



Abstract

As of February 2021, the novel coronavirus has created the greatest public health emergency of the century, infecting over 100 million people and killing more than two million people across the globe (World Health Organization, 2021). The rapid spread of Covid-19 has led to institutional breakdowns, such as public health systems that continue to struggle with the management of such a large influx of infected patients, border closures, and lockdowns of entire nations. As this research demonstrates, the coronavirus pandemic has provoked an increase in authoritarian behavior worldwide. In fact, authoritarian political behavior has been on the rise in well-established liberal democracies that were supposed to have "robust constitutional protections of fundamental rights" (Thompson & Ip, 2020, p. 4). Despite the global scope of Covid-19 with respect to authoritarian tendencies, this research project focuses on Iberoamerican countries, with a special focus on Brazil, Bolivia, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Key Words: COVID-19, authoritarianism, Iberoamerica, democratic decline.

Research Question

What is the impact of the COVID-19 on democracy in Iberoamerica? Is the coronavirus pandemic reinforcing authoritarianism in Latin American countries with a history of dictatorship?

Why is this Important?

COVID-19 has exacerbated democratic backsliding in Iberoamerican countries lacking institutional safeguards against abuses of power.

Government declared states of emergency are undermining human rights across the globe.

Trends in Iberoamerica indicate the undermining of free and fair elections and the freedom of association.

Governments in Iberoamerica have used the pandemic to suppress anti-government sentiment.

The lack of transparency surrounding the effects of COVID-19 has led to a massive increase in the spread of misinformation surrounding the pandemic.

Discussion

Across the globe there have been unmistakable regressions to authoritarian-style governance to contain the coronavirus. Such efforts have created fertile ground for the propagation of a new, perhaps more pernicious, pandemic – namely a constitutional pandemic – that is rising in conjunction with COVID-19. A public health emergency does not – and should not – give governments permission to abandon their obligations to uphold fundamental rights and liberties with impunity. Authoritarianization is a global phenomenon as governments everywhere try to contain the spread of COVID-19. Countries in Iberoamerica provide an exceptionally interesting focus since many countries in Iberoamerica have a history of dictatorship, therefore they are arguably more vulnerable to democratic backsliding, as this project will demonstrate. While this project focuses on a comparative analysis of Latin American countries, it acknowledges that there are similar trends of authoritarianization all over the world, notably in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Poland, Hungary, the United States, and so forth.

Table 1. Political Indicators: Latin America and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Country	Liberal Democracy Index (1-Dec-2019)	Pandemic Backsliding Risk Index (1-Dec-2020)	Approval of the President during the Pandemic (Jan and Mar/Apr 2020)	Support for Closing Parliament* (AmericasBarometer 2019)
Uruguay	.78	Low	62% (pos)	9.2%
Chile	.76	Low	51% (pos)	21.3%
Mexico	.50	Low	48 % (Mixedly)	28.1%
Ecuador	.49	Low	32 % (pos)	24.0%
Guatemala	.40	Low	89% (Mixedly)	22.8%
Costa Rica	.32	Medium	N/A	17.5%
Argentina	.43	Medium	42% (pos)	13.2%
Panama	.59	Medium	95% (pos)	25.4%
Colombia	.50	Medium	56% (pos)	16.1%
República Dominicana	.32	Medium	30 % (Mixedly)	14.3%
Honduras	.20	Medium	N/A	25.7%
Nicaragua	.06	Medium	N/A	21.7%
Peru	.47	High	59% (pos)	28.9%
Brazil	.51	High	14% (pos)	22.4%
El Salvador	.44	High	57% (Mixedly)	18.1%
Paraguay	.43	High	N/A	27.2%
Bolivia	.31	High	54% (Mixedly)	27.5%
Venezuela	.09	High	11% (pos)	N/A

Source: Aspuru with data from V-Dem, (pos, Mixedly, AmericasBarometer
*The question in the 2019 survey was: Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress/Parliament and govern without it?

Reference: <https://www.pse.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2020-04/democratic-backsliding-latin-america-during-pandemic.pdf>

Evidence

Brazil:

- Politicization of the Ministry of Health
- Undermining of provincial quarantine and social distancing measures by the federal government
- Deliberate spread of misinformation
- Use of coronavirus pandemic to remove checks on Presidential power and weaken opposition

Bolivia:

- Politically motivated handling of the coronavirus pandemic by current caretaker president.
- Threat of prison sentences for the dissemination of coronavirus information that contradicts government official position.
- Government use of emergency legislation to persecute political opponents.
- Pandemic used as scapegoat for suspension of elections, a means to extract emergency aid to bolster presidential electoral campaign, and a threat to ban main opposition candidate from running in upcoming election.

El Salvador:

- Arbitrary detention of healthcare workers, journalists, and members of the opposition.

Nicaragua:

- Outright denial of coronavirus and promotion of unsafe/unproven treatments.
- Dismissal of healthcare workers for challenging government response to COVID-19.
- Arbitrary detention of political prisoners.

Venezuela:

- Arbitrary detention of regime critics/political opponents.
- Arbitrarily enforced restrictions on movement, rations on essential items and services, and a bolstering of police power to enforce these measures.
- Abuse of government power and an increase in repression under the guise of enforcing specific quarantine measures.
- The bypassing of and complete disregard for democratic processes in government.

Conclusions

According to my research, the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing authoritarian tendencies in countries all over Latin America. Of particular significance for my research were the countries of Brazil, Bolivia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. While the coronavirus pandemic may not have been the explicit cause of democratic backsliding in these countries, the state of emergencies that were put into place as a bulwark against the spread of coronavirus have been, and continue to be, exploited by leaders in Latin America in order to carry out political agendas that were previously unconstitutional and therefore unacceptable. My case studies show several major political trends in Latin America, which has a long and tumultuous history of authoritarian military dictatorship. While an international comparative analysis was beyond the scope of this project, this topic warrants further research as the policies put in place as a result of emergency government measures have the potential to have far-reaching ramifications and unforeseen consequences that could lead (and is arguably already leading) to a constitutional pandemic.

References

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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Award for funding this research. I would also like to give special thanks to Dr. Dan Russek for giving me the opportunity to expand my research into an area that is of significant interest to me. Lastly, I would like to thank Christine Forster for introducing me to the history of dictatorship in Latin America, which has illuminated my studies in political science and has become of personal interest to me.