Latin America's Polarization in Comparative Perspective

Jennifer McCoy

ABSTRACT

Political polarization is a systemic-level and multifaceted process that severs cross-cutting ties and shifts perceptions of politics to a zero-sum game. When it turns pernicious, political actors and supporters view opponents as an existential threat and the capacity of democratic institutions to process political conflict breaks down. The article identifies four common fault lines of polarization globally – who belongs, democracy, inequality and social contract. It argues that while Latin American countries experience, to varying degrees, all four of the fault lines, it is the deep-seated, persistent social hierarchies oriented around class, race, and place that stand out relative to other countries. Reaching consensus on reforms that may renew or reformulate agreements on the terms of the social contract, boundaries of community membership, and redressing social inequality is a tall task. Yet the region's sustained consensus on the democratic rules of the game can provide the mechanisms for addressing this task if new majority coalitions can be formed.

Keywords: Political polarization, pernicious polarization, Latin America, democratic backsliding

Introduction

Run-off presidential elections between the ideological extremes, careening between the left and right in anti-incumbency votes, massive social protests, and the repeated emergence and survival of populist or autocratizing polarizing leaders in twenty-first-century Latin America raises the question of whether these trends evidence rising political polarization. If they do, what is the nature of that polarization and its implications for democracy? Further abroad, the perception of rising political polarization, along with political instability, mass social protests, and/or democratic erosion, has raised alarm bells around the world among analysts and policymakers alike. Yet the concept of political polarization has so many definitions and qualifiers,

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today it is becoming reminiscent of "Democracy with Adjectives" (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Within a growing body of comparative research, Latin America has been understudied, and thus this special issue is especially welcome. Yet the volume itself reflects the lack of consensus in the larger field, with multiple definitions and analytical and empirical approaches to studying the phenomenon.

This article reflects on the findings in this volume, as well as my past comparative work, to consider how we might understand political polarization in Latin America in comparative context. It does not attempt to present any causal evidence, but rather to consider how we might conceptualize polarization and its implications for democracy in the region. It is crucial to parse out the nature of the threats to democracy in the region and the role that political polarization may play in exacerbating (or ameliorating) those threats.

I take a systemic-level process-oriented approach to polarization that views polarization as multi-faceted and includes the interactions between masses and elites, and between governing and opposition political actors. When polarizing strategies of political rhetoric are employed to demonize and discredit opponents and their supporters, the process of polarization severs cross-cutting ties, shifts perceptions of politics to a zero-sum game, and creates incentives for political actors to reciprocate and deepen rather than ameliorate the negative aspects of polarization. The consequence for democracy is to delegitimate opponents, view opponents as an existential threat, and break down the capacity of democratic institutions to process political conflict (Bobbio 1996; Schedler 2023). Thus, while Latin America faces challenges of deadly transnational crime, stubborn social immobility and intergenerational inequality, weak state capacity, and crises of representation, democratic actors and institutions become increasingly unable to resolve conflicts and solve these problems.

The research agenda on political polarization should thus include investigating the drivers of political polarization in individual countries (specific grievances as well as facilitating conditions of electoral and media institutions), assessing its particular nature (ideological and/or affective, elite or mass-led, governing and opposition political interactions, role of civil society), and then investigating potential interventions to prevent and overcome polarization that brings pernicious consequences for democracy.

The article is organized in four parts. It first asks whether political polarization is rising in Latin America, and if so, what kind and how do we know? It then presents a system-level process-oriented conceptualization of political polarization. The third section identifies four common fault lines of polarization globally and explores how these are exemplified in Latin America, before closing with a brief conclusion.

Is Polarization Rising in Latin America? If So, What Kind?

The research presented in this special issue supports the contention that polarization is rising in Latin America, but it points to different types and levels of polarization: elites, masses, or both, partisan or anti-party, affective or ideological. Questions are also

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raised about whether and how contemporary political instability, crises of representation, and instances of democratic backsliding are related to political polarization. Measures of these different types and levels of polarization are impeded by a dearth of longitudinal comparative data covering Latin America as a region. Studies thus far, including all but one in this volume, are case based. Even the best comparative public opinion surveys do not consistently cover every country in every round and with every question. So, studying the phenomenon and its implications for democracy is complicated, and there is much to be done.

Expert surveys by V-Dem provide the most comprehensive measures of polarization over time (back to 1900) and around the world (202 countries). It is, of course, a subjective measure, but V-Dem data provide an opening window into identifying larger patterns which can, and should, be examined with other qualitative and quantitative empirical measures, including public opinion surveys, elite opinion surveys, political party system measures, election results, discourse analysis, institutional analysis, and structural analysis.[1]

V-Dem provides two measures of polarization of a country as a whole: the Political Polarization measure asks experts to rank the degree of hostility between political camps in a society. Thus, this variable includes affect—hostility and antipathy between political groups, and the "extent to which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions. Societies are highly polarized if supporters of opposing political camps are viewed to be reluctant to engage in friendly interactions, for example, in family functions, civic associations, their free time activities and workplaces" (Coppedge 2023).

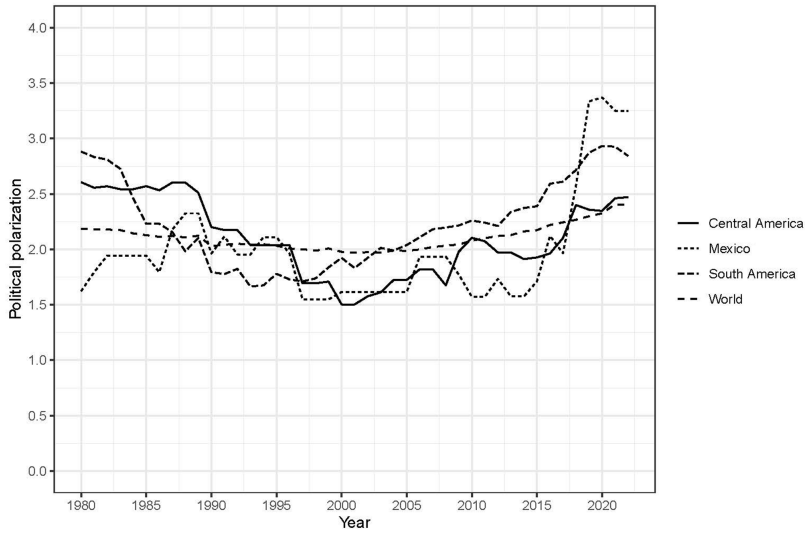
A second variable, Polarization of Society, measures the extent to which differences in opinions on major political issues result in major clashes of views and polarization in the society, i.e., the electorate and political actors. This variable seeks to assess divisions in opinions on major issues facing society, and thus is closer to "idea" or issue polarization. These variables together attempt to capture in some sense the notions of affective and ideological polarization as described in the Introduction to this volume, but they take a macro-level view, assessing the system as whole—elites and masses, and the extent of divisions into incompatible blocks, rather than the spatial unidimensional measures of polarization as distance on policy preferences or antipathy measured at the individual level with direct survey questions.

Latin American polarization measured by these two variables, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, is generally above world averages and very high in the last decade. As we will see below, however, these expert assessments do not always correspond to mass-level ideological or affective polarization measures, possibly because the V-Dem questions ask experts to assess society as a whole, including elite polarization, which public opinion surveys do not necessarily capture.

Figure 1 depicts the more identity-based variable of Political Polarization, indicating an Us vs Them antipathy and extension into social relations. It rose quickly in Mexico during the López Obrador presidency in Mexico, and in South America increased fairly constantly throughout the twenty-first century, while Central America roughly followed world averages.

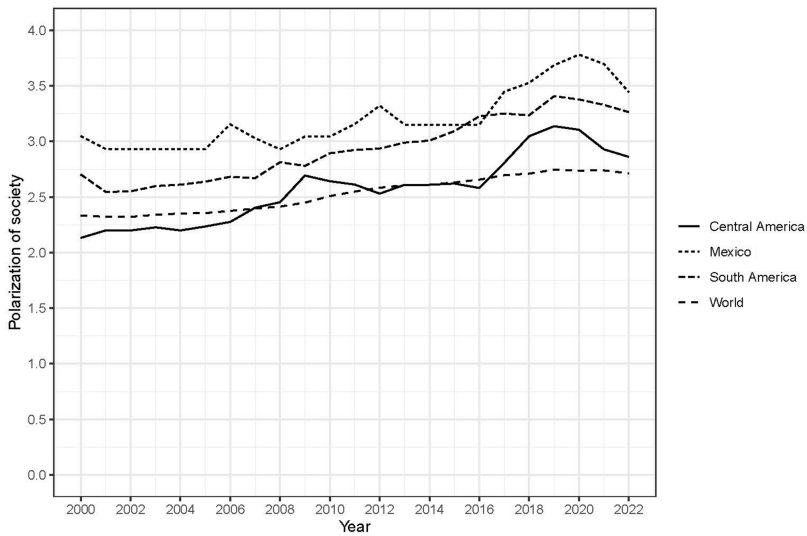
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Figure 1. Political Polarization (identity-based) by Subregions and the World, 2000–2022



Source: Varieties of Democracy database, V13

Figure 2. Polarization of Society (issue-based) by Subregions and World, 2000–2022



Source: Varieties of Democracy database, V13. Reverse coded so that 4 is high polarization

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For Polarization of Society (Figure 2)—the more issue-based variable available only since 2000—we see South America and Mexico consistently above world averages and Central America surpassing world averages only in 2017. Dramatic changes in expert perceptions of this indicator have occurred recently in Mexico and Central America as they rose steeply and then fell somewhat after 2020. The decline came under very different circumstances: in Mexico during the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), whose popularity continues high despite controversy, in Honduras after the election of Xiomara Castro ending a controversial Hernández presidency and representing a successful transfer of power to a leftist government, and in Nicaragua where severe repression is stifling expression of dissent.

The V-Dem experts' perception of rising polarization in the region since 2005, following worldwide trends, is supported by data presented in this volume by Paolo Moncagatta. He finds that mass-based ideological polarization has increased since 2010 in all but one of the 19 countries studied. The exception is Mexico, although Moncagatta's data ends with 2018/19 polling, precisely when the V-Dem experts see a rise in issue-based and, especially, affective polarization. It may also be the case that while mass ideological polarization is not particularly high in Mexico, elite polarization may be, as exemplified by the contentiousness over some of AMLO's strategies in recent years regarding environmental issues, democracy-related policies, and education.

We do not have a similarly comprehensive study measuring affective polarization through public opinion surveys at the mass level across the region, but two comparative studies including a few Latin American countries give us an indication. Affective polarization is conventionally measured with feeling thermometers to assess voters' like and dislike of their own and other parties, party leaders, or party supporters. One study including six Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay) finds that these Latin American countries' average level of affective polarization is in the middle range of all the countries in the CSES series of election studies 1996–2019. Although there is only one year of data for Uruguay and Argentina, we can see some patterns in the other countries: Peru has a U-shaped curve for affective polarization between 2001 and 2017 (high when Fujimori had just been ousted in 2001, and again in 2017); Brazil increases affective polarization between 2002 (Lula's first election) and 2018 (Bolsonaro's election); Mexico is up and down during its first years of alternating parties in office, 2000–2016; and Chile has an inverted U between 1999 and 2017 (Orhan 2022). Of these, Peru has the highest average and Brazil the lowest.

Another multi-country study, by Josep Comellas and Mariano Torcal, examined ideological identity (i.e., a left-right identity unattached to specific issues or parties) in two Latin American countries to find strong affective polarization between "leftists" and "rightists." The authors conclude that "the tendency of voters in multiparty systems to divide into two affective left-right blocs is not so much due to policy disagreements as it is a simple question of identity" in which ideology can act like a "supra-party identity" (Comellas and Torcal 2023). They find this is true for Chile,

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but less so in Argentina where the main line of affective polarization is pro- and anti-peronismo/justicialismo, rather than ideological identity (see also Carty and Torcal 2023).

Along with Luna in this volume, such research highlights a key characteristic of many Latin American countries that distinguishes them from some other polarized countries: the lack of strong partisan identity and a strong anti-party sentiment without a corresponding in-group.[2] Thus, "personalist" or "leader" polarization measures may show much higher levels of affective polarization without necessarily corresponding to partisan, ideological, or issue polarization. This is particularly the case in countries with charismatic and polarizing populist leaders, like Chávez, Correa, Morales, Bolsonaro, and AMLO. Case studies that can draw on consistent country surveys illuminate this. For example, Castro Cornejo (2023) finds that in the 2018 election Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) was able to capitalize on anti-establishment sentiment with a strongly polarizing electoral strategy. Similarly, in Brazil, following several years of corruption scandals affecting the entire political establishment, Mignozzetti and Spektor (2019) find a tripling of mass affective polarization, up to 65% in 2018, reflecting both an anti-PT and an anti-establishment sentiment.

A related phenomenon in Latin America is affective polarization between a party movement and its opponents, sustained over time with different leaders. Political polarization thus occurs between one movement and its opponents, regardless of ideological inconsistencies or heterodox alliances. This was the case historically, for example with Apristas and anti-Apristas in Peru and Peronists and anti-Peronists in Argentina, and more recently Chavistas and anti-Chavistas in Venezuela and Petistas and anti-Petistas in Brazil.

Finally, anti-establishment sentiment can explain surprise electoral results, giving rise to new movement politics (Meléndez 2022). Leaders such as Chávez in Venezuela, Correa in Ecuador, Bukele in El Salvador, Boric in Chile, and most recently Milei in Argentina have capitalized on such anti-establishment sentiment to win power as relative outsiders.

A Process-Oriented Approach to Conceptualizing Political Polarization

As the Introduction to this special issue discusses, polarization does not occur only among the masses or among the elites, along either ideological or affective spatial distance lines. Instead, it is a multi-faceted *process* that depends on the interaction of governing and opposition political elite agency, partisan sorting, and mass attitudes (Somer and McCoy 2024). Different types and levels of polarization can coexist, reinforce, and follow each other, creating a multilayered phenomenon. Thus, a process-oriented analysis of the system-level dynamics of political polarization is needed. In this approach, political polarization can be defined as a process of simplifying politics, leading toward a division of society into two mutually

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antagonistic camps (Somer and McCoy 2018; Roberts 2022; Freeman 2023). This simplification takes binary forms such as the frames of "people vs. elites," "illiberal vs. liberal," "nationalist vs. cosmopolitan," "religious vs secular, "or "urban vs rural." The resulting poles can be associated with parties, ideologies, movements, or a particular political leader, which may act as objects of real attachment or empty signifiers. While in-group interests are more salient for some polar camps, others are pulled together based on a rejection of the alternative pole.[3]

Elsewhere, my coauthors and I have called this "pernicious polarization" for its harmful effects on democracy when it reaches extreme levels (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Three things distinguish this process-oriented conceptualization of polarization from spatial definitions based on distance between individual-level or group attitudes, even when aggregated to a country-level characteristic: (i) a focus on process—dynamics, relationships, power and interactions between elites and masses, governing and opposing parties; (ii) the formation of incentives that emerge pushing actors toward increasingly hostile and conflictive interactions; and (iii) the formation of political identities spurring intergroup conflict dynamics and growing perception of mutual threat.

Polarization often is led by political elites who use polarizing and vilifying discourse in their pursuit of power. They utilize any specific cleavage or discontent that they choose, bundling issues and creating "stories" with emotional appeals (as Sarsfield and Abuchanab analyze in this volume for the Mexican case). As Jonathan Benson argues, elite polarizing rhetoric activates and politicizes a latent economic or cultural grievance or social cleavage by giving it political salience and identity (Benson 2023). It does not require ideological polarization at the voter level—often there is a normal distribution of issue preferences, but social elites and activists more polarized at the extremes drive the polarization (Somer and McCoy 2019; Bermeo 2003; Anria and Roberts, forthcoming; Luna this volume). It is pernicious because the binary group division takes on the dynamics of intergroup conflict, with the emotional responses of antagonism and perceptions of mutual threat. The elimination of cross-cutting cleavages and their replacement by reinforcing cleavages within each political camp increases mutual distrust and antipathy, leading to a break-down of communication and an unwillingness to compromise. Eventually each side sees the others as an existential threat that needs to be vanquished and prevented from holding power.

Pernicious polarization thus impedes democracy's ability to manage conflicts peacefully. As the Introduction to this volume notes, referencing Bobbio (1996), "democracy can process conflicts when rival groups recognize the other side as legitimate interlocutors for societal interests and preferences in the democratic arena; when the other side is viewed as illegitimate or threatening, however, competition assumes an existential character, democratic norms start to break down, and anti-democratic practices are likely to follow." Outcomes can vary from policy gridlock and instability to erosion in democratic quality to a hegemonic takeover by an autocratic party.

There is thus a two-way relationship between democracy and polarization: extreme polarization can *produce* democratic crises, government dysfunction and paralysis, and

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erosion in the quality of liberal democracy. But a democratic crisis and erosion can also be the *source* of polarization over who and what is threatening the democracy, and, sometimes, even over the concept of democracy itself (Somer and McCoy 2019). In fact, it often produces a feedback loop: Polarizing conflicts lead people to hold zero-sum perceptions and perceive mutual existential threats from the other camp to their way of life or to the nation. These perceptions in turn incentivize democracy-eroding practices by incumbents as well as opponents. Disagreements may manifest in polarization over democracy itself (either its desired nature, or perceptions of the Other's threat to democracy) and further intensify polarization *and* backsliding (Schedler 2023).

Common Fault Lines of Polarization Globally and in Latin America

In a context of democratic governance challenges including climate threat, massive migration flows, globalization, transnational crime, and technological change, we can observe four common fault lines of contemporary political polarization centered on basic components of democracy: (i) Demands to expand or contract the boundaries of community membership, (ii) competing concepts of democracy and who poses a threat to democracy, (iii) perceptions of a breach of the terms of the social contract, and (iv) anxieties and perceptions of injustice in material (income and wealth) inequalities.[4]

These fault lines may stem from historic unresolved debates over who belongs and the concept of national identity (formative rifts) or from more recent external and internal changes and governance challenges, including democratization itself giving rise to voice and participation from new groups. The fault lines are also interdependent in important ways and may be manifested in other terms in actual political discourse. For example, economic inequality, precarity, and anxiety may be transferred to cultural resentments (Rhodes-Purdy et al. 2023). Conflicts over nationalist versus cosmopolitan assertions of authority and sovereignty may stem from divides over whether to expand the boundaries of community membership to new waves of immigrants. Disputes over collective responsibilities versus individual rights protected by a social contract are heightened with a social demand for a strong hand of law and order. Similarly, addressing one fault line of polarization may help ameliorate another fault line.

In addition, two facilitating conditions shape the incentives and capacity of political actors and voters to pursue polarizing or depolarizing strategies: first, the institutional (especially electoral) arrangements in any given democracy provide incentives for political behavior and shape perceptions of the nature of the game—whether positive, zero, or negative sum. Second, the organization of media and social media, increasingly driven by profit motives met by "outrage" coverage, shape the information environment for citizens—either polarizing, fragmenting, or closing information space.

I will describe each of the fault lines in more detail and discuss how they are relevant in Latin America.

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Inclusion, Belonging, and Identity (Boundaries of the Political Community)

Many countries experience divisions today over the boundaries of community membership and who should be a rightful citizen. These divisions may stem from the recurrence of historical unresolved debates about citizenship and national identity (formative rifts), changing values within a society, or new debates about immigration that may be brought to the public's attention by a polarizing leader. Any of these divisions may give rise to alienation and fears of exclusion and lost status among previously privileged groups.

As democracies evolve, economies develop, values change, and demographics morph, demands to redefine the criteria, and expand or contract the membership in and rights enjoyed by those members will continually surface. Some demands originate in the country's founding and come from below. For example, historically marginalized groups who did not enjoy equal status at the country's founding, later seek full inclusion in the political community, such as the descendants of African slaves brought to the Americas. Demands also come from below from ethnic-cultural groups who existed prior to the formation of the modern nation-state, and who seek recognition and different forms of cultural and juridical autonomy within the larger state, such as First Nations in Canada or indigenous groups in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Demands for inclusion in the political community also come from more recent change. As societal values change, some groups may demand equal rights such as women's right to work, own property, and control their own reproductive decisions, or LGBTQ rights to marry, adopt children, or adopt their own gender identity. Other demands for inclusion come outside the political community—from the large-scale contemporary forces in our age of globalization and mass migrations driven by economic aspirations, war, and climate change. These waves of expansion of the criteria for membership and rights of those members, in turn, often create backlashes from those who prefer the status quo and strive to maintain the traditional culture as they see it, which includes the existing social hierarchy where they maintain a dominant status, or at least are not at the bottom of the ladder.

In Latin America, debates over "who belongs" stem primarily from demands for inclusion from historically marginalized groups, rather than from disputed national identity. That is, Afro-Americans, women, and the poor seek to gain equal footing in a hemisphere dominated by social hierarchies (discussed below). Indigenous populations throughout the Western hemisphere or in Scandinavian countries, on the other hand, struggle for rights to protect not only their cultural heritage but also the environmental resources so integral to their ways of life (Yashar 1999). This has generated new forms of multicultural autonomy such as the plurinational states created in twenty-first-century constitutional rewritings in Ecuador and Bolivia (and failed in the 2022 effort in Chile).

Polarization over values reflecting the cultural dimension of polarization discussed in the Introduction to this volume also are emerging in Latin America. For example, the backlash to demands and achievements for women's rights and LGBTQ

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rights is strong among right-wing populist parties around the world. In Brazil, Samuels and Zucco in this volume find that polarization in 2022 was stronger on cultural issues, such as abortion, gun rights, and same-sex marriage, and issues related to crime and security than on economic issues or the environment. Likewise, Mignozzetti and Spektor (2019) found that Bolsonaro polarized mainly drawing on anti-establishment sentiment and anger at corruption, rising unemployment, and crime; but his controversial statements about women, LGBTQ, and indigenous persons resonated with the growing evangelical population. The importance of religion, and particularly the growth of evangelical churches in mobilizing to gain electoral representation, is forcefully documented by Amy Erica Smith (2019) and Taylor Boas (2024).

Majoritarian vs Liberal conceptions of democracy

Polarization is occurring over the very concept of democracy, with competing views of the balance between a majoritarian aspect of democracy privileging popular sovereignty and the will of the majority, and liberal aspects of democracy emphasizing the protection of the rights of political minorities and the diffusion of power through checks and balances. Polarization grows in contexts of democratic backsliding, when an incumbent leader or party concentrates power and weakens checks and balances while promoting its democratic credentials in terms of its representation of the popular will. Thus, disagreement over the procedural rules of the game has become a polarizing issue even in established democracies, where confidence in elections has wavered or one party has used the rules to entrench itself as a governing majority. Perceptions become polarized over whether democracy is improving or deteriorating, and who poses a threat to democracy.

In Latin America, weakened political parties, political fragmentation and instability, and corruption have generated alienation from the political establishments in countries from Chile to Brazil to Peru to Guatemala in the last decade, with different political consequences. These divides reflect a sort of social polarization without formal political representation. Anti-establishment sentiment may arise from poor government performance or lack of responsiveness to socio-economic grievances as a result of policy convergence and consensus among center-right and center-left parties on a neoliberal market model, a pattern also seen in Europe (Berman and Kundnani 2021). This was the case in Chile, for example, as the Concertación reduced poverty, but for the most part kept in place the Pinochet-era privatization of education, pensions, and its labor policies for fear of backlash and instability from the right. A new generation grew alienated from politics and led protests in the education sector and beyond throughout the 2010s, culminating in the demand for a new constitution (Luna 2021; Madariaga and Kaltwasser 2020).

Alternatively, anti-establishment sentiment may arise from elite collusion, corruption, and impunity, as occurred in Brazil in the mid-2010s (Mignozzetti and Spektor 2019; Stuenkel 2021). In this case, a divide over Lula's Partido do Trabalhaldores gave way to broad anti-establishment sentiment, which in turn fueled the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro and a pro- and anti-Bolsonarista divide along with the pro and anti-PT

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divide. Samuels and Zucco in this volume analyze the role of asymmetrical negative partisanship, finding that anti-PT voters do not have an in-group (except fleetingly Bolsonaro's parties), while pro-PT voters do not have a specific out-group. Importantly, half of Brazilians are non-partisans with no attachments, especially those with low socio-economic status or minimal interest in politics.

Another form of elite collusion appeared to be playing out in Peru and Guatemala in 2023, creating massive social polarization without political representation or poles. In Peru, an ongoing struggle between Congress and reformist presidents resulted in a rapid change of presidents and eventually the high-stakes conflict between leftist president Pedro Castillo (eventually ousted) and the conservative-dominated Congress in 2023. After his vice-president (from the same party) replaced him, she allied with the conservatives in Congress to defy protestors demanding early elections and constitutional change. The conflict expanded to reflect the formative rift between the urban elite in Lima and the poorer, more indigenous, and mestizo interior of the country. In Guatemala, an elite-party cartel disqualified candidates for the 2023 presidential election who threatened their impunity, and then when a dark horse candidate from the grass-roots civic sector emerged in second place, government authorities attempted to interfere in the run-off. After further delays challenged both by domestic social sectors and foreign governments, the winning candidate Bernardo Arévalo was inaugurated in January 2024, but faces the stiff task of trying to govern without control of government institutions.

Prior rejections of the political establishment provided the opportunity for populist leaders to come to power in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia and eventually begin to concentrate power. Polarization and problems of democratic governance became intertwined as failures of political establishments to respond to political, economic, and cultural grievances were exploited by polarizing leaders. These leaders mobilized dissatisfied citizens, winning popular support while further deepening democratic crisis and partisan divides over their challenges to the existing democratic norms and institutions. In a feedback loop, democratic backsliding itself produced polarization over the preferred concept of democracy—participatory versus representative, majoritarian versus liberal, as well as over perceptions about whether democracy was improving or deteriorating in a given country and who was the bigger threat to democracy.

Juan Pablo Luna in this volume presents a concept of "disjointed polarization" to indicate a parallel process of social and political elite ideological and affective polarization, and popular dealignment and general alienation from the party establishment. The surprising thing about this disjointed polarization in Chile, Luna argues, is that rather than simply being an interregnum until a new realignment occurs, it appears to be stable and enduring. That is, strong anti-identities stabilize electoral behavior around the left and right, and the center drops out (witness the Boric-Kast run-off in 2022). But all have ceilings—anti-authoritarianism constrains Kast, anti-communism constrains Boric, and anti-convergence legacy when the Concertación adopted the right's market policies constrains mainstream centers.

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Luna thus predicts for Chile an enduring cycling between rootless parties and lame duck presidents. That is, political actors in this context will achieve neither the populist-oligarchic realignment prevalent in some other Latin American countries, nor a more positive generative polarization creating a new cleavage and representation around new party structures. The underlying crisis of representation that Luna identifies is a problem that extends to several Latin American countries with parties unable to "structure societal discontent via legitimate political representation" and create a political realignment, such as Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Costa Rica.

Competing Visions of the Social Contract

The concept of social contract underlies the collective of citizens as a people, the "body politic." The social contract involves the implicitly or explicitly agreed social understandings regarding why and how citizens depend on each other and the state, not only in the present but also in the future. This includes collective interests, rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Polarization arises over competing fundamental beliefs about the nature and content of this social contract and alleged breaches of it. Belief polarization may occur over such questions as what it means to enjoy equal and secure opportunities for advancement of different social classes and even different generations. Value conflicts may arise over the relative prioritization of individual versus collective interests, communitarianism versus cosmopolitanism, security versus freedom, religious versus secular views of the state, or the importance of adherence to community norms and authority.

The growth of organized crime and insecurity as the top concern in an increasing number of Latin American countries in the 2020s produces competing visions of the social contract over individual versus collective rights and interests (Winter 2023). Willingness to trade individual civil liberty protections for collective security provided by strong men is evident in the huge popularity of El Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele's approach to controlling gangs through mass arrests and mass trials (paralleling the popularity of Filipino former president Rodrigo Duterte's controversial use of extra-judicial measures against drug gangs). Even more concerning is the growing attention to the Bukele model in governments ranging from the centrist Noboa government in Ecuador to the progressive Castro government in Honduras.

The terms of the social contract are also foci for the social explosions demanding not only to revisit social-economic policies sustaining inequality, but also to address the very models and concepts of solidarity versus individual effort, collective versus individual responsibility. Belief polarization gives rise to value conflicts over the relative prioritization of collective versus individual interests, rights, privileges and responsibilities. Major protests erupted in 2018–2019 in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, larger than 100,000 people and lasting more than a month (Protest Tracker, CEIP). Initially protesting austerity measures, social inequalities, or proposed social and educational policy reforms, the protests grew and morphed into a larger demand for constitutional change in Chile (changing the social contract), or

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demand for human rights protections following harsh repression of protestors in Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Colombia.

The Chilean months-long mobilization had significant political impact, as Luna analyzes in this volume. It led to an agreement with the Pinera government to conduct a referendum for a constitutional assembly, and to the election of former student leader Gabriel Boric as president in a polarized election against far-right candidate José Antonio Kast in 2021. The first attempt to write a new constitution, led by independents and progressives, was decisively defeated in a popular referendum, not only due to disagreement over the economic model and solidarity, but also in part over a formative rift over community membership: the proposed constitution contained provisions for Chile to become a plurinational state, incorporating more than one nation within the national state, and giving rights of autonomy to indigenous group. A second attempt reflecting conservative prerogatives was also decisively rejected by the public.

Inequality of Wealth and Income

Polarization arises over the causes and possible solutions of the contemporary problems of capitalist market economies, in particular the growing wealth and income inequalities in these societies and their implications for life chances. These inequalities, especially when exacerbated by social immobility, give rise to widespread public discontent, anxiety, and precarity. While these inequalities are well-documented and felt, there is widespread disagreement over their sources and even less consensus on solutions. Public resentments, however, are easily exploited by polarizing leaders such as populist autocrats. In return, mainstream political parties struggle to devise programs to address these grievances or to build the political coalitions necessary to accomplish them. Even more difficult, resentments do not necessarily draw on inequality per se, but rather may be driven by perceptions of un-deservingness or unfairness in this distribution. Often, they are not even directed toward the economic elite. That is, some groups (immigrants, ethnic groups, women, individuals deviating from dominant sexual or religious norms, urban versus rural lifestyles, etc.) may be viewed as gaining unfair or undeserved advantages from government policies.

While many polarized countries around the world experience formative rifts around identity and inclusion, Latin America stands out in comparative perspective on its deep-rooted inequality. A recent report by the Andean Development Corporation (CAF) on inherited inequality in Latin America demonstrates how this long-standing rift interacts with formative rifts over racial and ethnic inclusion (De La Mata et al. 2022). Despite some improvement in the twenty-first century, [5] the CAF data show that the region as a whole still exhibits the most unequal income distribution in the world (Graph 1.3, 28.) and persistently so since 1985. Its wealth distribution GINI (average for 2010–2019) is also the highest in the world (Graph 1.5, 30). Most of Latin America, with the exception of Argentina, Peru, and Uruguay, appears in the top quintile of income GINI distributions globally (Graph 1.1, 26) and the GINI ratios are higher than predicted by their per capita GDP (Graph 1.2, 27). For wealth GINI, Brazil, along with the United States, is in the top quintile (a whopping 83 to 91 score; Graph 1.4, 29).

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The intergenerational impact of this deep inequality in income and wealth results in Latin America having the largest income immobility in the world, according to the CAF report. Social policies attempting to overcome this problem through improvements in education, for example, have made it possible for younger generations to surpass their parents' educational levels. Yet, the gaps in education, and especially how that translates to skilled jobs, between children of rich and poor families remain. "Only one in ten children of non-college-educated parents obtain a college degree by 24 or 25 years of age. That fraction is almost 50% for children with a parent who graduated from college . . . Even if younger generations' academic achievements have improved with respect to their parents', labor market opportunities have not. The children of parents employed in high-skilled jobs are almost six times more likely to land such jobs than are the children of parents employed in low-skilled occupations" (Arreaza 2023). The wealth gap exacerbates the problem of social immobility even further, such that family background determines life prospects more than individual effort and merit. The social immobility arising from inherited inequality differentially effects racial and ethnic groups as well in Latin America. Afro-descendants and indigenous experience lower mobility than mestizos, who in turn experience lower mobility than whites (Executive Summary, 11).

The CAF argues that social immobility has important implications for democracy and political stability as well: "In addition, the high intergenerational persistence resulting from inequality of opportunities can corrode people's trust in each other and in institutions. Not only does this undermine the possibilities of providing public goods, but it also weakens the tolerance and mutual respect that constitute the bedrock of life in a democracy" (Executive Summary, 3). Survey research in Latin America also has found that personal experiences with upward social mobility improves democratic attitudes while downward mobility harms them (Houle and Miller 2019).

Gamboa, Botero, and Zanotti in this volume illustrate inequality surged to become a dominant political demand in Colombia. They explain that the 2016 Peace Accord with the FARC guerrilla allowed for new concerns and cleavages to emerge in the national arena, where most debates and campaigns had hinged, for decades, on how to handle the armed conflict. After the peace accords, new socio-economic concerns took center stage in electoral discussions and generated a cycle of massive protests between 2019–2021. They document this shift in their analysis of presidential candidate tweets in the 2022 presidential election: the top three issues across all four candidate tweets were the *economy, corruption, and education* and only 5.8% of all tweets discussed security issues.

Conclusion

Latin American democracy has broken down completely in only two countries in the twenty-first century—Nicaragua and Venezuela. The other countries have demonstrated democratic resilience to varying degrees, and South America has remained above the world averages in the liberal democracy rankings, according to V-Dem measures. Yet, they demonstrate vulnerabilities and a pattern of

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underperformance that is likely to continue to weaken their capacity to withstand, adapt, and recover from shocks and stressors. Rising political polarization is one of these vulnerabilities.

Latin American countries reflect, to varying degrees, all four of the fault lines identified here as the principal fault lines for political polarization in contemporary democracies globally. However, the deep-seated, persistent social hierarchies oriented around class, race, and place make Latin America stand out relative to other countries and regions. The region's deepest divides do not focus on religion as in many other countries, nor on clearly delineated ethnolinguistic divides (with the exception of Bolivia, Peru, and Guatemala). Instead, the stubborn income, wealth, and land inequalities resulting in severe social immobility are reemerging as flashpoints expressed in anti-establishment social protests and votes.

Polarization around unresolved formative rifts over who is a rightful citizen (community membership) and the social relations that determine their life chances appears the most difficult to overcome. Elite resistance to addressing these rifts in some cases took the form of policy convergence making mainstream parties unresponsive to citizen grievances and demands beyond initial reductions in poverty in the interest of political and economic stability, such as in Venezuela during Punto Fijo, or Chile under the Concertación governments. But more commonly in the twenty-first century, patterns of elite collusion to maintain the social hierarchies and protect their impunity persist. Reaching consensus on reforms that may renew or reformulate agreements on the terms of the social contract, boundaries of community membership, and acceptable levels of social inequality is a tall task.

Latin America retains to a large degree broad consensus on the democratic rules of the game, which provides the mechanisms for addressing this task. Yet it will take broad majorities able to gain and retain political power to enact such fundamental reforms, as Uruguay in the early twentieth century and Costa Rica in the mid-twentieth century achieved. Those efforts came at the hands of a victorious party following partisan civil wars. Replicating such broad majorities in a democratic context today is impeded by the existing polarization. Large legislative majorities have been achieved in countries like Venezuela, Mexico, and El Salvador in the twenty-first century, but they have been used to change the democratic rules of the game to concentrate power in the executive, subjecting the countries to the whims of an illiberal leader. Where political power has been more closely divided, as in Colombia, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina, or more diffused, as in Peru, attempts at executive aggrandizement have been held in check more easily thus far. Political agency matters, and it will require social organizations to make proposals and, together with grassroots mobilization, press political elites to adopt them, as well as courageous leaders willing to look beyond personal and partisan interests to the national interest and to build coalitions in favor of reform.

The articles in this volume provide some clues to begin to address political polarization in the region. The Gamboa, Botero, and Zanotti analysis of presidential tweets and engagement provides hopeful signs that depolarizing and positive messages can generate positive engagement with voters—a finding contrary to much of the

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literature about the difficulty of positive emotional appeals to compete with negative emotional appeals. The Sarsfield and Abuchanab analysis of how Mexico's populist storytelling of conspiracies and ostracism generates negative affective polarization points to the areas to seek counter-narratives and storytelling. The Samuels and Zucco analysis shows how misperceptions about the out-group's composition and attitudes lead to affective polarization in Brazil, similarly to the United States. Thus studies in the US population demonstrating that correcting such misperceptions can reduce affective polarization lend some hope to addressing it in Brazil. Finally, Juan Pablo Luna's analysis of the crisis of representation leading to "disjointed polarization" highlights the urgent need for political party development not only in Chile, but throughout the region.

Notes

1. See the special issue on Measuring Democratic Backsliding in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Volume 57, Issue 2, April 2024, for a debate on subjective and objective measures in political science, including expert surveys used by V-Dem.

2. Exceptions like Uruguay occur, where a long tradition of "family" parties and contestation between Blancos and Colorados often produces high scores in affective partisan polarization that contrasts with the long-term democratic stability and perceptions of V-Dem's coders who perceive relatively low polarization in Uruguay.

3. As the Introduction to this volume and authors such as Samuels and Zucco (2018) and Carlos Meléndez (2022) describe, the affective dimension of polarization may not include a strong political bond with a group, but only a negative sentiment in opposition to a party, leader, or even the entire political class or "establishment."

4. This section draws from my book project in progress with Murat Somer, *Depolarizing Politics: Preventing and Overcoming Pernicious Polarization*.

5. The region exhibits variation in its reduction of inequality and poverty, with Bolivia and Chile for example making significant progress on both since 2005, Mexico and Peru improving and leveling out, and Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia improving but then regressing in recent years. See the World Bank, Poverty and Inequality Platform, https://pip.worldbank.org/home.

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