA’s.

This process of brand dilution began in 2009 and intensified between 2012–2018. Funes’ election had been widely interpreted as a compromise, where the FMLN had sacrificed ideological purity to win the presidency for the first time.<sup>23</sup> In 2014, Funes was succeeded by Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla fighter and longtime FMLN leader who was viewed as an authentic representative of the party’s interests. However, like his predecessor, Sánchez Cerén continued to favor free market policies and a repressive security approach. In addition, the corruption investigations that plagued both ARENA and the FMLN during this period suggested to voters that the two parties were similar in both their policy positions and their *modus operandi*.<sup>24</sup>

As a result of brand dilution, many Salvadorans struggled to find meaningful differences between the two parties. A 2018 survey asked Salvadorans whether they agreed with the statement that “the parties of the left and right criticize each other a lot, but really they are the same thing;”<sup>25</sup> almost 80 percent of respondents said they agreed.<sup>26</sup>

As expected, brand dilution was correlated with a decline in partisan attachments to ARENA and the FMLN. Figure 4 displays party preferences based on yearly surveys conducted by the Academic Public Opinion Institute (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, IUDOP).<sup>27</sup> With the

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<sup>21</sup> Holland, Alisha. 2016. “Insurgent Successor Parties: Scaling Down to Build a Party After War,” in Steven Levitsky et al. (Eds.). *Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 288.

<sup>22</sup> Jovel, Stefany. 2009. “Funes promete agresivo plan de austeridad en oficinas públicas.” *La Prensa Gráfica*, June 12, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Holland 2016, p. 288-89.

<sup>24</sup> Pocasangre, Oscar. 2021. “Why El Salvador’s Multi-Party System is on the Brink of Collapse.” *El Faro*, February 24, 2021.

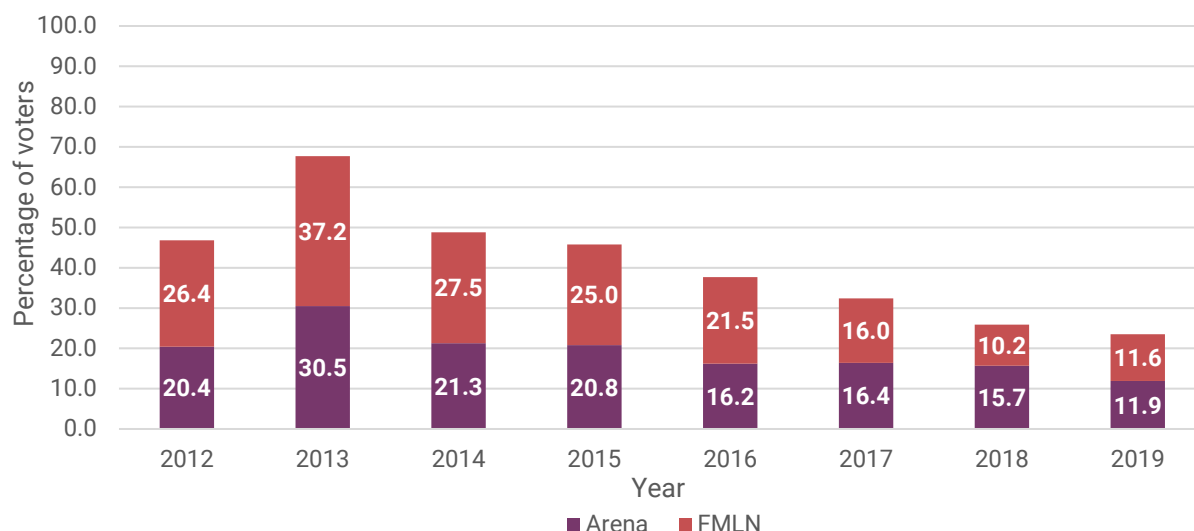
<sup>25</sup> IUDOP. 2018b. “Encuesta sobre el proceso electoral 2018.” San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana José Matías Delgado, p. 38.

<sup>26</sup> 57.2 percent said that they strongly agreed with the statement, while 25.1 percent said they somewhat agreed.

<sup>27</sup> The AmericasBarometer asks respondents whether they identify with a political party. We use the IUDOP data because three of the four AmericasBarometer rounds during this period occurred either during presidential election years or during election

exception of 2013, the share of Salvadorans who said they supported one of the two major parties declined significantly between 2012 and 2018. In 2012, almost one in every two Salvadorans said they supported either ARENA or the FMLN. By 2018, that figure stood at just over one in four.

**Figure 4: Percentage of Voters Who Said They Preferred ARENA or the FMLN, 2012–2019**



Source: IUDOP.

In turn, those without attachments to one of the major parties reported less institutional trust. In a 2018 IUDOP survey, respondents who said they did not support ARENA or the FMLN were more likely to say that year's midterm elections were fraudulent.<sup>28</sup> They were also more likely to say that they did not trust the National Electoral Tribunal (TSE).<sup>29</sup> Most tellingly, partisans and non-partisans of the two major parties reported different attitudes regarding the value of elections (Table 2). Over 70 percent of ARENA supporters and 77 percent of FMLN supporters said that elections were somewhat or very “useful for the country’s democratization;” and only 6.8 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively, said elections were not at all useful. In contrast, 62.8 percent of those who said they did not support a political party thought elections were somewhat or very useful for democratization and 12.7 percent said they were not useful at all.<sup>30</sup> These observations suggest that those who were detached from the two major parties were not only more likely to doubt the fairness of elections, they were also more likely to question whether Salvadoran elections were valuable in the first place. Indeed, 31.8 percent of those who said

campaigns. As a result, self-reported partisan attachments in the AmericasBarometer surveys likely overestimate true partisan loyalties: tellingly, the lowest levels of partisan attachments recorded by AmericasBarometer in this period occurred in 2016, the only year the survey did not coincide with an election. We do use AmericasBarometer data for the individual-level analysis below because IUDOP data are not available at a disaggregated level.

<sup>28</sup> IUDOP. 2018a. “Encuesta de evaluación del cuarto año de Gobierno de Salvador Sánchez Céren, Asamblea Legislativa, Corte Suprema de Justicia y evaluación poselectoral.” San Salvador: Universidad Centroamericana José Matías Delgado, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> IUDOP 2018a, p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> IUDOP 2018a, p. 120.

they did not identify with a political party and 36.4 of those who identified with a non-major party said they strongly agreed with the statement that “elections are a waste of time because things never change in this country,” compared to only 18.3 percent of those who identified with the FMLN and 26.1 percent of those who identified with ARENA.<sup>31</sup>

**Table 2: Are Elections Useful for the Democratization of the Country? (2018)**

Party Preference	Not At All	A Little	Somewhat	A Lot
ARENA	6.8	22.3	11.0	59.9
FMLN	4.3	18.6	12.2	64.9
None	12.7	24.4	12.5	50.3

Source: IUDOP 2018b.

In sum, between 2012 and 2018, party brands diluted and attachments to El Salvador’s two major parties declined significantly. Survey data suggest that those who were detached from the two major parties were, overall, less trusting of the fairness and value of elections.

## Summary

We have argued that three main factors undermined Salvadoran’s democratic attitudes between 2012 and 2018. The 2012 non-aggression pact between the state and criminal organizations ultimately undermined public satisfaction with democracy. Meanwhile, high-profile corruption investigations conducted between 2012 and 2018 increased perceptions of endemic corruption, weakened confidence in the ability of institutions to hold politicians sufficiently accountable, contributed to dissatisfaction with democracy, and undermined trust in elections, parties, and the executive branch. At the same time, partisan brand dilution weakened voter attachments to the major parties and eroded faith in elections. In the next section, we examine the rebound in satisfaction and trust observed between 2018 and 2021.

## Satisfaction and Trust Rebound, 2018–2021

Between 2018 and 2021, satisfaction with democracy soared from 36.6 percent to 77.6 percent, the highest level recorded in at least a decade. The share of respondents who said they distrusted elections plummeted from 43.2 percent in 2018 to 23.4 percent in 2021. The central driver of this reversal in attitudes was the election of President Bukele in 2019.

Bukele’s election broke the duopoly that ARENA and the FMLN had held over presidential elections since the mid-1990s. Between 1994, the first time the FMLN participated in presidential elections, and 2014, the combined presidential vote share of the two major parties never fell below 73.9 percent. Across the five presidential elections held during this period, the

<sup>31</sup> IUDOP 2018b, p. 36.

two parties secured a combined average of 87.6 percent of the vote. However, in 2019, ARENA and the FMLN won only 31.72 and 14.4 percent of the vote, respectively, by far the lowest vote share each party has mustered since democratization. Bukele secured 53.1 percent of the vote, the highest share any presidential candidate has won since democratization (Table 3).

**Table 3: Presidential Election Results, 1994–2019 (%)**

Party/Candidate	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
ARENA	49.00	51.96	57.71	48.68	38.96	31.72
FMLN	24.90	29.05	35.68	51.32	49.83	14.40
Bukele						53.10

Note: Results are for first-round elections.  
Source: TSE.

The 2019 election not only ended ARENA and the FMLN's dominance but also resulted in the election of an extremely popular president. As Figure 5 shows, in 2021, three years into Bukele's term, 83.5 percent of AmericasBarometer respondents rated his performance as good or very good; only 2.4 percent had negative evaluations of the executive. Some polls have placed Bukele's approval rating as high as 96 percent and no poll, to our knowledge, has ever placed his approval rating below 83 percent.<sup>32</sup>

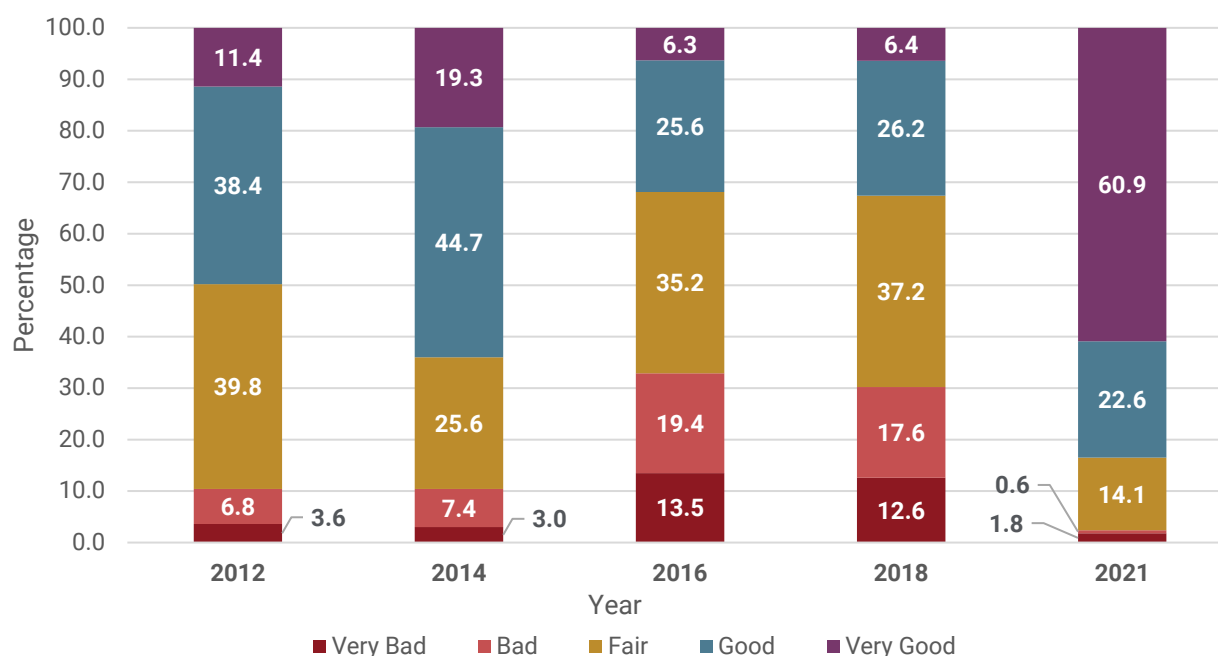
Between 2012 and 2018, Salvadorans had grown increasingly skeptical of the fairness of elections and of whether elections could bring about meaningful change. By 2018, 62.4 percent agreed that elections were a waste of time.<sup>33</sup> A growing number of Salvadorans had also lost trust in the executive and confidence in the political system's ability to address the country's most important issues, especially crime. Many Salvadorans had grown increasingly detached from the two major parties and viewed them as one of the root causes of the problem: in 2018, when asked what would most help improve conditions in the country moving forward, 35.3 percent of Salvadorans chose the election to the presidency of a party other than ARENA and the FMLN and 35.9 percent chose the election of a "strong leader that does not come from the parties."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Villarán, Julio. 2020. "Aprobación del presidente Nayib Bukele sube al 96% en el país, según la última encuesta de Cid-Gallup." *La Página*, November 18, 2020. <https://lapagina.com.sv/nacionales/aprobacion-del-presidente-nayib-bukele-suba-al-96-en-el-pais-segun-ultima-encuesta-de-cid-gallup/>.

<sup>33</sup> IUDOP 2018b, p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> IUDOP 2018a, p. 124.

Figure 5: Evaluations of the Executive, 2012–2021



Source: AmericasBarometer.

Bukele’s election demonstrated that elections could bring about meaningful change and translate public preferences into political outcomes, even at the expense of the two major parties. Moreover, because Bukele and his allies had repeatedly claimed that the election would be marred by fraud, his landslide victory belied perceptions that elections could not be trusted to be free and fair.<sup>35</sup> In Bukele’s rise, many Salvadorans got their wish for not only a president who branded himself as anti-party, but also one who was not affiliated with ARENA or the FMLN.<sup>36</sup>

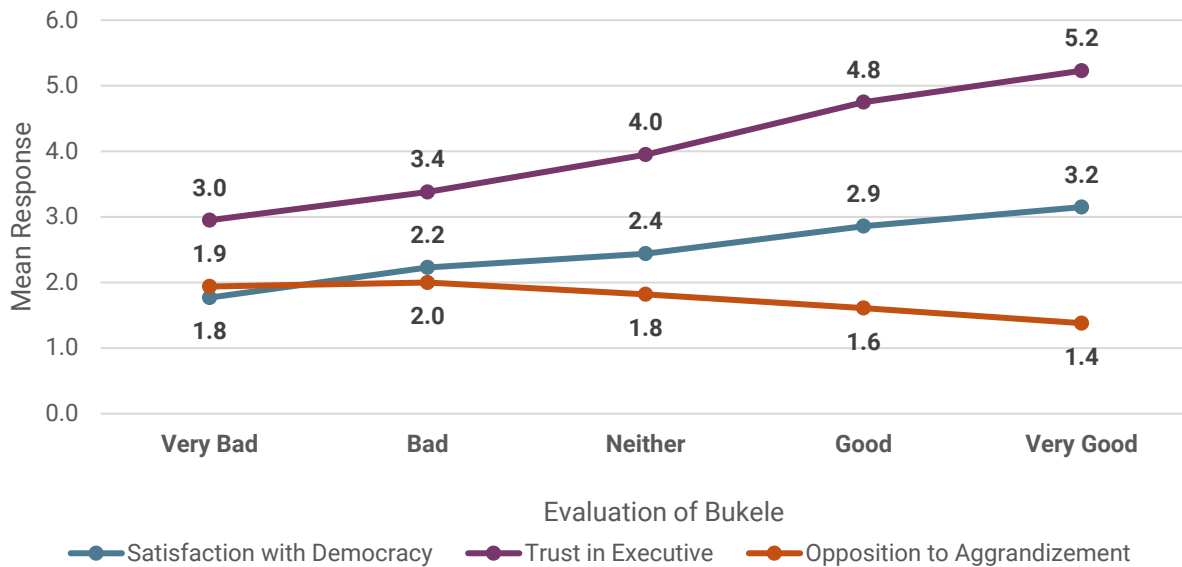
Bukele’s election and the collapse of the ARENA–FMLN duopoly thus contributed to a remarkable increase in satisfaction with democracy, which jumped from a period-low mark in 2018 to a period-high mark in 2021; belief in democracy as the best form of government, from 58.6 percent in 2018 to a period-high of 72.5 percent in 2021; and trust in elections, as the share of Salvadorans who said they did not trust elections declined from a period-high 43.2 percent in 2018 to a period-low 23.4 percent in 2021. As Figure 6 shows, AmericasBarometer results from 2021 suggest that positive evaluations of Bukele’s performance were correlated with higher levels of satisfaction of democracy and higher levels of trust in the executive. However, those who had a positive evaluation were less likely to oppose the president ruling without the legislature. This observation is consistent with the view that changes in public

<sup>35</sup> Labrador, Gabriel. 2021. “Un TSE dudoso no supo enfrentar al fantasma del fraude.” *El Faro*, March 20, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> In 2019, Bukele ran on the Grand National Alliance ticket. Simultaneously, he formed his own party, Nuevas Ideas, through which he has governed.

attitudes toward democracy between 2018 and 2021 were driven primarily by support for Bukele and what he represented.

**Figure 6: Democratic Attitudes by Evaluation of Bukele’s Performance, 2021**



Source: AmericasBarometer.

## The Consequences of Changing Attitudes

The decline in satisfaction with democracy and institutional trust that occurred between 2012 and 2018 contributed to the collapse of the major parties and the election of Bukele.

Bukele’s campaign capitalized on growing frustrations with the established parties: he referred to the FMLN as “ARENA 2.0,” a clear nod to the process of brand dilution; labeled ARENA and the FMLN *los mismos de siempre* (the same ones as always); railed against the undemocratic nature of the two parties; and promised to end their lock on the presidency. Ending corruption was a key promise: *el dinero alcanza cuando nadie roba* (there is enough money when no one steals) and *devuelvan lo robado* (return what you have stolen) became signature campaign slogans. Bukele also mobilized voters by stoking distrust in election integrity: he claimed that electoral authorities were plotting fraud against him and called on his supporters to turn out in numbers so large that the election would be impossible to steal.



Above all, Bukele put forward a cohesive narrative that tied the country's problems directly to the power of the traditional parties and placed his political movement as the solution. In a June 2021 speech, Bukele succinctly summarized the vision that had defined his presidential campaign:

**In our country, there was always a group of power behind the government. An invisible government behind the scenes that no one elected. We saw it with the right, which had the oligarchy behind it, and we saw it with the left, which supposedly came from the people but in the end served the same oligarchy. Over time we discovered that the two were sides of the same coin ... Was that democracy? Of course not.<sup>37</sup>**

He further added:

**Now we are building a real democracy. We are not building a false democracy, like the one the forces of the status quo installed. ... For 200 years, democracy was a pantomime, it was all theater. We had elections, yes, but when politicians got to power, they forgot about the people. ... We will never again return to the system that for two centuries sank us into crime, into corruption, into inequality, and into poverty. Never again. Don't get any ideas. As long as God gives me strength, I will not allow it.<sup>38</sup>**

Bukele's campaign, in sum, relied on appealing to voters who had grown dissatisfied with democracy, lost trust in elections and the traditional parties, and come to be skeptical of the political system's ability to address key issues.

Though publicly available data on the drivers of vote choices in 2019 are limited, the available evidence suggests that, because these attitudes had come to describe a growing number of Salvadoran voters between 2012 and 2018, Bukele's appeals resonated to great effect. Besides candidate evaluations, discontent with the traditional parties was the strongest predictor of voting for Bukele in 2019.<sup>39</sup> One in two of those who had voted for the FMLN and 30 percent of those who had voted ARENA in 2014 said they would vote for Bukele in 2019.<sup>40</sup> A plurality of those asked said the main reason the FMLN had lost votes was a failure to deliver on their promises; when asked about ARENA, 41.3 percent of respondents pointed to corruption. These data points are consistent with widespread acceptance of Bukele's narrative about Salvadoran democracy, or the absence thereof.

Once in office, changes in public opinion enabled Bukele to centralize power in the presidency and undermine checks and balances. Between 2018 and 2021, trust in the executive skyrocketed. Crucially, trust in the legislature and the judiciary did not follow suit: about one-in-two Salvadorans said they did not trust either institution in the 2018 and 2021 AmericasBarometer surveys (Figure A3.3 in Annex 3). When forced to take sides in

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<sup>37</sup> A video of this speech is available, in Spanish, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AIBoulqN3E>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Córdova, Ricardo et al. 2019. *La población salvadoreña en las elecciones presidenciales de 2019: análisis de la intención de voto mediante un panel electoral*. San Salvador: Dr. Guillermo Manuel Ungo Foundation, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Córdova et al. 2019, p. 42.



confrontations between the executive and the other branches of governments, Salvadorans overwhelmingly chose to support Bukele.

In February 2020, Bukele used the military to break into the Legislative Assembly to force legislators from ARENA and the FMLN to approve an international loan. In May 2021, Bukele used his new legislative supermajority to overthrow and replace the Attorney General and the Constitutional Chamber, El Salvador's highest court. In both cases, Bukele framed his power grabs as an effort to overcome fundamentally undemocratic institutional barriers to the implementation of the people's will: "the oligarchy," he said following the judicial coup, "can no longer rule from the Constitutional Chamber."<sup>41</sup> Salvadorans, a majority of whom trusted the executive more than they trusted the legislature or the courts, overwhelmingly embraced this narrative. In a survey of opinions on Bukele's forced entry in the National Assembly, 78.5 percent of respondents said they approved of the president's behavior, 65.6 percent said Bukele was "the president of the people," and only 18.9 percent said he was an authoritarian.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, over 70 percent of Salvadorans said they approved of Bukele's removal of the Constitutional Chamber and the Attorney General.<sup>43</sup> Bukele has continued to enjoy widespread support as he undermines lower courts, municipal governments, non-governmental organizations, the press, and other sources of horizontal accountability.

## Conclusion

This study described the evolution of democratic attitudes in El Salvador between 2012 and 2018. NORC's cluster analysis appears to provide an optimistic image of public attitudes toward democracy. Institutionalists were the largest cluster family across all but one survey cycle, and their share grew significantly during the study period. The share of respondents classified as authoritarians was generally small and declined significantly between 2012 and 2018. A third trend is less promising from the perspective of democratic durability: a significant share of Salvadorans has, historically, been military interventionists.

Additional analysis of trends in public opinion revealed a more complex situation. Even though most Salvadorans have consistently agreed that democracy is the best form of government, trust in institutions and levels of satisfaction with democracy decreased significantly between 2012 and 2018. These trends suggest that, while support for democracy in the abstract remained relatively stable, support for and satisfaction with democratic institutions in practice eroded. These changes were the consequences of anti-crime policies, a string of unprecedented high-profile corruption investigations, and party brand dilution. However,

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<sup>41</sup> See footnote 39.

<sup>42</sup> Picardo, Óscar, et al. 2020. "La ciudadanía ha decidido apoyar el President Bukele... pero hay un 20% que lo considera autoritario." *Disruptiva Media*, February 27, 2020. <https://www.disruptiva.media/la-ciudadania-ha-decidió-respalda-al-presidente-bukele-pero-hay-un-20-que-lo-califica-de-autoritario>.

<sup>43</sup> *Disruptiva Media*. 2012. "Los salvadoreños evalúan los dos años de gobierno del presidente Nayib Bukele ... todo va a estar bien." June 7, 2012.

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between 2018 and 2021, there were major reversals in support for democracy, satisfaction with democracy, trust in elections, and support for executive power grabs due to the election of Bukele in 2019.

Recent events in El Salvador present an apparent paradox. Salvadorans say they are more satisfied with democracy and more trusting of elections and of the executive than at any other point in the past decade. Yet these trends have coincided with and likely have contributed to democratic backsliding through the erosion of checks and balances.

The foregoing analysis provides one explanation as to why pro-democratic attitudes and democratic stability moved in opposite directions: over the past four years, Salvadorans have not become more democratic, they have become more presidentialist. Support for and trust in the executive have swelled, while trust in the judiciary and the legislature remain stagnant. Trust in elections, which resulted in Bukele's ascent to power in 2019, has grown, but trust in political parties, the main vehicles of electoral competition, has not. Salvadorans say they are more satisfied with democracy than before not because democratic institutions are consolidating, but because those institutions have resulted in the election of a profoundly popular leader.

This shift in public attitudes does not bode well for the future of Salvadoran democracy. Instead, it suggests that public opinion is unlikely to slow El Salvador's authoritarian turn at the hands of Bukele and may even help to accelerate it.

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## Annex 1. Methodology

NORC employed cluster analysis to classify citizens into clusters with distinct attitudinal profiles. Cluster analysis entails analyzing a collection of heterogeneous objects and grouping them in smaller, homogenous clusters according to two or more measurable attributes. The aim is to maximize similarity *within* each cluster while maximizing dissimilarity *between* clusters.

There are several variants of cluster analysis. NORC used Hierarchical Density-Based Clustering (HDBScan) as developed by Campello, Moulavi, and Sander.<sup>44</sup> HDBScan identifies groups of observations that are closely packed together in space and leaves outliers unclassified. HDBScan only requires one parameter—the minimum size of a cluster—and chooses the number of clusters endogenously through a hierarchical process that retains the most stable clusters. We employed Mahalanobis distances as the criteria for computing the distance metric used by HDBScan.

By using cluster analysis, we let survey respondents speak for themselves instead of making assumptions in advance about how to group them. We did not forcibly group observations that did not belong together by predefining acceptable combinations of attitudes or setting arbitrary cut-offs for scores to classify respondents into a given cluster. However, our analysis has one main limitation: the variables used are not continuous and do not share a common scale. Ideally, we would conduct cluster analysis with continuous variables that can be standardized to ensure comparability.

The democratic attitudes used for this analysis include support for democracy, opposition to military coups, opposition to executive aggrandizement, tolerance of protest and regime critics, and support for democratic inclusion. Table A1.1 presents the full wording of the AmericasBarometer questions we used to measure each democratic attitude. We use these questions to create attitudinal scores, ranging from zero (least democratic attitude) to one (most democratic attitude). When more than one question is available for a given democratic attitude, we calculate the attitudinal score by averaging responses.

**Table A1.1: AmericasBarometer Items and Underlying Democratic Attitudes**

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES <sup>1</sup>	QUESTIONS
Support for democracy	ING4. Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?  <i>Response options: Seven-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (7) Strongly agree.</i>

<sup>44</sup> Campello, Ricardo, Davoud Moulavi, and Jörg Sander. 2013. "Density-based clustering based on hierarchical density estimates." *Pacific-Asia conference on knowledge discovery and data mining*. Springer. p. 160-172.

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES <sup>1</sup>	QUESTIONS
<b>Opposition to military coups<sup>2</sup></b>	<p>Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified...</p> <p>JC10. When there is a lot of crime</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.</i></p>
	<p>Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified...</p> <p>JC13. When there is a lot of corruption</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified; (2) A military takeover of the state would not be justified.</i></p>
<b>Opposition to executive aggrandizement<sup>2</sup></b>	<p>JC15A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Legislative Assembly and govern without the Legislative Assembly?</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.</i></p>
	<p>JC16A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to dissolve the Supreme Court and govern without the Supreme Court?</p> <p><i>Response options: (1) Yes, it is justified; (2) No, it is not justified.</i></p>
<b>Tolerance of protest and regime critics</b>	<p>D1. There are people who only say bad things about the form of government of El Salvador, not just the current government but the system of government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's right to vote? Please read me the number from the scale.</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
	<p>D2. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views? Please read me the number.</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
	<p>D3. Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the form of government of El Salvador, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office?</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES <sup>1</sup>	QUESTIONS
	<p>D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches?</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
<p><b>Support for democratic inclusion</b></p>	<p>D5. And now, changing the topic and thinking of homosexuals, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of homosexuals being permitted to run for public office?</p> <p><i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>

<sup>1</sup> In the 2021 round of the AmericasBarometer, only questions ING4 and JC15A were included in the survey. items JC13 and JC15A were administered in a split population so that each respondent was asked only one of the two questions. We decided to use JC15A for cluster analysis as we believe that executive aggrandizement currently represents a greater threat to democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean than military coups.

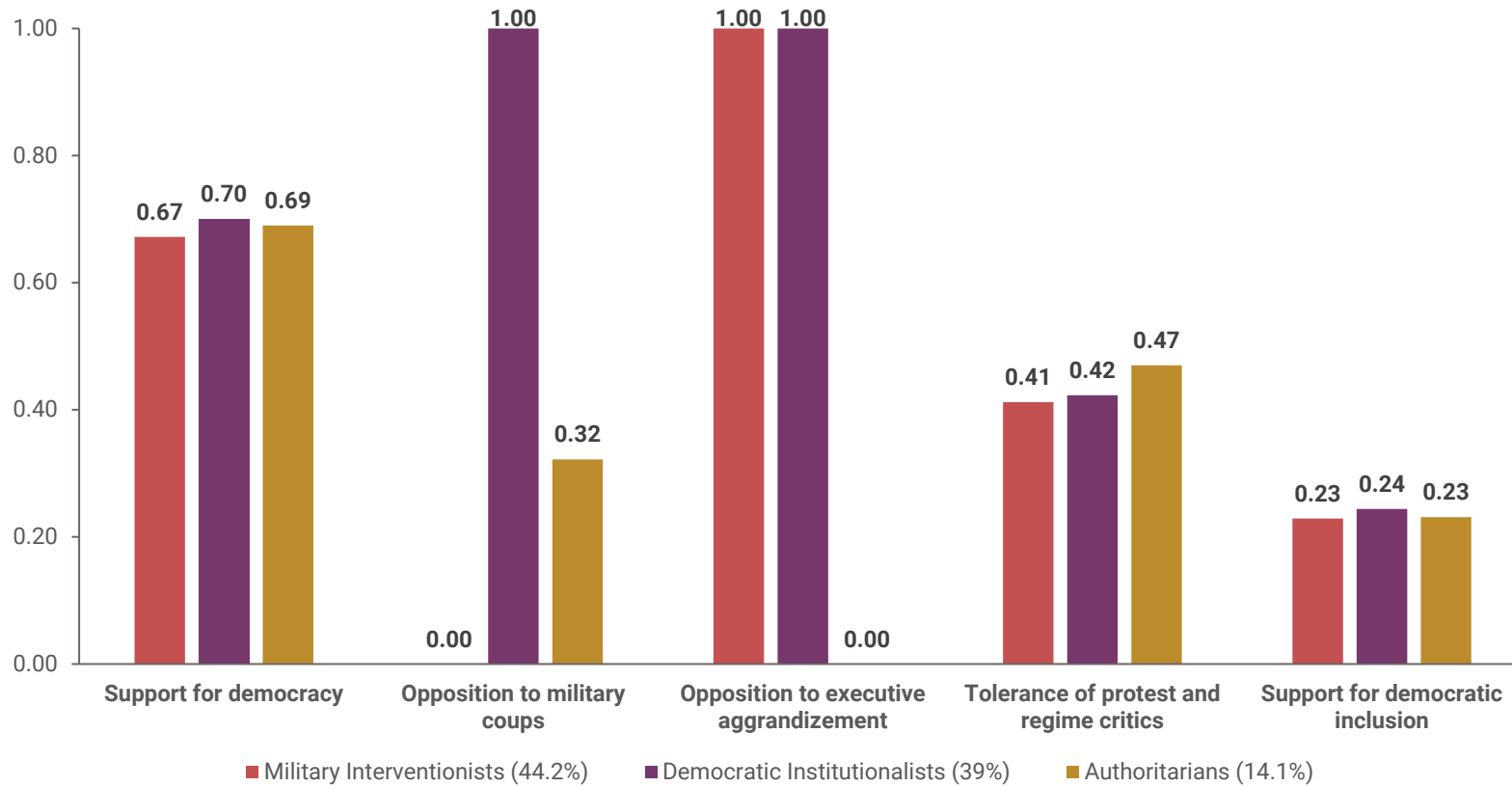
<sup>2</sup> For the 2012-2019 waves, opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement included up to two questions each (JC10 and JC13, and JC15A and JC16A, respectively). In 2012, respondents were asked all four questions. In 2014, respondents were asked JC10, JC13, and JC15A (JC16A was missing). In 2016, respondents were asked either JC10 or JC13 (split sample) and JC15A (JC16A was missing). In 2018, respondents were asked either JC10 and JC15A or JC13 and JC16A. We verified that responses to JC10 and JC13 had similar distributions. To ensure consistency across years, we artificially created a split sample by randomly taking the value of one of the two questions for each respondent in 2012 and 2014.

## Annex 2. Cluster Analysis Results

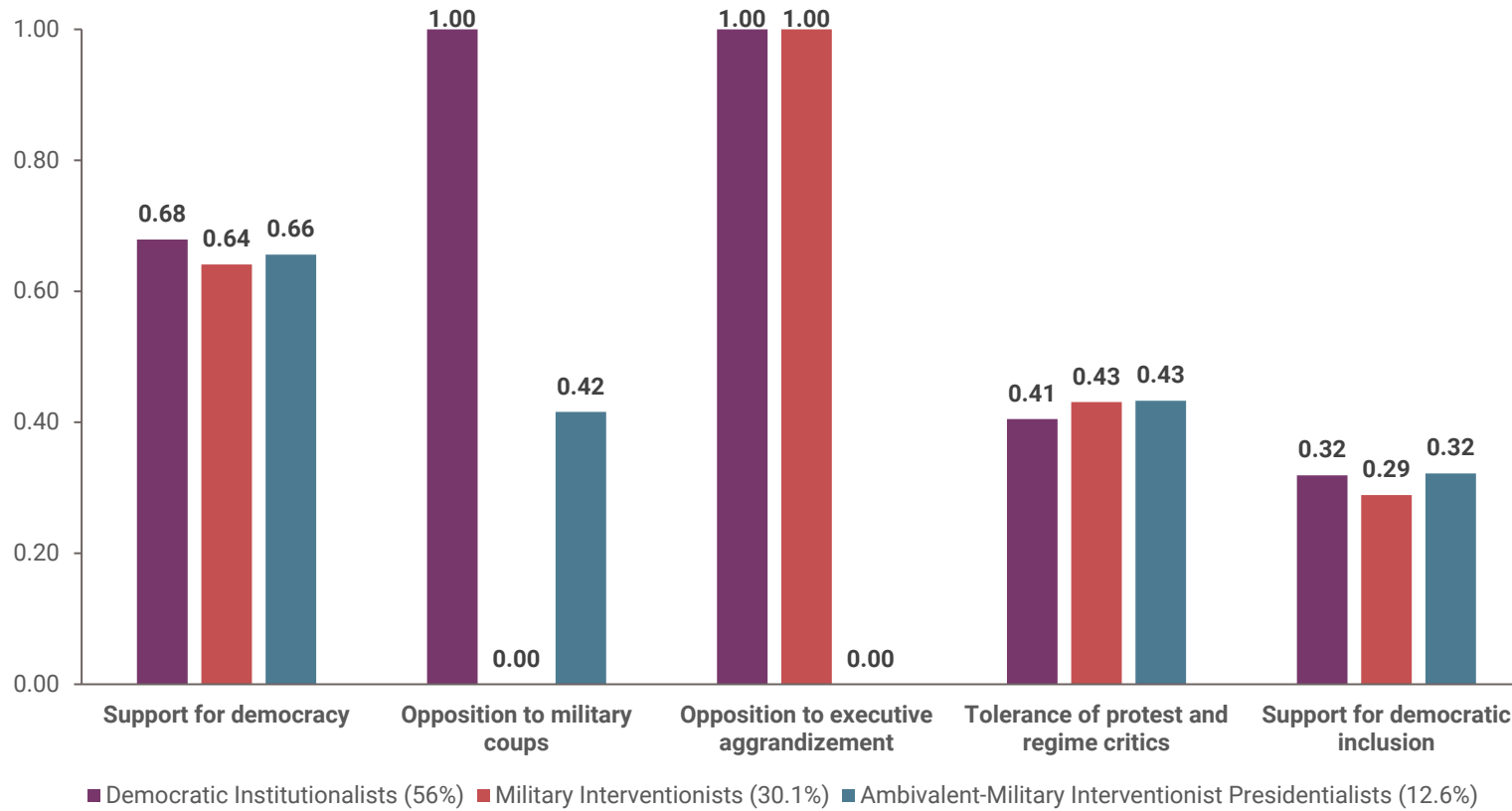
The bar graphs below present the main results of the cluster analysis. There is one bar graph per wave studied: 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2021. The bars indicate the average scores for the attitudes for each cluster. All attitude scores range from zero (least democratic) to one (most democratic). The percentages next to each cluster label in the legend indicate the share of respondents that was classified into the cluster. Thus, the graphs allow for comparing the clusters in terms of their democratic attitudes and their relative size.



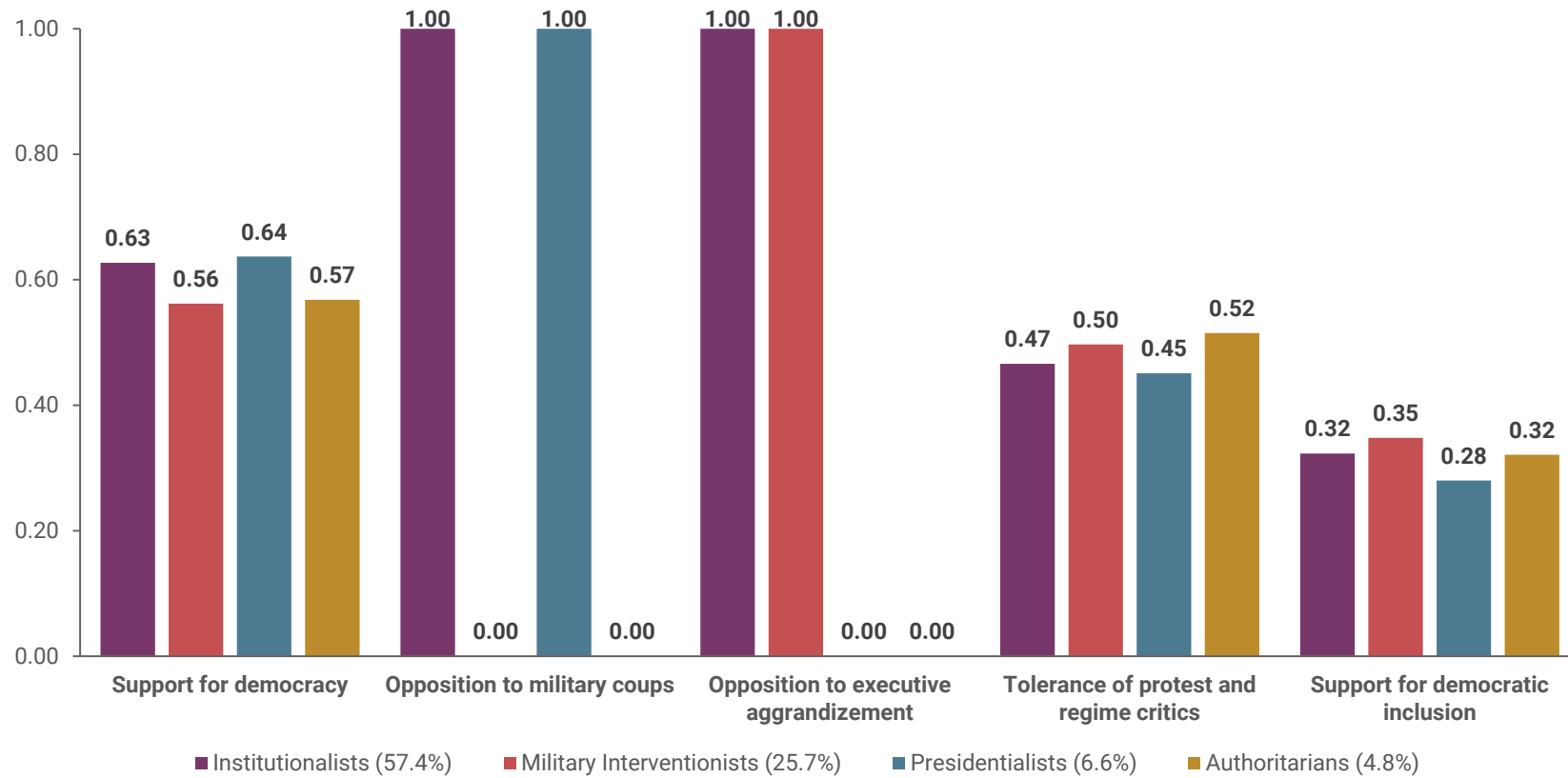
**Figure A2.1: 2012 Cluster Results**



**Figure A2.2: 2014 Cluster Results**



**Figure A2.3: 2016 Cluster Results**



**Figure A2.4: 2018 Cluster Results**

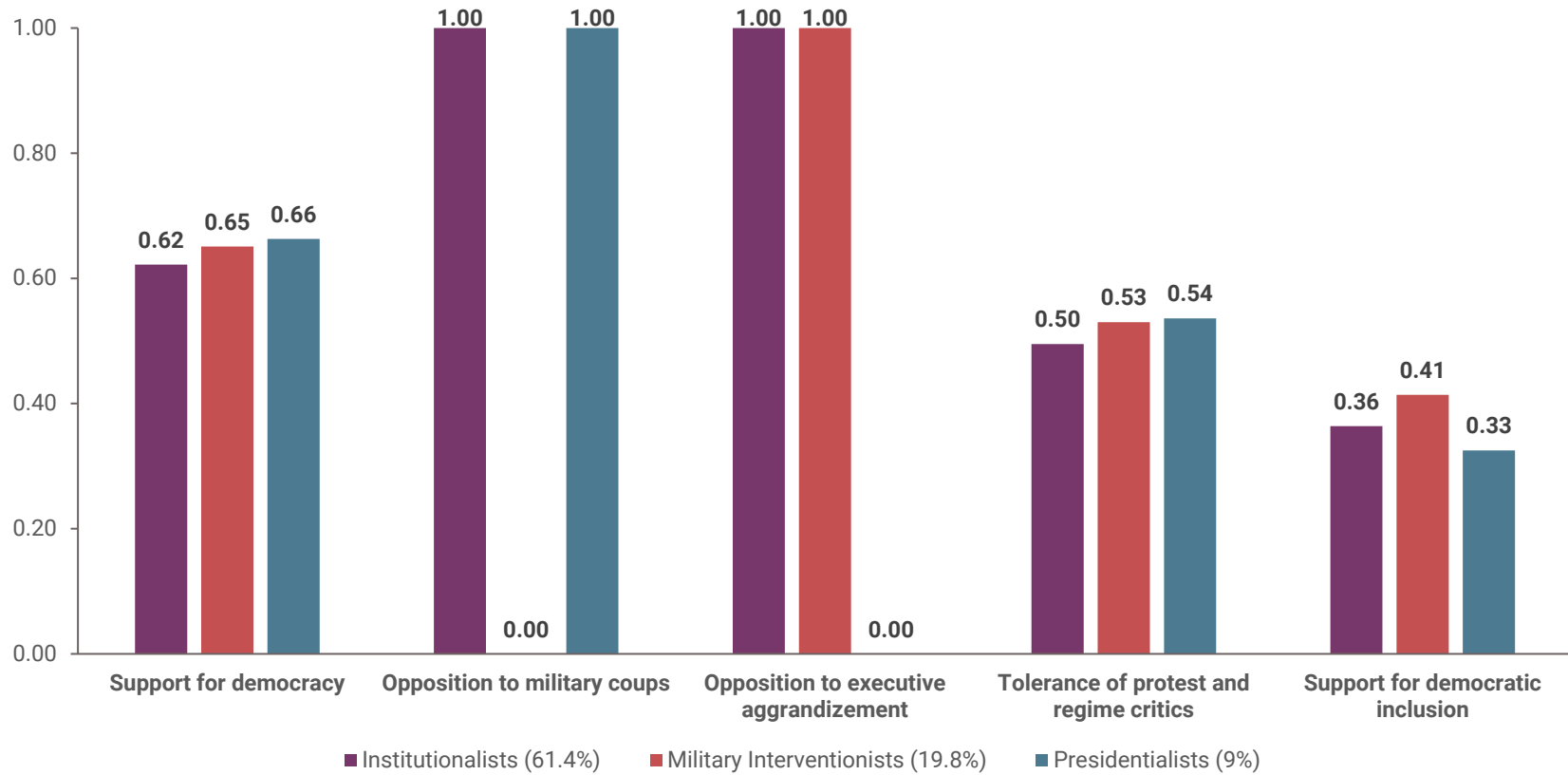
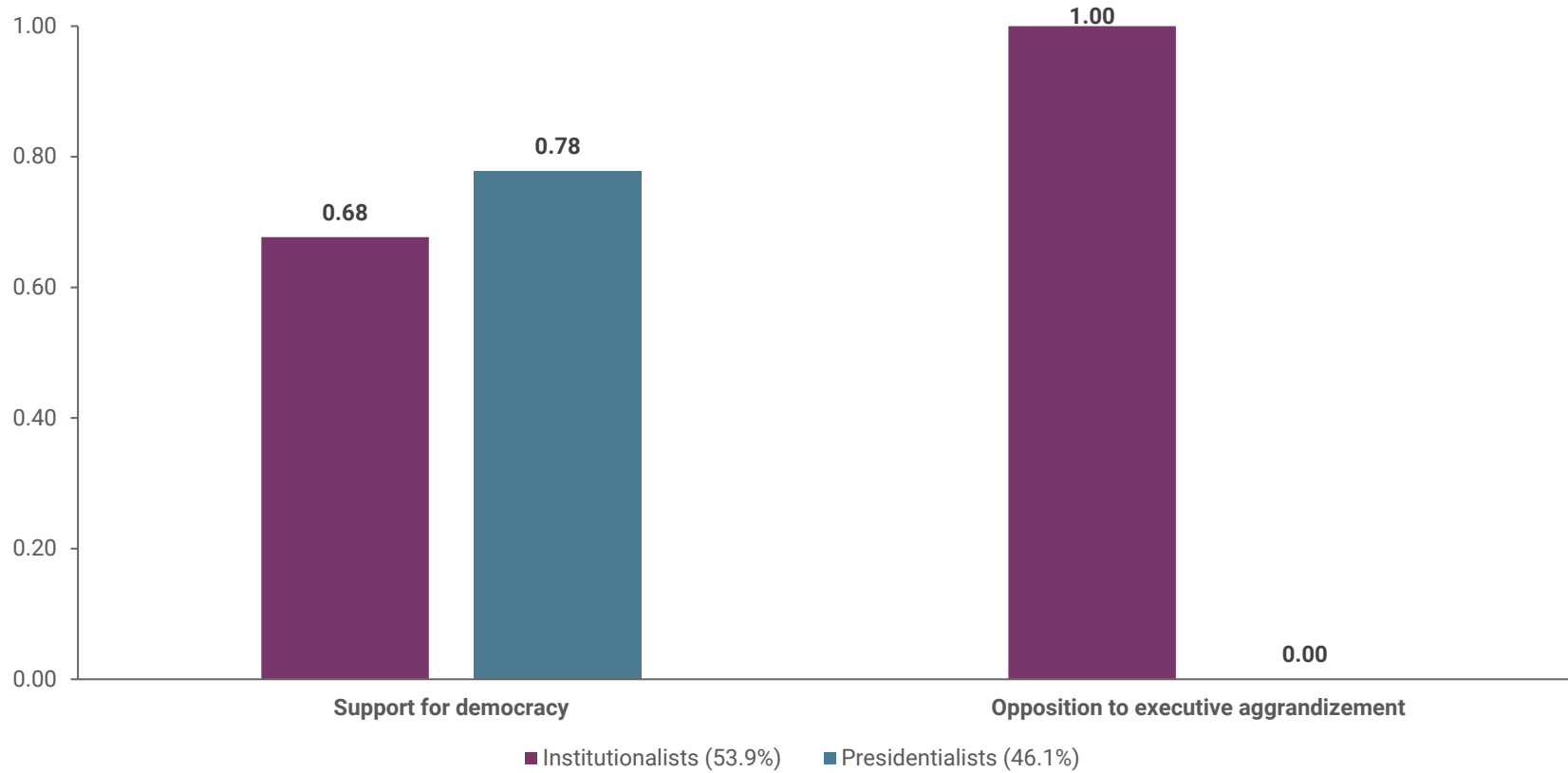


Figure A2.5: 2021 Cluster Results

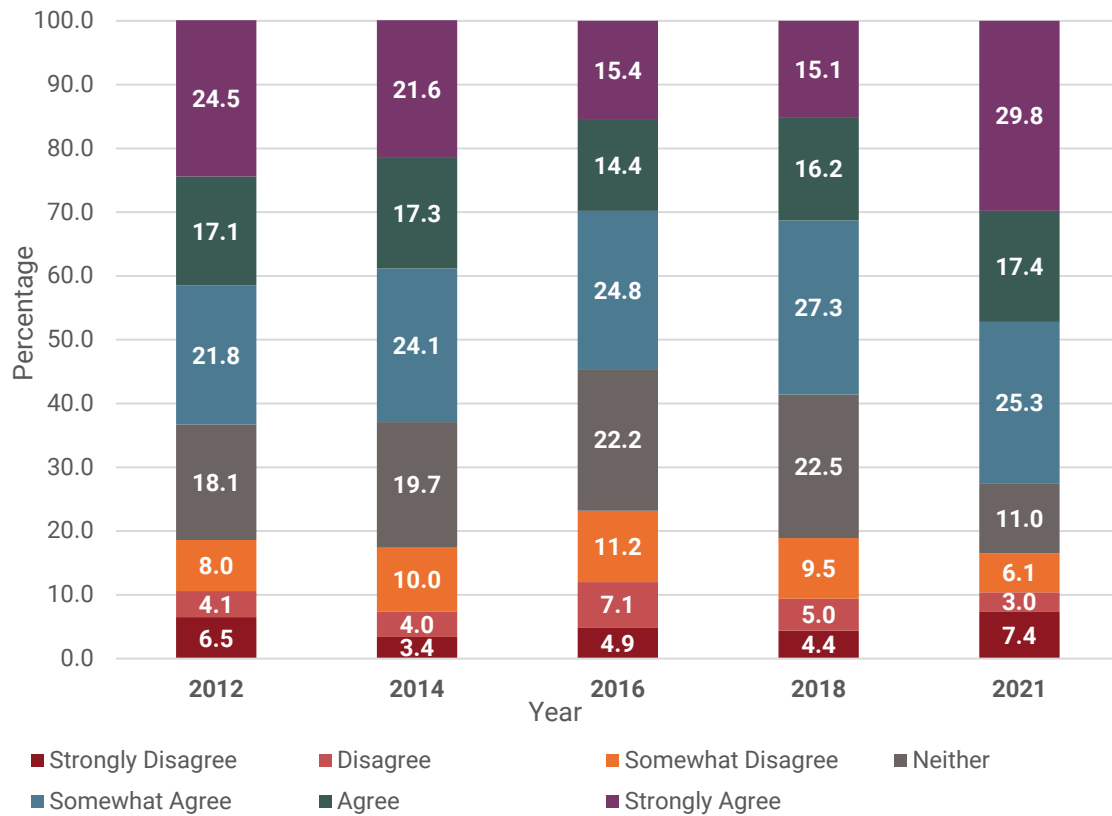


# Annex 3. Aggregate-level Trends in Attitudes

## Support for Democracy

In broad terms, Salvadorans’ position on whether democracy is the best form of government remained relatively stable between 2012 and 2019. The share of respondents who broadly agreed with that statement hovered between 63.4 percent (2012) and 54.6 percent (2016), while the share of respondents who disagreed hovered between 17.4 percent (2014) and 23.2 percent (2016). However, two patterns are worth noting. First, the share of respondents who strongly agreed that democracy is the best form of government declined steadily from 24.5 percent in 2012 to 15.1 in 2018. This is a trend worth investigating further because these respondents are those who are most likely to exhibit pro-democratic behavior. Second, support for democracy bloomed in 2021: a period-high 72.4 percent said they believed democracy was the best form of government. These trends are displayed in Figure A3.1.

**Figure A3.1: Is Democracy the Best Form of Government?**

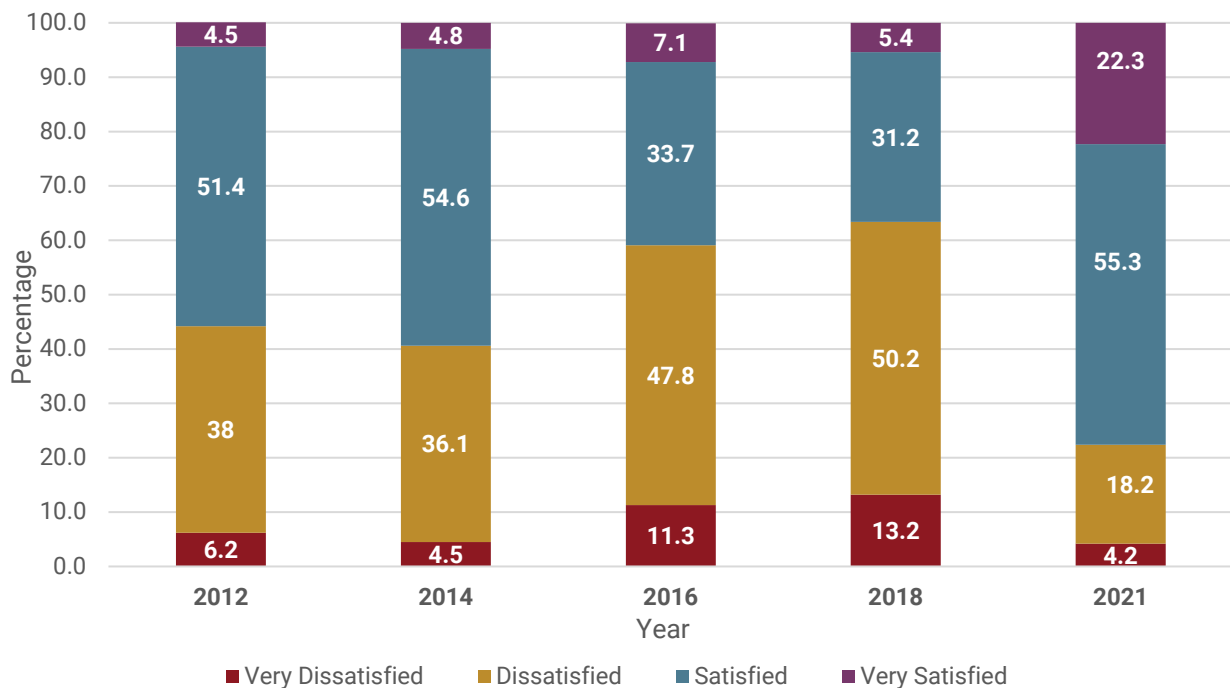


Source: AmericasBarometer.

As an indicator of meaningful support for democracy, asking whether Salvadorans believe democracy is the best form of government has limitations. Respondents may believe that democracy is, in principle, the best form of government, but they may exhibit low support for democratic institutions as they exist in practice and even disagree about whether those institutions are, in fact, democratic. With that in mind, we examine the extent toward which Salvadorans said they were satisfied with democracy and the extent to which they said they distrusted: 1) each branch of government, and 2) elections and political parties.<sup>45</sup>

Survey responses suggest that Salvadorans grew increasingly dissatisfied with democracy between 2012 and 2018. As Figure A3.2 shows, the percentage of Salvadorans who said they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied grew from 44.2 percent to 63.4 percent. Much like beliefs that democracy is the best form of government, however, satisfaction with democracy jumped between 2018 and 2021, from a low of 36.6 percent to a high of 77.6 percent.

**Figure A3.2: How Satisfied Are You With Democracy?**



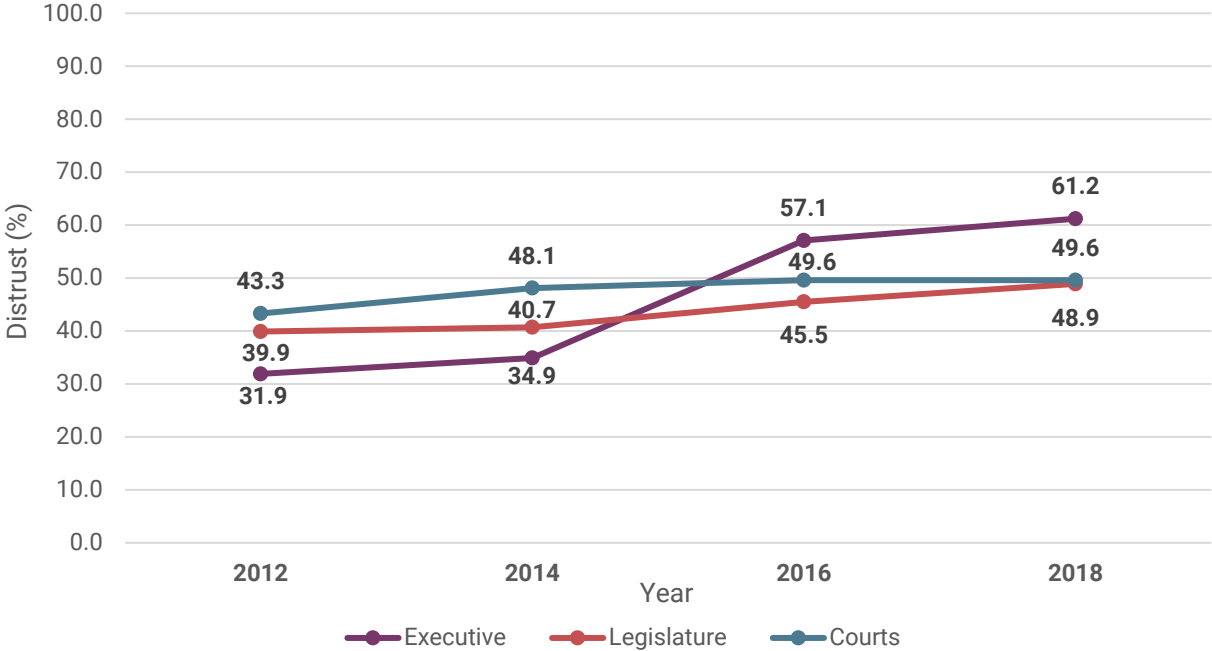
Source: AmericasBarometer.

Additionally, the available indicators suggest that many Salvadorans distrust political institutions in practice and that their distrust grew significantly between 2012 and 2018. In 2012, 31.9 percent of Salvadorans said they distrusted the executive; by 2018 this number had grown to

<sup>45</sup> The relevant AmericasBarometer survey items ask respondents to say how much they trust each institution on a scale from one (not at all) to seven (a lot). We consider answer values of one, two, and three as signifying distrust.

61.2 percent. During this same period, the share of Salvadorans who said they distrusted the legislature grew from 39.9 percent to 48.9 percent and the share of Salvadorans who said they distrusted the judiciary grew from 43.3 percent to 49.6 percent. Meanwhile, the share of Salvadorans who said they distrusted political parties grew from 59.3 percent to 65.8 percent, and the share of Salvadorans who said they distrusted elections grew from 32.3 percent to 43.2 percent. Again, however, the period between 2018 and 2021 represents a significant trend reversal: during that time, the share of respondents who said they distrusted elections declined from a period-high of 43.2 percent to a period-low of 23.4 percent. These trends are displayed in Figure A3.3 and Figure A3.4.

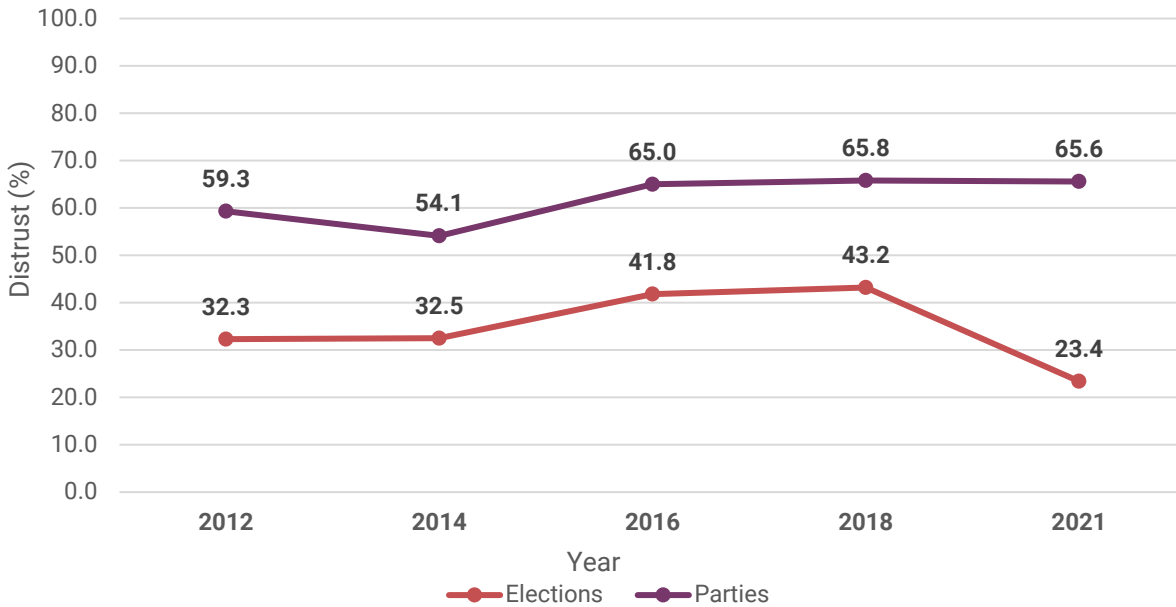
**Figure A3.3: Level of Distrust in Each Branch of Government, 2012 – 2018**



Source: AmericasBarometer.



**Figure A3.4: Level of Distrust in Elections and Parties, 2012–2018**

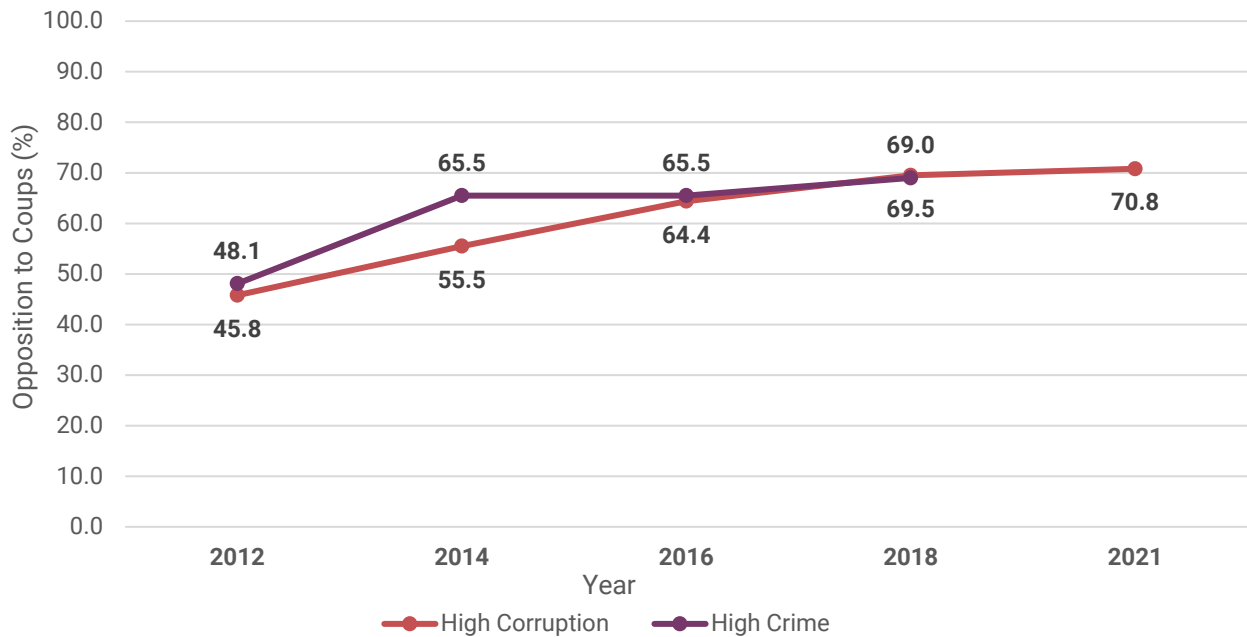


Source: AmericasBarometer.

## Opposition to Military Coups

Opposition to military coups has increased steadily and significantly since 2012. The percentage of respondents who said a military coup would not be justified under conditions of high corruption increased from 45.8 percent in 2012 to 70.8 percent in 2021. The percentage of respondents who said a military coup would not be justified under conditions of high crime increased from 48.1 percent to 69 percent in 2018. This is a significant transformation in Salvadorans’ attitude toward military coups. A decade ago, more than half of Salvadorans believed a military takeover was justified under conditions of extreme corruption or extreme crime. By 2018, that figure had decreased to approximately three in every ten. This evolution is especially remarkable given that, during the same period, El Salvador experienced high levels of crime and a string of high-profile corruption investigations. These trends are displayed in Figure A3.5.

**Figure A3.5: Opposition to Coups Under High Corruption or Crime, 2012–2021**

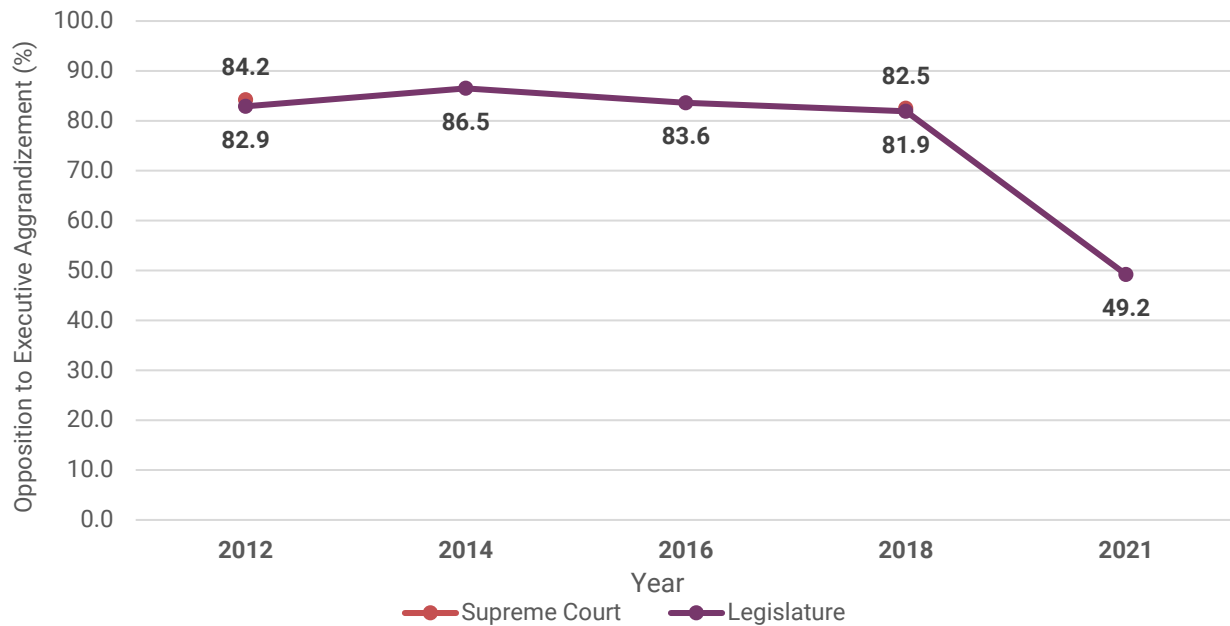


Source: AmericasBarometer.

## Opposition to Executive Aggrandizement

Between 2012 and 2018, opposition to executive aggrandizement remained high. The number of respondents who said the president would not be justified in governing without the Supreme Court or the legislature remained between 81.9 and 86.5 percent. Notably, however, the number of respondents who said the president would not be justified in governing without the legislature declined significantly in 2021, from 82.5 percent in 2018 to 49.2 percent. In other words, in a period of three years, opposition to executive aggrandizement with respect to the legislature declined by over 32 percentage points. These trends are displayed in Figure A3.6.

**Figure A3.6: Opposition to the President Governing Without Other Institutions, 2012–2021**



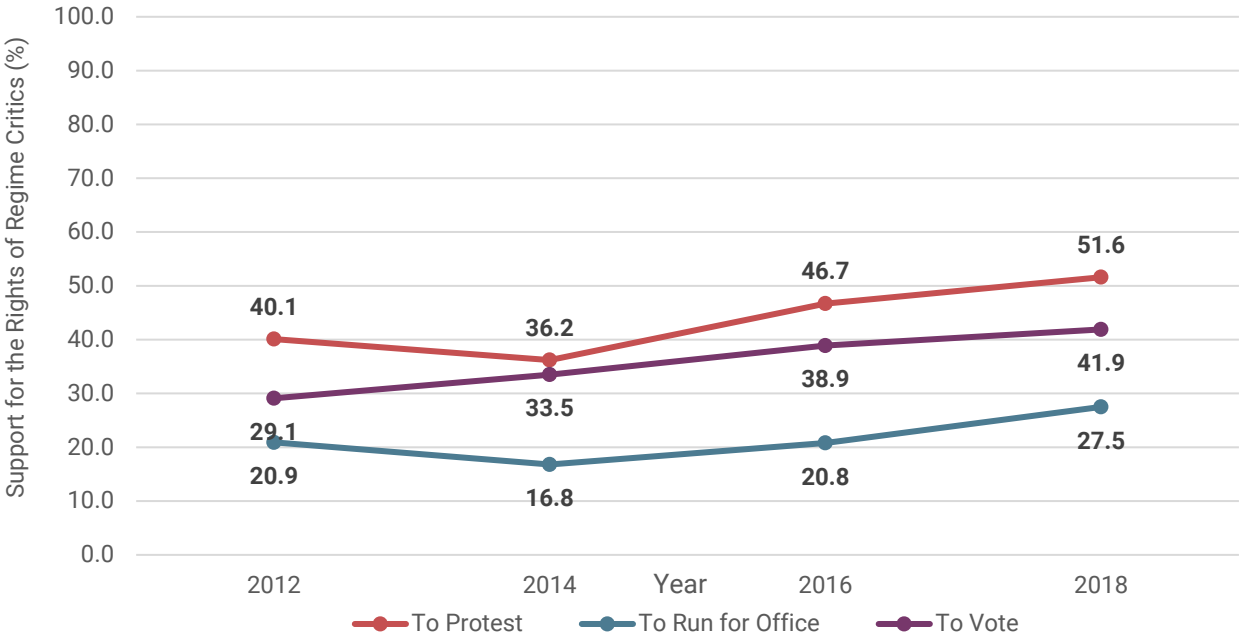
Source: AmericasBarometer.

## Tolerance for Protests and Regime Critics

Between 2012 and 2018, Salvadorans became more tolerant of protests and regime critics. The percentage of respondents who supported government critics’ right to vote increased from 29.1 percent in 2012 to 41.9 percent in 2018.<sup>46</sup> The percentage of respondents who supported government critics’ right to run for office increased from 20.9 percent to 27.5 percent. During the same period, the percentage of respondents who supported the right to peaceful protest grew from 40.1 percent to 51.6 percent. While Salvadorans have grown more tolerant, they remain relatively intolerant: as of 2018, a majority of Salvadorans opposed critics voting or running for office and only a slim majority supported the right to peaceful protest (Figure A3.7).

<sup>46</sup> The relevant AmericasBarometer items ask respondents to state their support on a scale ranging from one (strongly disapprove) to ten (strongly approve). We consider answers in the four highest categories (i.e., seven through ten) to indicate approval.

Figure A3.7: Tolerance for the Political Rights of Regime Critics, 2012–2018

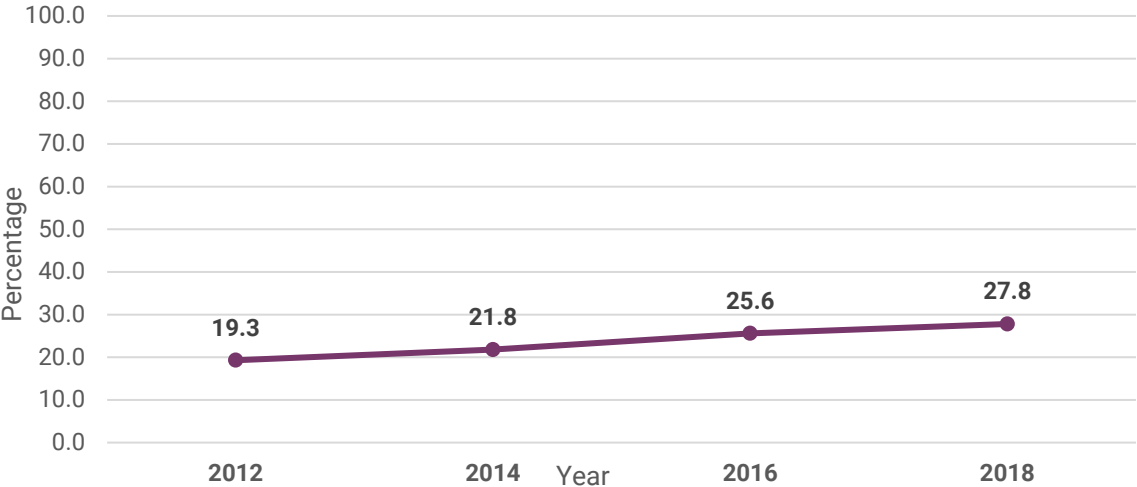


Source: AmericasBarometer.

## Support for Democratic Inclusion

The share of Salvadorans who said they approved of gay and lesbian people’s right to run for office increased steadily between 2012 and 2018, from 19.3 percent in 2012 to 27.8 percent in 2018 (see Figure A3.8).

**Figure A3.8: Approval of Gay and Lesbian People’s Right to Run for Office, 2012–2018**



Source: AmericasBarometer.

## Summary

The patterns described above suggest meaningful changes to Salvadorans’ attitudes regarding military coups, government critics, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. However, attitudes regarding support for democracy and executive aggrandizement are most relevant for understanding recent developments in Salvadoran politics: the central challenge to Salvadoran democracy is an increasingly authoritarian president who has centralized power and undermined checks and balances.

# Annex 4. Regression Results

**Table A4.1: Individual-level Predictors of Satisfaction with Democracy**

VARIABLE	SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY	
	2014	2016
Perception of Neighborhood Insecurity	-0.073*** (0.026)	-0.107*** (0.027)
Victim of Crime	-0.097*** (0.033)	-0.015 (0.031)
Crime Is the Most Important Issue	-0.031 (0.027)	-0.038 (0.027)
Trust in the Executive	0.234*** (0.027)	0.301*** (0.028)
Ideology	-0.002 (0.005)	0.017*** (0.005)
Personal Economic Situation Has Deteriorated	-0.070*** (0.019)	-0.046** (0.019)
Department Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,350	1,338
R-squared	0.100	0.108
Adjusted R-squared	0.087	0.095
F-Statistic	24.500*** (df = 6; 1330)	26.687*** (df = 6; 1318)

Note: \*p <0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01