

# The Role of Political Parties and Public Opinion in the Authoritarian Turn of the Left in Latin America. Interview with Noam Lupu

Noam Lupu 

In recent decades, the weakening of democratic systems in Latin America has been marked by the rise of personalist and populist leaderships, the deterioration of traditional political parties, and growing societal distrust toward democratic institutions. In this interview, Dr. Noam Lupu, Director of the Center for Global Democracy and of the AmericasBarometer project at the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University, whom I thank for his time and willingness to participate, analyzes the political, economic, and social factors, as well as the party dynamics, that have given rise to populist and authoritarian projects in the region. He also reflects on the loss of democratic legitimacy and the methodological challenges of measuring public opinion in authoritarian countries, offering a holistic perspective on the present and future of in the region.

**Sergio Angel [S.A.]** In recent years, various analyses have reported democratic backsliding across Latin America, accompanied by the resurgence of personalist leadership and authoritarian political projects. In your book “Party Brands in Crisis”, you argue that the weakening of partisan identities can erode the bonds between society and political parties. To what extent has the party crisis in Latin America paved the way for populist and authoritarian leadership? What other factors explain the regional drift toward authoritarianism and autocratic practices?

**Noam Lupu [N.L.]** I see the trend toward authoritarianism and personalism in Latin America as largely the result of three factors. First, party systems in the region weakened dramatically when many mainstream parties (particularly on the left) reneged on their campaign promises and pursued market reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. I wrote about this a decade ago in *Party Brands in Crisis* and warned then that this erosion of people’s ties to parties created new opportunities for anti-establishment outsiders and populists to more easily penetrate politics and pursue authoritarian projects.

Second, the commodity boom of the 2000s ended around

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2014 and gave way to a decade of stagnation that was followed by the pandemic and the ensuing inflation. So, there is a great deal of disillusion with democracy, a sense that democracy is simply not delivering. When Raúl Alfonsín ran for president in 1983 following Argentina’s return to democracy, he famously said, “*Con la democracia se come, se cura y se educa*”. Well, that has not been people’s experience of democracy over the last decade.

Finally, high-profile corruption scandals have plagued the entire Latin American region in the last decade and a half, beginning with the Panama Papers, followed by the Odebrecht scandal and its fallout across several countries, as well as scandals around the early disbursement of the COVID vaccines. All of these have severely eroded trust in the political establishment. People view their elected representatives as corrupt, self-interested, and completely detached from the people they should be representing.

We see all of this reflected in LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer survey data: people across the region are detached from political parties, they’re deeply pessimistic about their economies, they distrust their political leaders, and they want to see these democratic systems improved. This provides a potent opportunity for popular outsiders to gain political power, to build a personalistic following on the basis that they will do things differently, and to use this demand for change to centralize power and undermine democratic institutions. We’re seeing that dynamic play out in country after country in the region.

**S.A.** Many Latin American governments invoke discourses of popular and social justice to justify institutional reforms that expand executive power. In your view, why do populist discourses manage to sustain significant levels of social support even as they undermine democratic institutions and practices?

**N.L.** There is a lot of research being done specifically about this question: why do people support politicians who are undermining democratic institutions? In Latin America, I think a lot of this has to do with the loss of trust in those institutions. If you’re convinced that judges are corrupt,

that political and economic elites act with judicial impunity, and that the whole judicial system is rigged in favor of the rich, all things that many people in the region believe, then it's understandable that you might support a president who dismisses judges and works to reform the judiciary. If you're convinced that elected officials in the legislature are self-interested and corrupt, then you might support a president who acts without seeking authorization from the legislature. Those efforts may end up centralizing power in the executive and undermining democracy, but many people are very happy to see efforts to reform these distrusted institutions. This is especially true when those efforts are also linked to positive performance. When Hugo Chávez delivered welfare support and healthcare and education to poor Venezuelans in the early 2000s, they were willing to support his anti-democratic efforts. More recently, as Nayib Bukele has delivered by dramatically reducing gang violence, Salvadorans have been willing to support his efforts to undermine the legislature and the judiciary.

*S.A.* The Americas Barometer, produced by the LAPOP Lab, measures support for democracy, political tolerance, and the rule of law. Yet in authoritarian regimes, including Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, where society endures repression and harassment, what methodological challenges arise when attempting to capture genuine political attitudes, and how can biases stemming from fear and self-censorship be mitigated?

*N.L.* This is a growing methodological challenge in the region. As more and more countries take measures to limit freedom of expression, there is a chilling effect on people's willingness to express their true political preferences. We're obviously very clear up front that ours is an academic, nonpartisan survey for research purposes. We also take very seriously the possibility that people will be harmed if their survey responses are revealed and take pains to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Since our face-to-face surveys are conducted using electronic devices, the data are uploaded to the cloud as soon as the interview ends so that there is no longer any way for someone to access the responses on the device itself.

But there is a broader question about whether people are being truthful in their responses. We have not seen much evidence of self-censorship in our surveys so far. That makes some sense: even the most autocratic regimes in the region don't really have the capacity to monitor citizens that closely. But it is something we're keeping an eye on, particularly in our phone surveys. If someone is interviewing you over the phone, you might be more likely that they're affiliated with the regime. For instance, we do our survey in Nicaragua over the phone, with calls coming from Costa Rica and Panama. This year, we're conducting an experiment to see whether having a Nicaraguan interviewer (with their recognizable accent) affects

responses. The idea is that maybe an interviewer with a foreign accent is less likely to be assumed to be affiliated with the government. Stay tuned for those findings.

*S.A.* For the first time, the project plans to include Cuba in the AmericasBarometer. Given the institutional constraints and the limited availability of independent data on the island, what new information could this initiative provide regarding support for democracy and human rights, and what might it reveal about the political and social reality of Cuba?

*N.L.* I think our survey in Cuba is going to provide a great deal of insight about the state of public opinion in Cuba at a critical juncture in the island's politics. There have been other efforts to understand how Cubans evaluate their government and their support for democracy and human rights, but those studies focus only on Cuba and so they don't give you a benchmark. Including Cuba in the AmericasBarometer allows us to provide that kind of comparison. Are Cubans pro-democracy than Venezuelans, or Dominicans? Are they supportive of their government that other countries publics in the region? I think making those kinds of comparisons offers a great deal of new insights into where things stand, and where things are likely to go, in Cuba.

*S.A.* Recently, international debate has centered on the detention of Nicolás Maduro, who faces charges of drug trafficking and terrorism in the United States. From your perspective, could the ongoing dialogues between the United States and Delcy Rodríguez's interim government lead to a possible democratic transition in Venezuela?

*N.L.* I think we're fairly far off from a democratic transition in Venezuela. It's not impossible. Venezuelans have a lot of experience with democracy and are very politically engaged. And there certainly seems to be a lot of discontent with the status quo. Economic prospects are bad and street crime and drug-related violence continue to be huge issues. But it's hard to see a democratic regime that could take the reins and gain the support of political powerholders, economic elites, and the military and other security actors (including the colectivos operating at the local level), almost all of which are currently very closely aligned with the regime.

*S.A.* Along the same lines, drawing on your work at LAPOP and your trajectory in the measurement of democracy, what implications might the detention of Nicolás Maduro have for the political dynamics of other authoritarian regimes and left-wing governments in Latin America, for example, Mexico and Colombia?

*N.L.* I would say that the detention of Maduro is part of a broader shift in US policy toward the region under the Trump administration that also includes the use of tariffs,

the elimination of most foreign aid to the region, ramping up deportations to the region, the unilateral targeting of boats accused of shipping drugs in the Caribbean, and the current energy blockade of Cuba. This has changed political dynamics in the sense of creating antagonistic relationships between the region's governments and the US. Publics throughout the region have been losing trust in the US government for the last decade, but I suspect that this year's data will show significant additional declines. This creates opportunities for other global actors like China and Russia to build their relationships in the region, again, something we've already seen happening over the last decade.

I'm not convinced that this matters more for left-wing governments than right-wing ones. Right-wing governments may find it easier to develop a good relationship with the Trump administration, but I think the administration, and the US President in particular, identifies friends and foes around the globe less in ideological terms and more in terms of their willingness to adapt to the administration's preferences. Mexico is a good example, where President Sheinbaum has managed to have a good working relationship with the administration despite ideological differences.

*S.A.* Finally, *LAPOP Lab's Americas Barometer* has become one of the most influential instruments for measuring democratic values and public opinion across the hemisphere. Based on your research and reflection, which recent trends in the regional data concern you most, and which do you consider most urgent to address for the future of democracy in Latin America?

*N.L.* With some differences across countries, we've seen declining support for democracy and trust in democratic institutions across the region for at least the last decade. As I mentioned, this is associated with democracy's failure to deliver for the public since the end of the commodity boom. People across the region are experiencing economic stagnation or decline, they have pessimistic economic expectations about the future, they feel increasingly unsafe as crime and violence become more widespread, and they think elected officials are more interested in enriching themselves than in delivering for the public. Democracies are losing the public and the most urgent task is to win them back: demonstrate that democracy can deliver and regain people's trust in democratic institutions by getting people more engaged in their democracies, strengthening political parties, and recruiting politicians who can relate to the needs and aspirations of their constituents.

I thank Dr. Noam Lupu for his valuable perspectives and insights into the analysis of the authoritarian turn of left-wing projects and democratic backsliding in Latin America. The work of the AmericasBarometer and his research show that

democratic decline responds to multidimensional problems that have increased social distrust and facilitated the emergence of personalist leaderships and authoritarian projects. In light of this, the main challenge lies in rebuilding democratic legitimacy, strengthening political parties, and demonstrating that democratic systems can respond quickly and in a timely manner to social demands, thereby minimizing the risk that social discontent continues to fuel populist and autocratic projects. Therefore, amid uncertainty, rigorous analysis and the accurate measurement of public opinion are essential tools to anticipate risks, make realities visible, and promote the defense of democracy.