



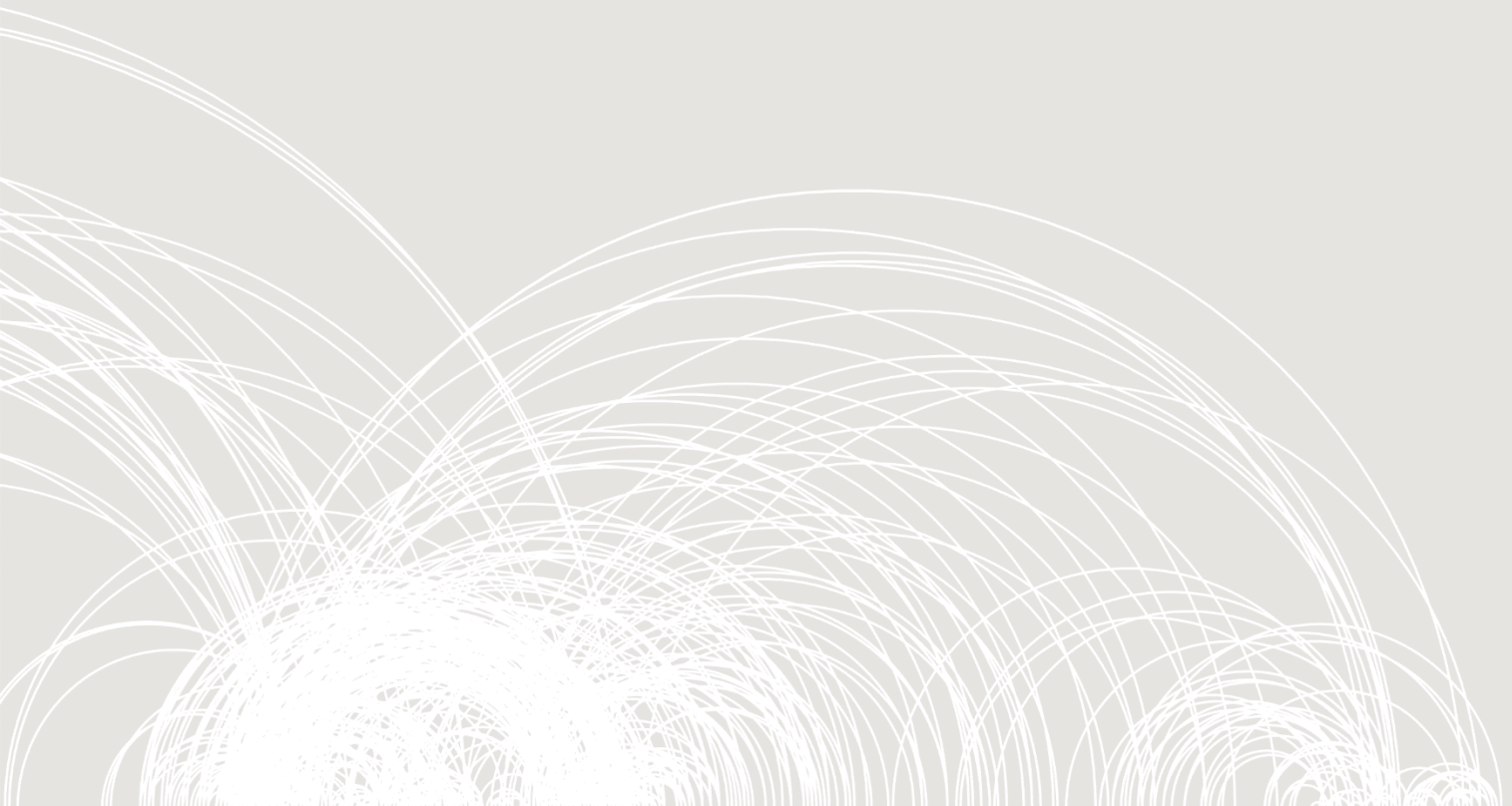
FINAL REPORT

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Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: Panama Report

Presented by:

NORC at the University of Chicago



Analysis of Trends in Democratic Attitudes: Panama Report

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Acronyms

LAPOP Latin American Public Opinion Project
PRD Party of the Democratic Revolution

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.”¹ 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.²

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 each cluster from the rest of the population using data from the last five waves of the

¹ 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.

² 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.

AmericasBarometer³ (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.⁴

This report presents the analysis for Panama. It was authored by Jon Subinas Garralda (Researcher, Centro Internacional de Estudios Políticos y Sociales) and Sergio García Rendón (Researcher, Centro Internacional de Estudios Políticos y Sociales). 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), with the support of Jeremy Horowitz (Senior Research Scientist, NORC at the University of Chicago), revised the report to ensure alignment with the study objectives.

³ The AmericasBarometer by the LAPOP Lab, www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop.

⁴ 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

Panama transitioned to democracy in 1989, later than most other countries in Latin America. Since then, Panama has stood out in Latin America for its relative political stability, institutionalized party system, and strong economic performance. Panama's political system has been dominated by two major parties, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the Panameñista Party. For many years, these parties presided over a stable political system distinguished by a programmatic approach to governance built through consensus and pacts. No major leftist political parties have achieved parliamentary representation, which may explain the programmatic consistency of the parties in power.

Eleven years after the transition to democracy, control of the Panama Canal was returned to the country, marking a milestone in Panama's development. Subsequently, between 2004 and 2018, Panama experienced an average annual growth rate of 7.0 percent, compared to 3.3 percent for Latin America as a whole.⁵ This growth resulted in Panama entering the short list of high-income countries in the region in 2017. Nonetheless, persistent inequality continues to exist, as evidenced by asymmetric access to basic services, a dual labor market, and poor social protection, among other indicators.⁶ Another idiosyncrasy of Panama is its low crime rate, with homicides at less than half of the regional average.⁷

This report describes the evolution of attitudes in Panama between 2012 and 2021 and examines the political dynamics that have contributed to changes in attitudes over time. To describe the evolution of democratic attitudes, we draw on NORC's cluster analysis, which identified groups of citizens with distinct patterns of democratic attitudes in each of five waves of AmericasBarometer data. To enrich the analysis, we also examine the evolution of support for democracy and tolerance for the political participation of regime critics. To identify the political dynamics that have contributed to changes in attitudes, we trace the linkages between political developments and public opinion.⁸

The central finding that emerges from the cluster analysis is that institutionalists, who oppose both executive aggrandizement and military coups, make up the largest group in all survey waves in the period of study. However, additional examination of democratic attitudes shows significant drops in support for democracy and tolerance in 2014. In the historical analysis section, we argue that the high overall support for democracy and democratic institutions in 2012 and the subsequent evolution of these attitudes can be traced to the leadership of former President Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014), whose time in office marked a turning point for

⁵ Astudillo, Jhonatan, Marcos Fernández, and Carlos Garcimartin. 2019. "La desigualdad pública en Panamá: su carácter territorial y el papel de las inversiones públicas." *Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo. Nota Técnica No. IDB-TN-1703*. <http://publications.iadb.org/es/la-desigualdad-de-panama-su-caracter-territorial-y-el-papel-de-las-inversiones-publicas>.

⁶ Cecchini, Simone, Raúl Holz, and Alexis Rodríguez. 2020 "La matriz de la desigualdad en Panamá." *Serie Políticas Sociales No. 236 (LC/TS.2020/121)*. Santiago: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe.

⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/es/index.html>.

⁸ Collier, David. "Understanding process tracing." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 44(4), (2011), 823-830.

democratic politics and attitudes. Martinelli's enormous popularity increased support for democracy, while his confrontational, polarizing political style weakened political tolerance.

The remainder of this report examines the evolution of democratic attitudes using cluster analysis based on data from the AmericasBarometer surveys conducted from 2012 to 2021, complemented by the analysis of trends in key attitudes over the same period. We also offer a historical analysis of Panama's recent political dynamics to explain variation in public opinion and provide concluding thoughts.

Describing Democratic Attitudes

NORC used data from the AmericasBarometer and cluster analysis to classify Panamanians into groups or "clusters" with distinct attitudinal profiles. The aim 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 respondents speak for themselves without making assumptions in advance about how to group them. Annex 1 provides detailed information regarding the study's methodology. NORC used five democratic attitudes to generate clusters:

- *Support for democracy*: The extent to which respondents agree or disagree that "democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government."
- *Opposition to military coups*: Whether respondents believe it would be justified for the military to take power in a military coup in certain circumstances.⁹
- *Opposition to executive aggrandizement*: Whether respondents 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 respondents support the right to protest and other political rights of regime critics.
- *Support for democratic inclusion*: The extent to which respondents support the political inclusion of homosexuals.

Questions to measure all five attitudes were available in the first four AmericasBarometer survey waves (2012, 2014, 2017, and 2018). Only three attitudes were available in 2021 because the survey included a limited set of questions: support for democracy, opposition to military coups, and opposition to executive aggrandizement. The 2021 cluster analysis results are therefore not comparable to those of prior waves and not discussed in the report. Annex 2 presents the main cluster analysis results for all waves.

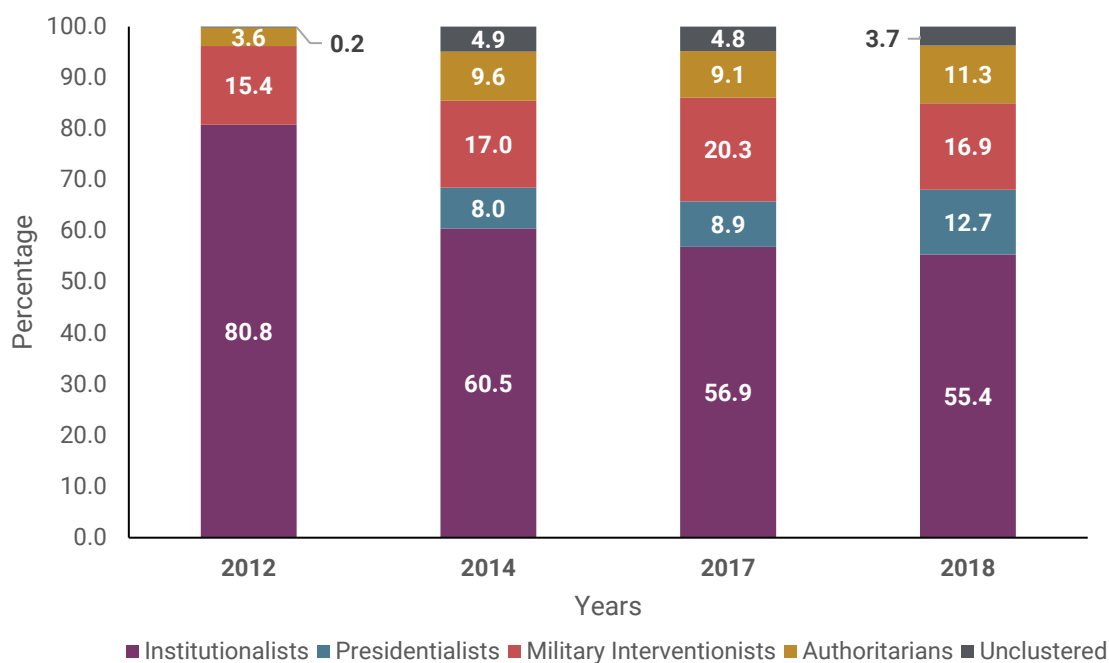
⁹ Regarding respondents who express they would support—i.e., not oppose—a military coup under certain circumstances, it should be noted that this idea is largely symbolic in Panama. Although military regimes have existed there, a constitutional reform in 1992 established that the country would not maintain an army.

The cluster analysis identified three clusters in 2012 and four clusters in 2014, 2017, and 2018. In all waves, a share of respondents were not classified into any cluster. 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 coups and executive aggrandizement. In this sense, they represent “ideal” democratic citizens compared to the other cluster families.
- *Presidentialists*: Individuals in this cluster family exhibit full opposition to coups but less than full opposition to executive aggrandizement.
- *Military Interventionists*: Individuals in this cluster family exhibit full opposition to executive aggrandizement but less than full opposition to coups.
- *Authoritarians (including includes authoritarians and ambivalent-military interventionist presidentialists)*: Individuals in this cluster family are characterized by less than full opposition to both coups and executive aggrandizement.

Figure 1 shows the relative size of these cluster families over time. Institutionalists make up the largest cluster in all years, suggesting relatively high support for democratic institutions and practices throughout the decade under study. However, the share of institutionalists declines significantly across survey waves, dropping from a high of 80.8 percent of respondents in 2012 to a low of 55.4 percent in 2018. Additionally, the declining share of institutionalists corresponds with increases in presidentialists and authoritarians. Presidentialists first appear as a distinct cluster with 8.0 percent of respondents in 2014 and increase to 12.7 by 2018. Authoritarians increase from 3.6 percent in 2012 to 9.6 percent in 2014 and then remain relatively stable.

Figure 1: Evolution of Cluster Families, 2012-2018



NORC’s cluster analysis identified the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics that significantly distinguish respondents in each cluster from the rest of the sample for each survey wave. The study examined several variables, including age, gender, wealth, race, education, crime victimization, corruption victimization, political efficacy (the belief that politicians respond to citizens’ preferences), and political participation. While respondents in all clusters were statistically significantly different from others in a few variables in each wave, there were no stable patterns across all waves and the differences were substantially small. This suggests that the demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and other characteristics examined do not structure attitudes toward democracy in a meaningful way. These caveats aside, we do find some recurrent statistically significant differences across two or more waves that are worth highlighting.

We focus on the variables that differentiate institutionalists from all other respondents. First, institutionalists tend to be slightly older. In 2014, the percentage of respondents in the 60 and over age bracket was higher among institutionalists than the rest of the sample. In 2018, the percentage of respondents in the 18-29 age bracket was lower among institutionalists than the rest of the sample. Second, institutionalists tend to be wealthier. In three of the four waves (2012, 2014, and 2017), the percentage of respondents in the highest wealth income bracket was higher among institutionalists than the rest of the sample. Lastly, institutionalists tend to have experienced less crime and corruption. In three of the four waves (2012, 2014, and 2017), the percentage of respondents who reported having been victim of a crime in the past 12 months was lower among institutionalists than the rest of the sample. Similarly, in three of the four waves (2012, 2017, and 2018), the percentage of respondents who reported having been

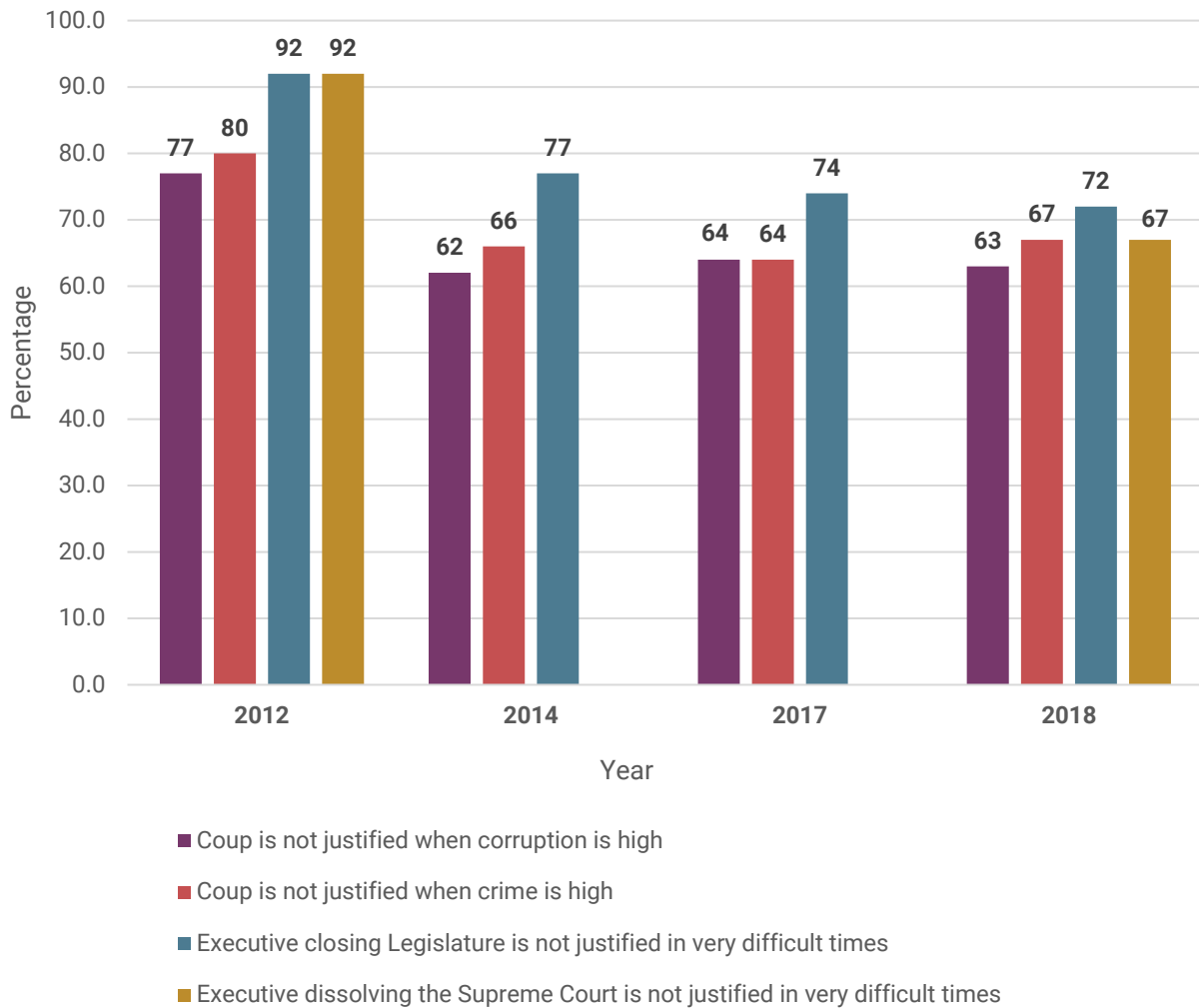
asked for a bribe in the past 12 months was lower among institutionalists than the rest of the sample.

The declining share of institutionalists shown in Figure 1 corresponds to three major trends in public opinion: a decline in support for democracy, a drop in opposition to military coups and opposition to executive aggrandizement, and an erosion of political tolerance.

In 2012, 65.3 percent of Panamanians agreed that democracy was the best form of government; this was the highest percentage throughout the period under study. By 2014, things had changed drastically. Support for democracy fell by more than 18 percentage points, to just 47.1 percent. This drop coincided with the end of President Martinelli's term. Martinelli, a Panamanian businessman and politician, enjoyed high levels of popularity throughout his term in office (2009-2014). In 2017, support for democracy rebounded to 58.1 percent, but declined again to 53.1 percent in 2018. The following year saw the end of Juan Carlos Varela's presidency (2014-2019). By 2018, Varela's popularity had dropped as he was mired in the region-wide Lava Jato and Odebrecht corruption scandals.

Figure 2 displays responses to the survey questions capturing respondents' attitudes towards military coups and executive aggrandizement. It shows an erosion of support for basic democratic institutions. In 2012, 76.6 percent of respondents thought that a military coup when corruption is high would not be justified. By 2018, this percentage had decreased to 63.2 percent. Similarly, in 2012, 91.5 percent of respondents thought that the executive closing the legislature in very difficult times would not be justified. By 2018, this percentage decreased twenty percentage points, to 72.3 percent.

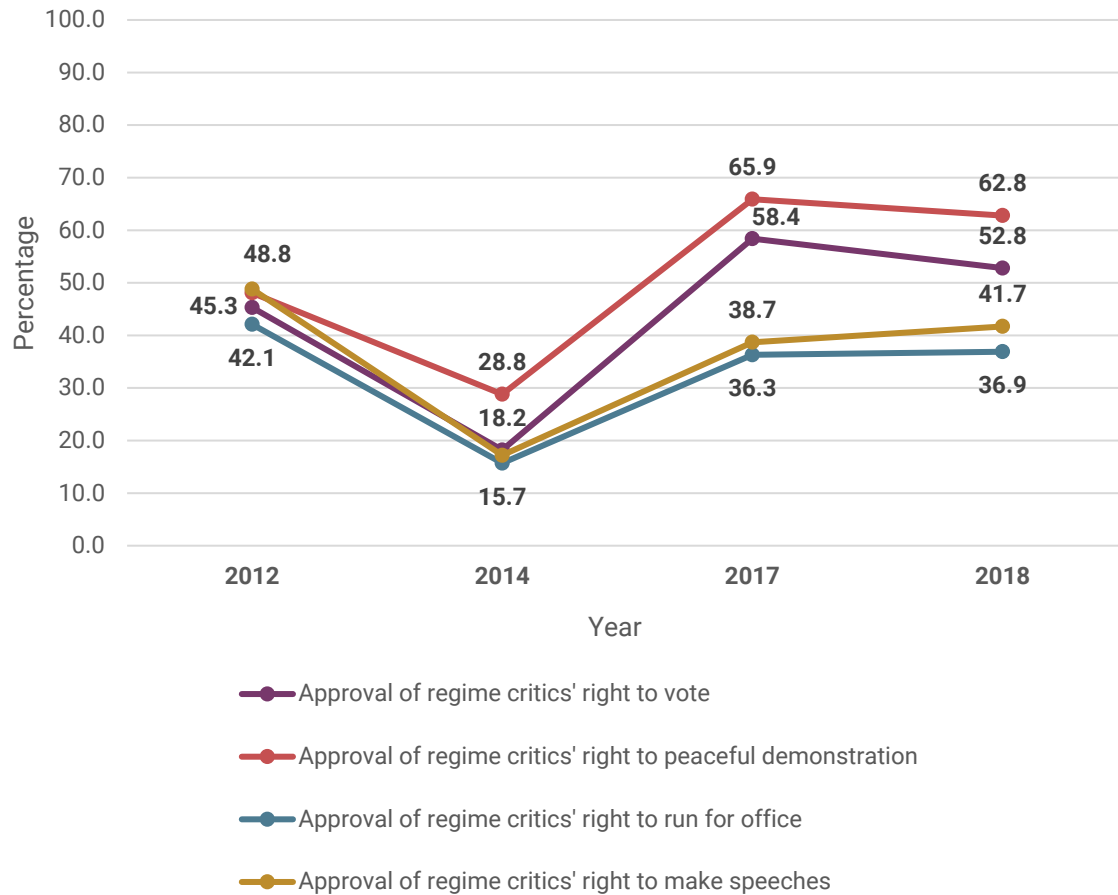
Figure 2: Opposition to Military Coups and Executive Aggrandizement, 2012-2018



Source: AmericasBarometer.

A third important trend relates to political tolerance, as measured by several questions that ask whether regime critics should be afforded political rights. As shown in Figure 3, tolerance was relatively low in 2012 and dipped significantly in the 2014. Tolerance improved substantially in 2017 and remained relatively stable in subsequent years.

Figure 3: Tolerance of Panamanians to the Political Participation of Regime Critics, 2012-2018



Source: AmericasBarometer.

In the next section, we argue that high levels of support democratic principles in 2012 stemmed from President Martinelli’s popularity. Following his departure from office in 2014, support for key democratic principles, as well as for democracy itself, declined significantly. Likewise, the weak support for regime critics enjoying political rights in 2014 stemmed from the strong support for Martinelli, a populist leader who sought to discredit and delegitimize his political rivals. High support for democracy in the abstract along with low tolerance for the opposition are characteristics associated with populist leadership. Such a presidency can help to increase support for democracy in theory while undermining core democratic principles by, for example, lowering citizens’ tolerance of others who contest the incumbent leader’s rule.

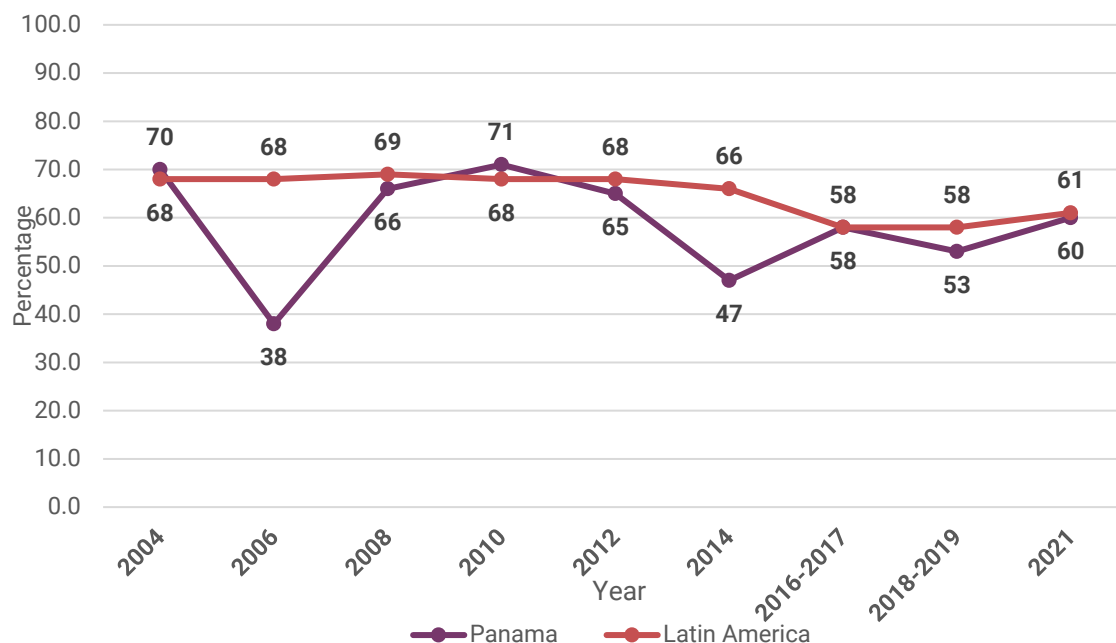
Explaining Changes in Democratic Attitudes

The leadership of President Martinelli helps explain changes in democratic attitudes in the period under study for two main reasons. First, many of Martinelli's supporters tied their assessment of democracy with the development of the president's political career. His first years in government saw high support among citizens, boosting support for democracy, while his exit from government coincided with disillusionment with democracy, which forbade his reelection.¹⁰ This explanation is not exclusive to Martinelli. A similar dynamic of expectations and disappointments was evident during Martín Torrijos' administration (2004-2009).¹¹ Secondly, Martinelli's leadership normalized a confrontational, polarizing political style where traditional politicians (especially the opposition), business, and Martinelli's critics, including the media, were ridiculed and delegitimized. This leadership style eroded tolerance for the opposition and their political rights among some sectors of the public.

To situate recent dynamics in the longer-term trends, Figure 4 shows support for democracy in Panama relative to the regional average for Latin America starting in 2004. The figure shows that support for democracy in Panama has at times deviated from regional trends by a wide margin. In 2006, during Torrijos' presidency, support for democracy dropped to a record low of 38 percent, or 30 percentage points below the regional average. In 2014, at the end of Martinelli's presidency, support for democracy fell to 47 percent, almost 20 points below the Latin American average. What explains the large deviations from regional trends in 2006 and 2014?

¹⁰ Martinelli's supporters may have reasoned as follows: if Martinelli is in government, democracy works well and has my support. However, if he is not in government, then democracy does not work as well and does not have my support.

¹¹ Torrijos was the son of General Omar Torrijos, who ruled Panama from 1968 to 1981 and founded the PRD in 1979.

Figure 4: Support for Democracy in Latin America and Panama, 2004-2021

Source: AmericasBarometer.

Short-term declines in democratic support were related to domestic political events that call into question the performance of democratic institutions. Low support for democracy in 2006 coincided with two events. The first was a referendum on the expansion of the Panama Canal. At the time, large swaths of the population felt that President Torrijos had failed to deliver on the society-wide benefits he promised would follow the return of the canal to Panamanian control six years earlier. The second was the partial privatization of the pension system to include individual retirement accounts in Panama for the first time. These two events may have increased the perception of lack of protection or abandonment among large, socially vulnerable groups in society.¹²

To understand low support for democracy in 2014, and general trends in Panamanians' democratic attitudes between 2014 and 2018, we examine Martinelli's leadership. His leadership affected both citizens' views about democracy and their tolerance for the rights of political opponents.

Martinelli's election in 2009 broke the partisan balance that the PRD and the Panameñista Party had enjoyed since the transition to democracy in 1989.¹³ Despite being part of the Panamanian business elite, Martinelli was often characterized as a political outsider who emerged from the

¹² Although support for the canal expansion proved broad in the referendum (77 percent), voter turnout was very low (43 percent). Tasón, Jessica. 2016. "El día que Panamá dijo sí a la ampliación." *La Estrella de Panamá*. May 15, 2016. <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/politica/220516/martinelli-cae-cortizo-sube-carrizo>.

¹³ Brown Araúz, Harry. "Elecciones 2014: el Realineamiento del Sistema de Partidos Panameño." *Revista Panameña de Ciencia Política*, 20 (2014): 55-82.

circles of economic power.¹⁴ Martinelli's candidacy broke the culture of party pacts and consensus, introducing political antagonism into the system. While his emergence was related to the rise of personalist and disruptive leaders across the region, it also responded to the unique political, social, economic, and historical characteristics of Panama. Martinelli managed to establish a division between the "them" of the previous parties and economic elites and the "us" of himself and his supporters, thus strengthening the bond with his followers and polarizing the political climate.

A first notable feature of Martinelli's government was its successful economic performance, with gross domestic product growth per year averaging over 10 percent during his administration.¹⁵ Poverty dropped from 33 percent in the first year of his presidency to 26 percent in his final year.¹⁶ Martinelli claimed that his administration's increased spending in monetary transfers via direct subsidies to citizens made this poverty reduction possible.¹⁷ These economic policies entailed major growth in public spending, with an increase of 8 billion dollars, and this resulted in a 60 percent increase in the public debt of the non-financial sector.¹⁸ These economic policies proved disruptive in a country known for financial discipline, with little inclination toward government spending or debt, and firm citizen rejection of subsidies.

In addition, Martinelli carried out significant public works projects, such as the construction of a subway, airports, highways, and the second and third phases of the coastal beltway in Panama City, a space with sports fields and many recreational and community spaces for citizens. These works improved working class citizens' access to public transportation and fostered recreation in the heart of the city, improving the living conditions of a sizable economically-vulnerable population. It is partly due to these achievements that Martinelli's popularity remained high during his term, reaching 54 percent in 2013, a high figure for a Latin American president approaching the end of their term at the time.¹⁹

Martinelli's popularity influenced democratic attitudes between 2012 and 2021. In 2010, just one year into Martinelli's term, Panamanian citizens registered their highest support for democracy since the AmericasBarometer's inception, at 71 percent. This was only the second time that democratic support in Panama was above the Latin American average; the first time was in 2004, during the first year of the Torrijos administration, when support reached 70 percent. Both times Panamanians' support for democracy exceeded the regional average occurred during the first year of new governments led by presidents who took office during economic boom times and claimed to represent change from the prior government. This gives some indication that attitudes toward democracy are related to public support for incoming governments, and a

¹⁴ Brown Araúz, Harry and Rotsay Rosales. "Cambiar Todo Para Que Nada Cambie." *Contextualizaciones Latinoamericanas* 11 (2015): 1-28.

¹⁵ Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo. n.d. "Mapa de Información Económica de la República de Panamá: Deuda del Sector Público." Accessed May 13, 2022. <https://minerpa.com.pa/producto-interno-bruto-real-y-nominal/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe. 2011. "Presidente destaca transferencias directas como instrumento para derrotar la pobreza." October 4, 2011. <https://www.cepal.org/es/comunicados/presidente-panama-destaca-transferencias-directas-como-instrumento-derrotar-la-pobreza>; El Capital Financiero. 2014. "Subsidios se multiplicaron en el gobierno de Martinelli." June 9, 2014. <https://elcapitalfinanciero.com/subsidios-se-duplicaron-en-el-gobierno-de-martinelli/>.

¹⁸ Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo. n.d. "Mapa de Información Económica de la República de Panamá: Deuda del Sector Público." Accessed May 13, 2022. <https://minerpa.com.pa/deuda-del-sector-publico/>.

¹⁹ El País. 2013. "Martinelli comienza el último año de mandato entre reconocimientos y críticas." June 30, 2013. https://elpais.com/economia/2013/06/30/agencias/1372607517_703289.html.

recognition of being satisfied with the results of democracy at that moment. Thanks to his leadership style and popularity, Martinelli was linked to the evaluation of Panama's democracy. The 2010 and 2012 questions on democratic attitudes were inextricably related to attitudes about Martinelli, his administration, and his policies.

What explains the decline in support for democracy in 2014 along with the erosion of tolerance for the political rights of regime critics? During his administration, Martinelli entered public disputes and confrontations with opposition sectors, businessmen, and the media. A sharp rift opened with his own vice-president, Varela, due to competing electoral interests in 2014; Varela decided to run for the presidency as Martinelli sought to be reelected.²⁰ He accused business owners of not paying taxes and called them “*empresaurios*,” a demeaning play on words combining “*empresario*” (businessman) with “*dinosaurio*” (dinosaur).²¹ His remarks about the media were constantly pejorative.²² Martinelli's rhetoric aimed at delegitimizing his adversaries, and this affected democratic values among his followers. As shown above approval of regime critics' right to vote dropped by 27 percentage points, to 18.2 percent between 2012 and 2014; approval of critics' right to protest dropped by 19 points, to 28.8 percent; approval of critics' right to run a candidate dropped by 26 points, to 15.7 percent; and approval of critics' right to give political speeches dropped by almost 32 points, to 17.2 percent.

Beyond rhetoric, Martinelli's actions dealt a blow to democratic attitudes. In the last year of this term, he was accused of illegally intercepting the communications of his political opponents and the media.²³ In March 2013, representatives of the Catholic Church, the media, and members of the political parties signed the Electoral Ethical Pact, but Martinelli's party (Cambio Democrático) opted not to sign. The country's security services were militarized during the Martinelli administration in a way that has been considered a detriment to the country's democratic stability.²⁴ Martinelli and his sons have since been accused of multiple counts of corruption.²⁵ Most recently, Martinelli's sons were convicted in the United States for receiving bribes from the construction company Odebrecht while their father was in power, a clear sign of high-level corruption in his administration.²⁶

The same popularity that contributed to high support for democracy in 2010 and 2012 became a double-edged sword in 2014. In that year, Martinelli left power, succeeded by his former ally Varela. To some, democracy no longer seemed as valuable. Indeed, only 47 percent of

²⁰ British Broadcasting Corporation. 2014. “Panama elects Juan Carlos Varela, President Martinelli's worst enemy.” May 5, 2014. https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/05/140504_panama_presidente_varela_perfil_az.

²¹ Telemetro. 2012. “Presidente Martinelli dedica discurso a “empresaurios” y medios.” January 2, 2012. <https://www.telemetro.com/nacionales/2012/01/02/presidente-martinelli-discurso-empresaurios-medios/2002395.html>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Swissinfo. 2021. “Cronología del caso de las escuchas ilegales por el que Martinelli fue absuelto.” November 10, 2021. https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/panam%C3%A1-martinelli_cronolog%C3%ADa-del-caso-de-escuchas-ilegales-por-el-que-martinelli-fue-absuelto/47098140.

²⁴ Guevara Mann, Carlos. 2016. “Panamá: luces y sombras en torno a la institucionalidad democrática.” *Revista de Ciencia Política* 36 (1): 259-285. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-090X2016000100012>.

²⁵ Pérez, Orlando. 2017. “Panamá: Democracy Under the Shadow of Corruption.” *Revista de Ciencia Política*. 37 (2): 519-541.

²⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation. 2022. “Odebrecht en Panamá: condenan en EE. UU. a dos hijos del expresidente Ricardo Martinelli por ayudar en los sobornos de la constructora “para su padre.” May 21, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-61532375>.

Panamanians supported democracy in 2014, support for military coups increased, and beliefs about the political rights of regime critics declined.

Martinelli has remained politically relevant after leaving office, and subsequent corruption scandals have not undermined his support. A recent poll showed that Martinelli is the candidate with the greatest support for the 2024 election.²⁷ To explain the former president's invulnerability to scandals and criticism, a common phrase repeated by the media and citizens is that "he stole, but he achieved."²⁸ For his followers, "he achieved" is the relevant point, while for his detractors, "he stole" is more important. On March 23, 2019, Martinelli referred to this slogan on Twitter, clarifying that he did indeed "achieve" and asking followers to pay no attention to "unproven" corruption accusations.²⁹

In sum, Martinelli broke the traditional culture of consensus and pacts in Panama's still-young democracy and split the political chessboard in two sections: his supporters and his detractors.³⁰ As a consequence, citizen attitudes and values, as well as democratic institutions themselves, have been influenced by the popular former president. While support for democracy and tolerance for the political rights of regime critics have improved since 2014, they remain below the high levels experienced before and during Martinelli's presidency.

Conclusion

Cluster analysis identified a sizable segment of the Panamanian citizenry that is committed to democratic institutions and opposes both military coups and executive branch-driven democratic ruptures. The results show that the institutionalist segment comprises the largest share of respondents in all survey waves, an encouraging finding. At the same time, the share of institutionalists declined between 2012 and 2018, corresponding with declines in rejection of military interventions and executive aggrandizement. We also observed short-term dips in support for democracy and in political tolerance in 2014.

We believe that trends in democratic support are related to President Martinelli's role in Panama's political system. Martinelli was able to connect his own political favorability with popular support given to democracy. In 2022, following many scandals and allegations of corruption, Martinelli was still campaigning for the 2024 presidential election, which shows the strength of the connection he achieved with Panama's citizenry. During his term in office, Martinelli presented solutions and direct answers to the citizens' demands for improved wellbeing while breaking with the traditional political parties, the media, and the powerful elite families. This marked a major shift from the two-party political system that had proven lethargic in responding to the country's social and economic needs. After Martinelli's first year of

²⁷ La Estrella de Panamá. 2022. "Martinelli cae, Cortizo sube y Carrizo se mantiene." May 16, 2022. <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/politica/220516/martinelli-cae-cortizo-sube-carrizo>.

²⁸ Claramente, CM (Facebook Watch). 2018. "¿Robó, pero hizo?" June 11, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1806137769432568>.

²⁹ Martinelli, Ricardo. Twitter Post. March 23, 2019. 3:36 PM. <https://twitter.com/rmartinelli/status/1109539395659534336?lang=es>.

³⁰ Laclau, Ernesto. 2014. "Antagonismo, subjetividad y política." In *Los fundamentos retóricos de la sociedad*. Buenos Aires: F.C.E.

government, support for democracy was 3 percentage points above the Latin American average; yet by the year he left power (2014), support for democracy was 20 percentage points below the regional average (47 percent). The identification of his personal leadership with an acceptance of democracy can thus be said to break with regional dynamics in terms of democratic attitudes.

Martinelli's discourse, actions, and style of political leadership altered the ways his followers conceive of democracy. Martinelli's rhetoric tended toward strong disqualification of his political rivals. In this political climate, Martinelli's followers and his opponents both had to face the dilemma of how to coexist in democracy where the ideas of "the other" are deemed unworthy of expressing, even in the public and electoral spheres. The decline in tolerance for the political rights of the opposition since the end of his administration illustrates impact that this president's leadership has had on democratic attitudes in general.

The former president antagonized his rivals and broke with the political balance in place since the transition to democracy, characterized by alternation between two complementarity major parties and a period of stability, consensus, and pact-building. Regardless of whether Martinelli is permitted to run in the 2024 election, he has paved the way for other actors to take up his confrontational, polarizing political strategy. Elite confrontation and polarization will likely continue to shape Panamanian public opinion on democracy for years to come.

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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.³¹ 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 ¹	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>

³¹ 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 ¹	QUESTIONS
<p>Opposition to military coups²</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>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>
<p>Opposition to executive aggrandizement²</p>	<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>
<p>Tolerance of protest and regime critics</p>	<p>D1. There are people who only say bad things about the form of government of Panama, 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>

DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES ¹	QUESTIONS
	<p>D3. Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the form of government of Panama, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
	<p>D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>
<p>Support for democratic inclusion</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? <i>Response options: Ten-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disapprove to (10) Strongly approve.</i></p>

¹ In the 2021 round of the AmericasBarometer, only questions ING4, JC13, and JC15A were included in the survey. Item JC13 was administered to one-quarter of the sample and JC15A to one-half of the sample. About 27 percent of the sample was asked the two questions. We use this portion of the sample to conduct cluster analysis.

² 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 2017, 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. 2012–2021 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, 2017, 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

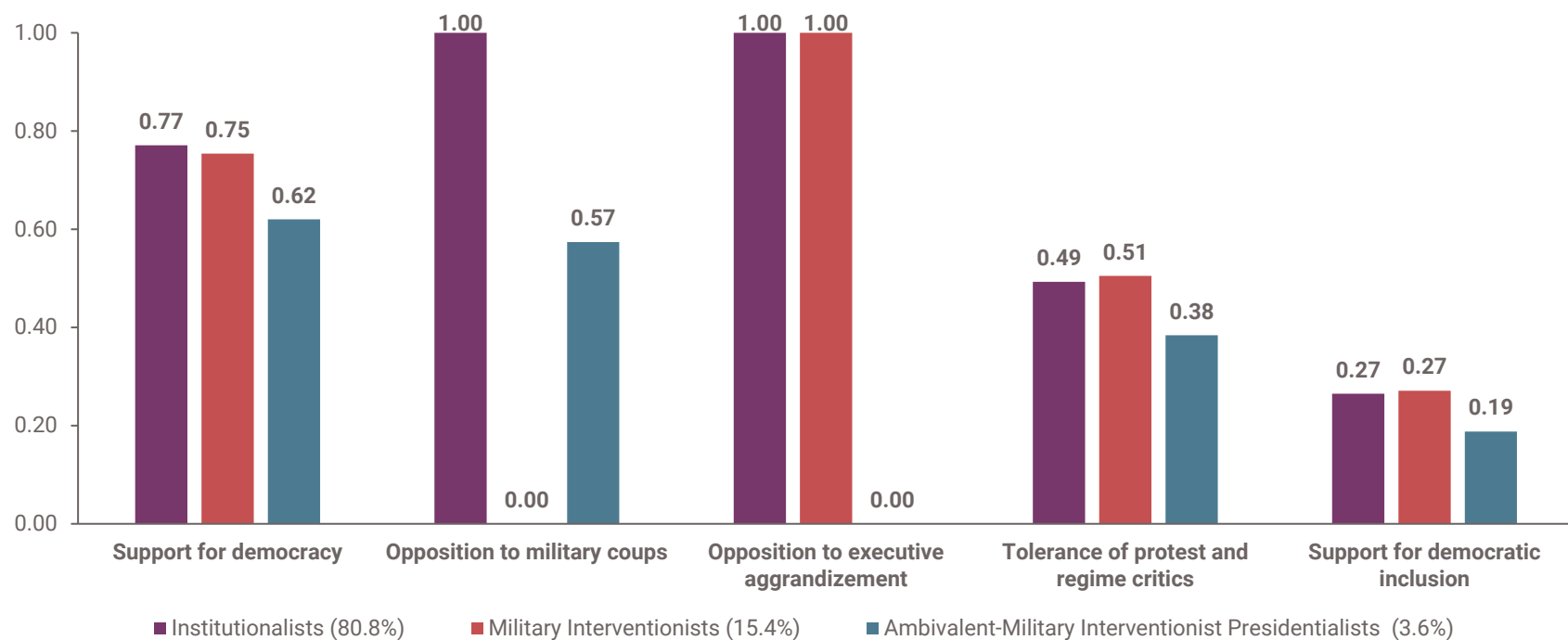


Figure A2.2: 2014 Cluster Results

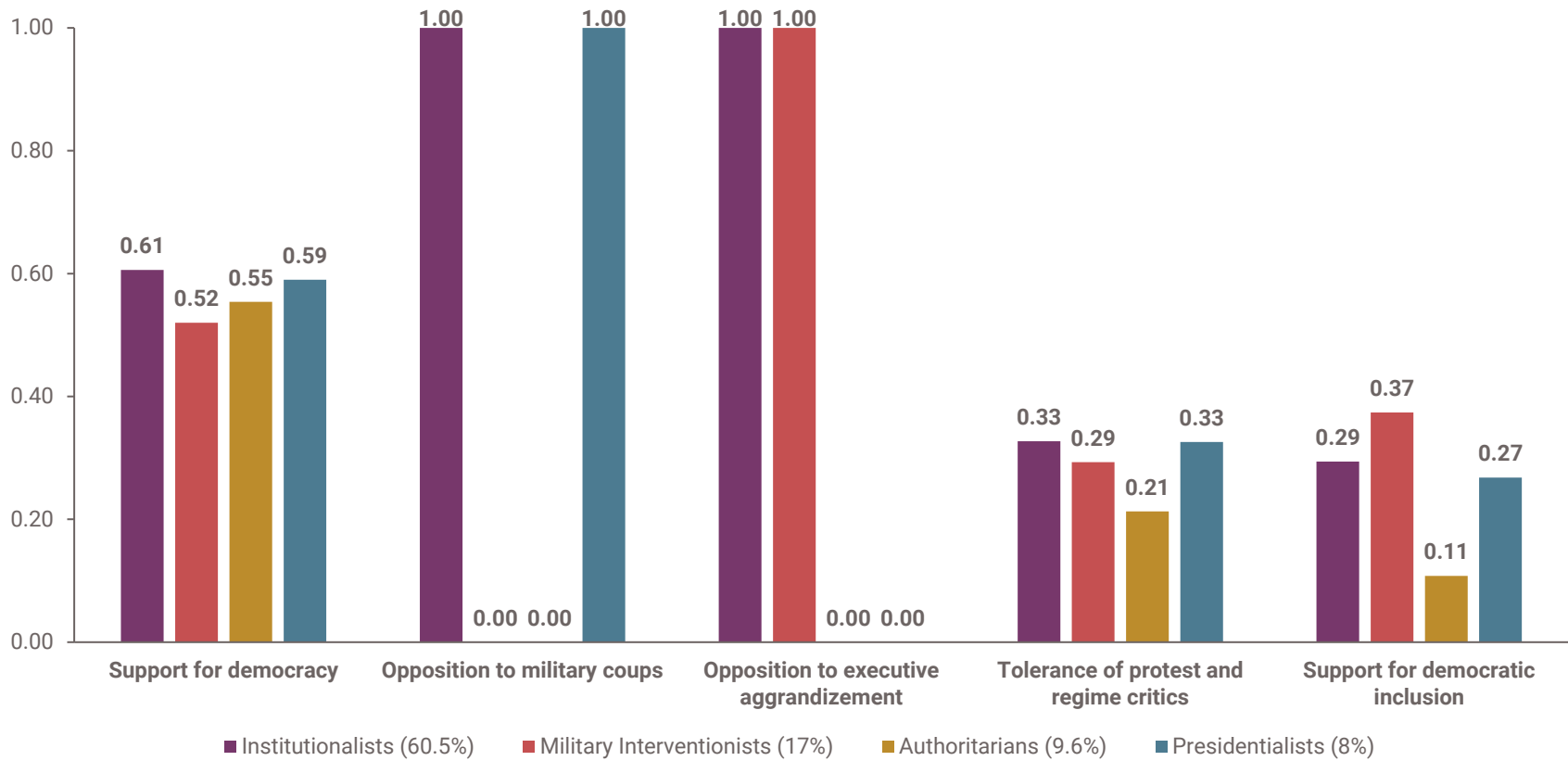


Figure A2.3: 2017 Cluster Results

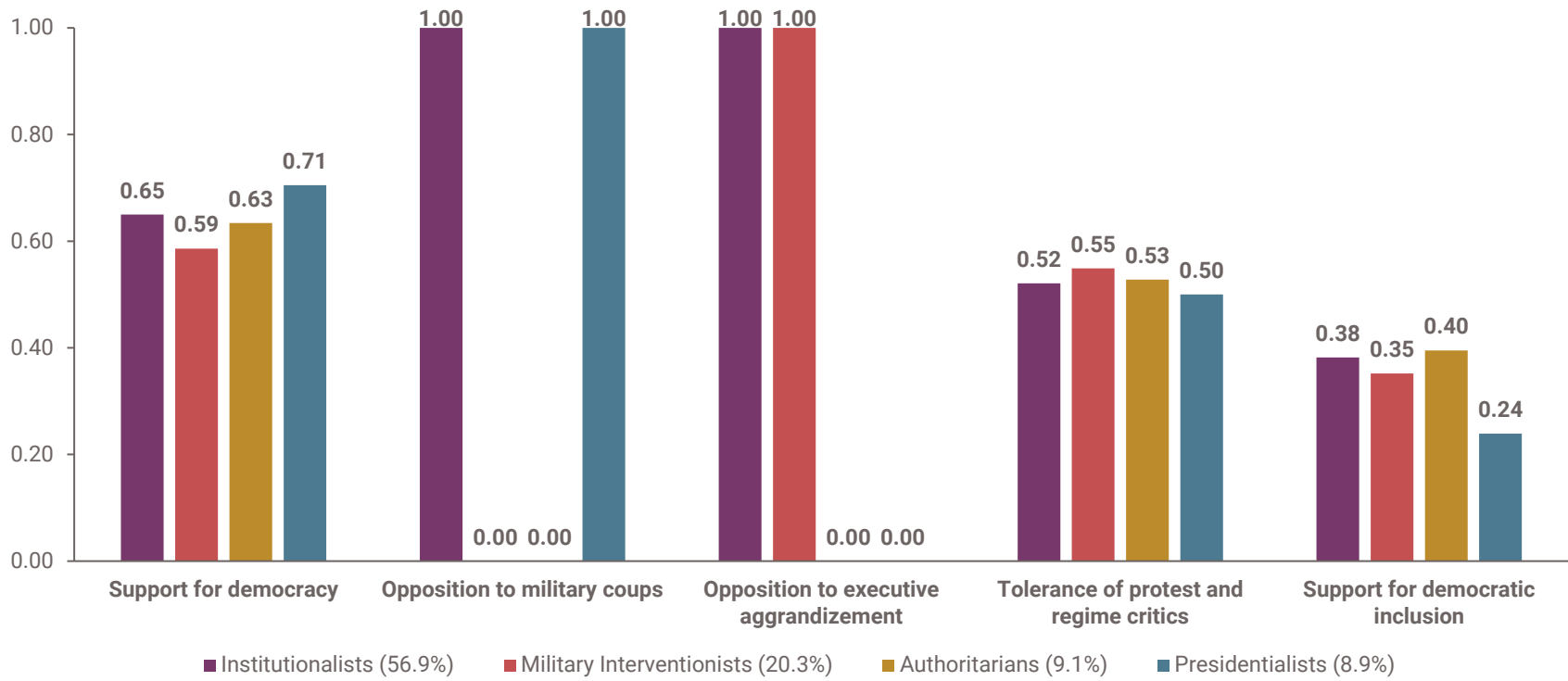


Figure A2.4: 2018 Cluster Results

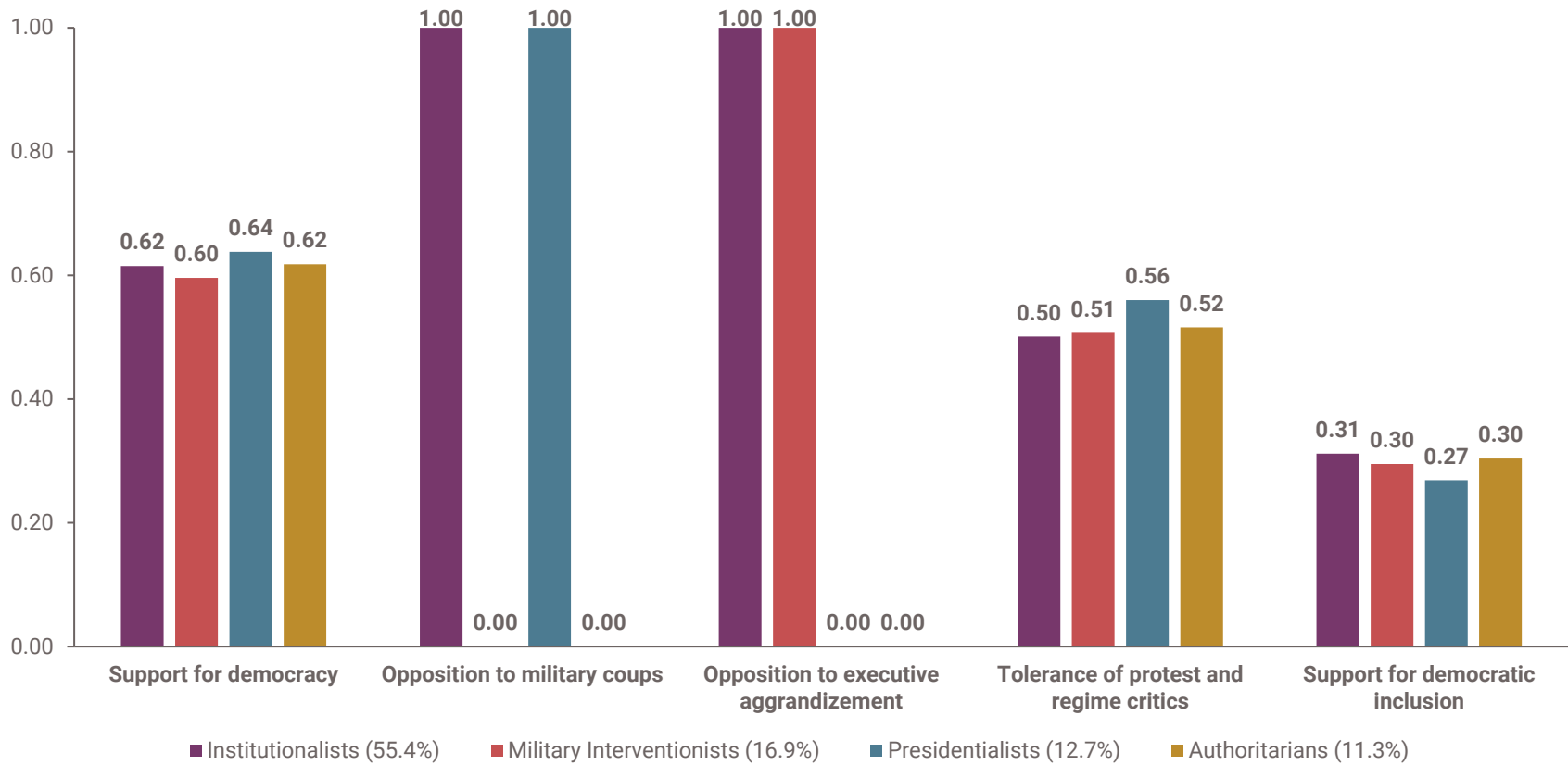


Figure A2.5: 2021 Cluster Results

