

Are Free Elections Enough? The Challenge of Ensuring a Level Electoral Playing Field

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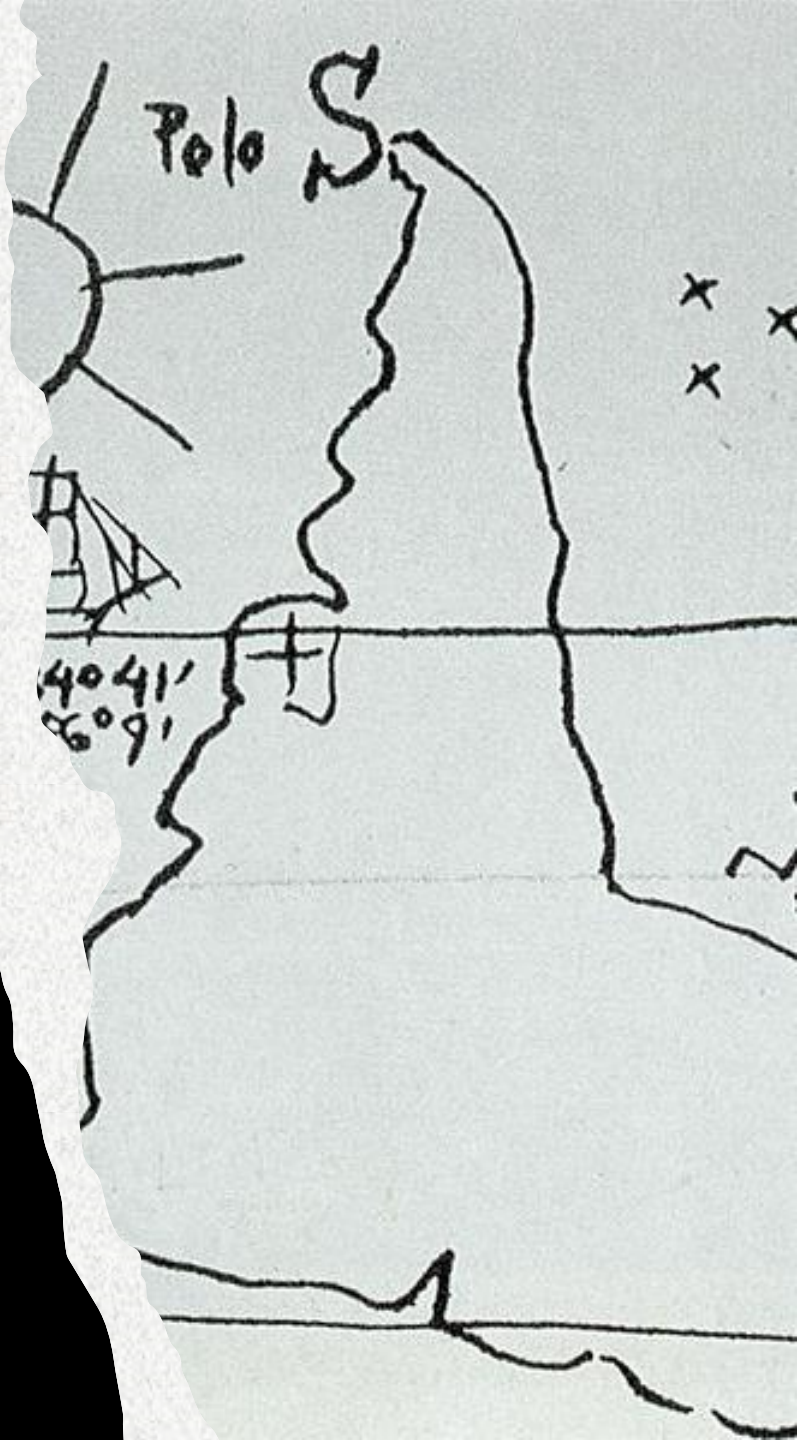


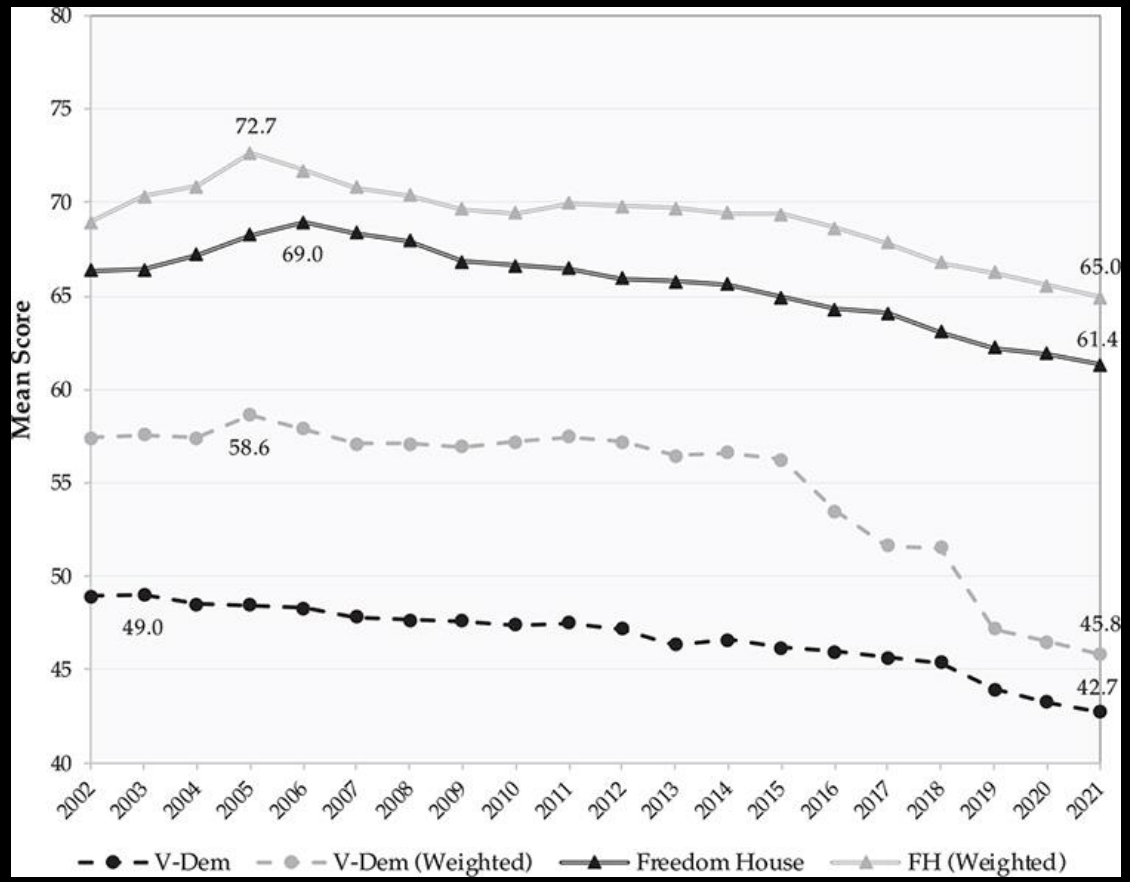
Plan for the session

1. What is unexpected about the state of democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean?
2. Why are so many citizens discontent with their democracy?
3. What have we learned regarding institutional design for the establishment of majorities?
4. Is clientelism as a form of vote mobilization inevitable in poor and unequal democracies?
5. Do race and ethnic exclusion translate into inequality in democratic politics?

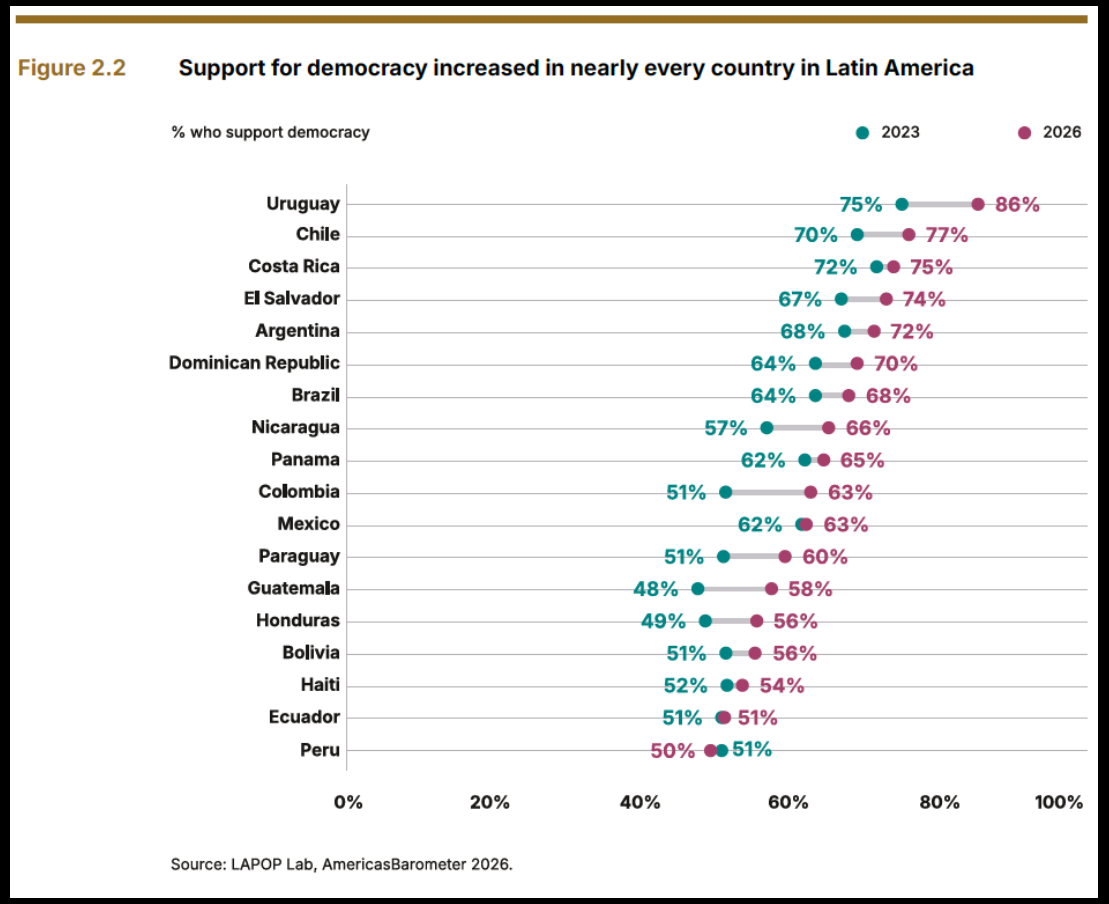
Fact 1. The Peak of the ”third wave” of democratization was reached in the mid 2000s

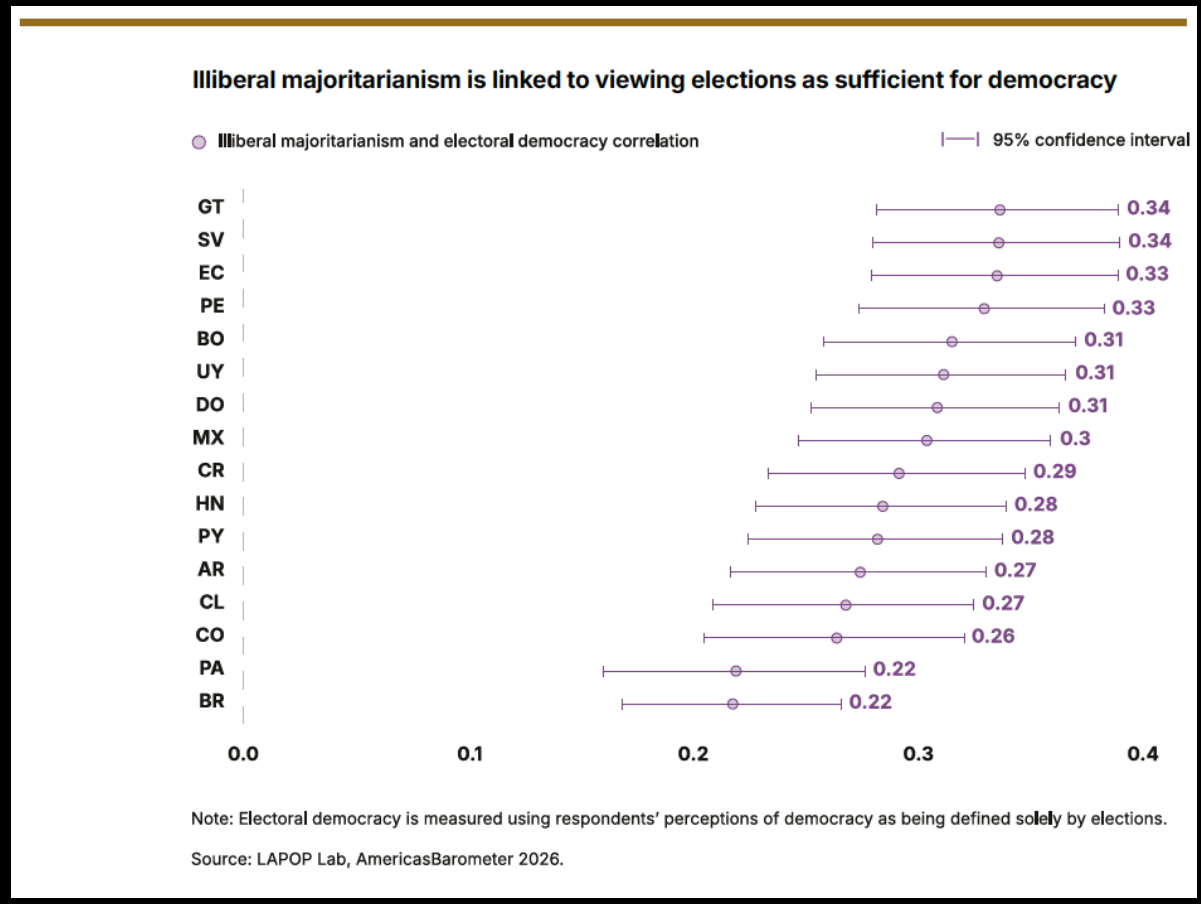
Why Latin America's Democracies Are Stuck *Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán* Journal of Democracy (34)1, January 2023

TRENDS IN LATIN AMERICAN V-DEM LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDEX AND FREEDOM HOUSE SCORES. Note: Data labels show the highest and the 2021 data for each series. *Sources*: Michael Coppedge et al., "V-Dem Country–Year Dataset v12," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project; Freedom House, "Aggregate Category and Subcategory Scores, 2003–2022," *https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Aggregate_Category_and_Subcategory_Scores_FIW_2003-2022.xlsx*.



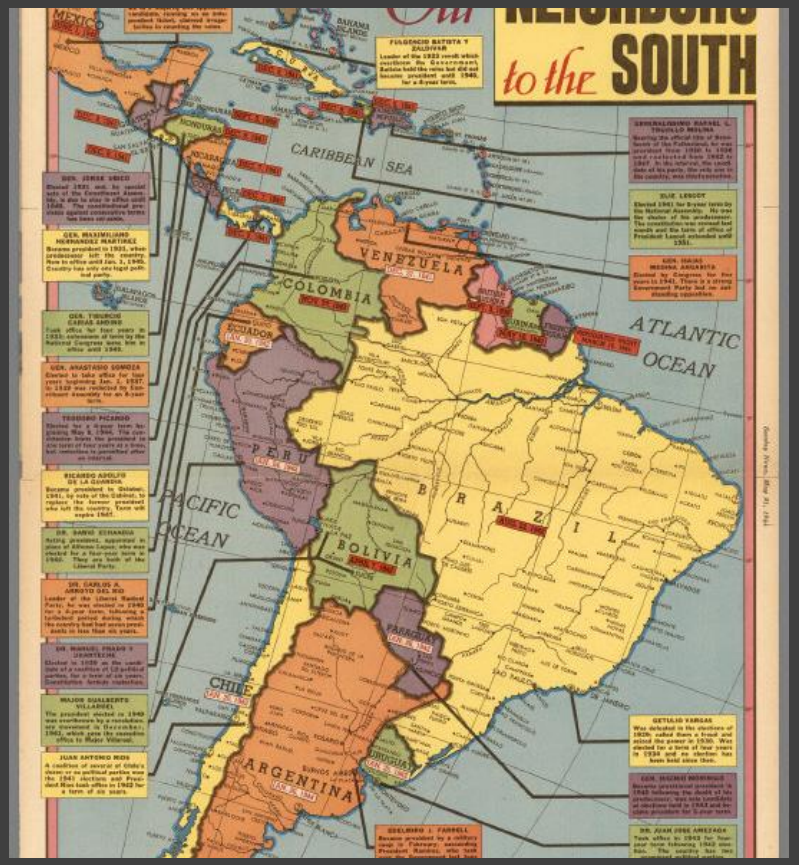
Fact 2. Democracy is no longer backsliding – and we may now have a better understanding of why



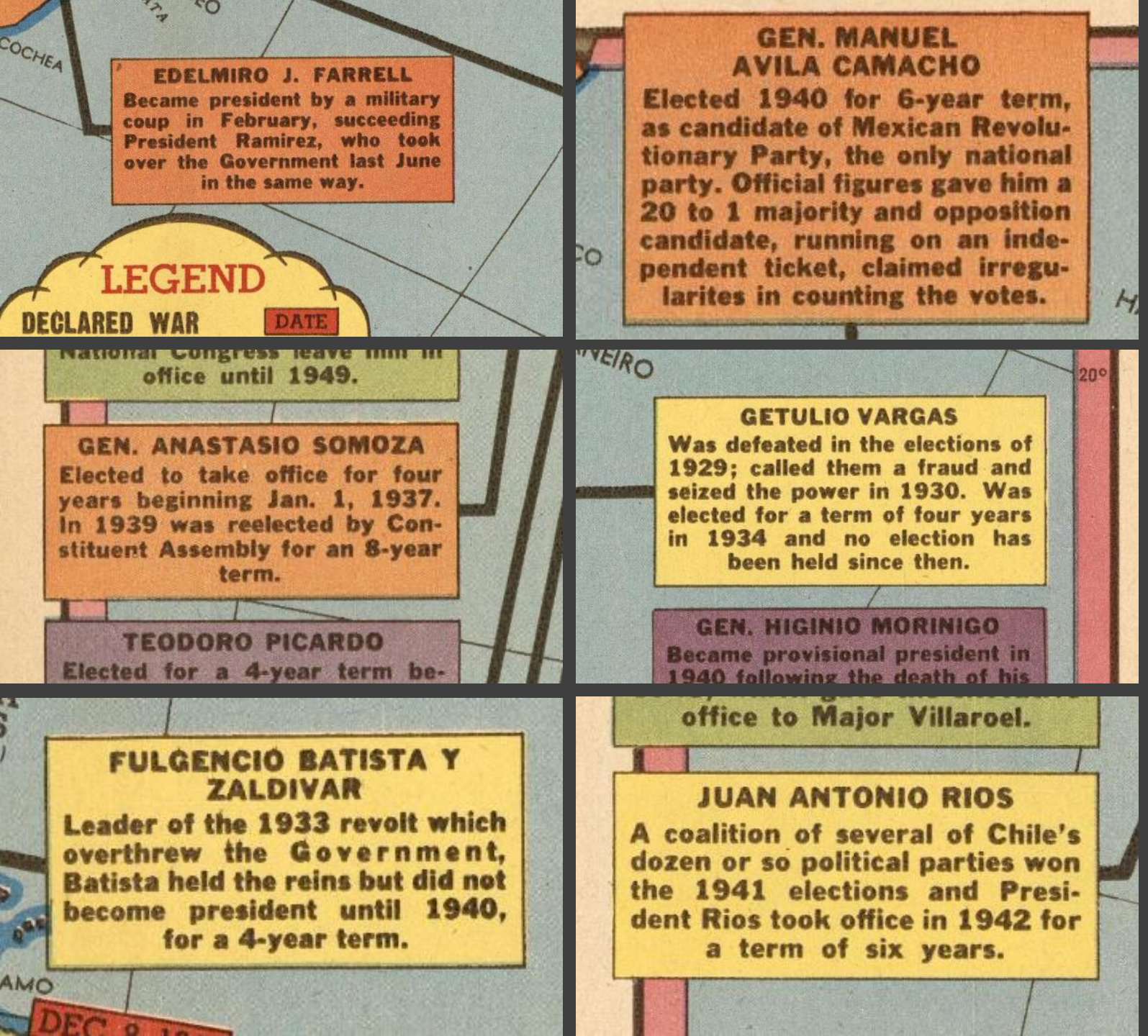


A long-term hemispheric perspective …

- Our Neighbors to the South (South America), *Sunday News*, May 21, 1944. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection List No. 8510.000



DEMOCRACY, as conceived by our neighbors in the Western Hemisphere, is not in all respects the same as we see it in the United States. For instance, the constitutions of many Latin American countries evidence a fear of dictatorship by limiting the tenure of office of the chief executive. In some cases, two consecutive terms are not permitted. However, such provisions are circumvented in various ways and the real power is sometimes behind the presidential chair, but not in it. Actually, the Latin American governments range from unquestionably democratic regimes to dictatorships which are motivated by democratic ideals in varying degrees. The boxes on this map give the name of the president of each country and a few facts concerning his term of office. (NEWS map by Staff Artist Sundberg)



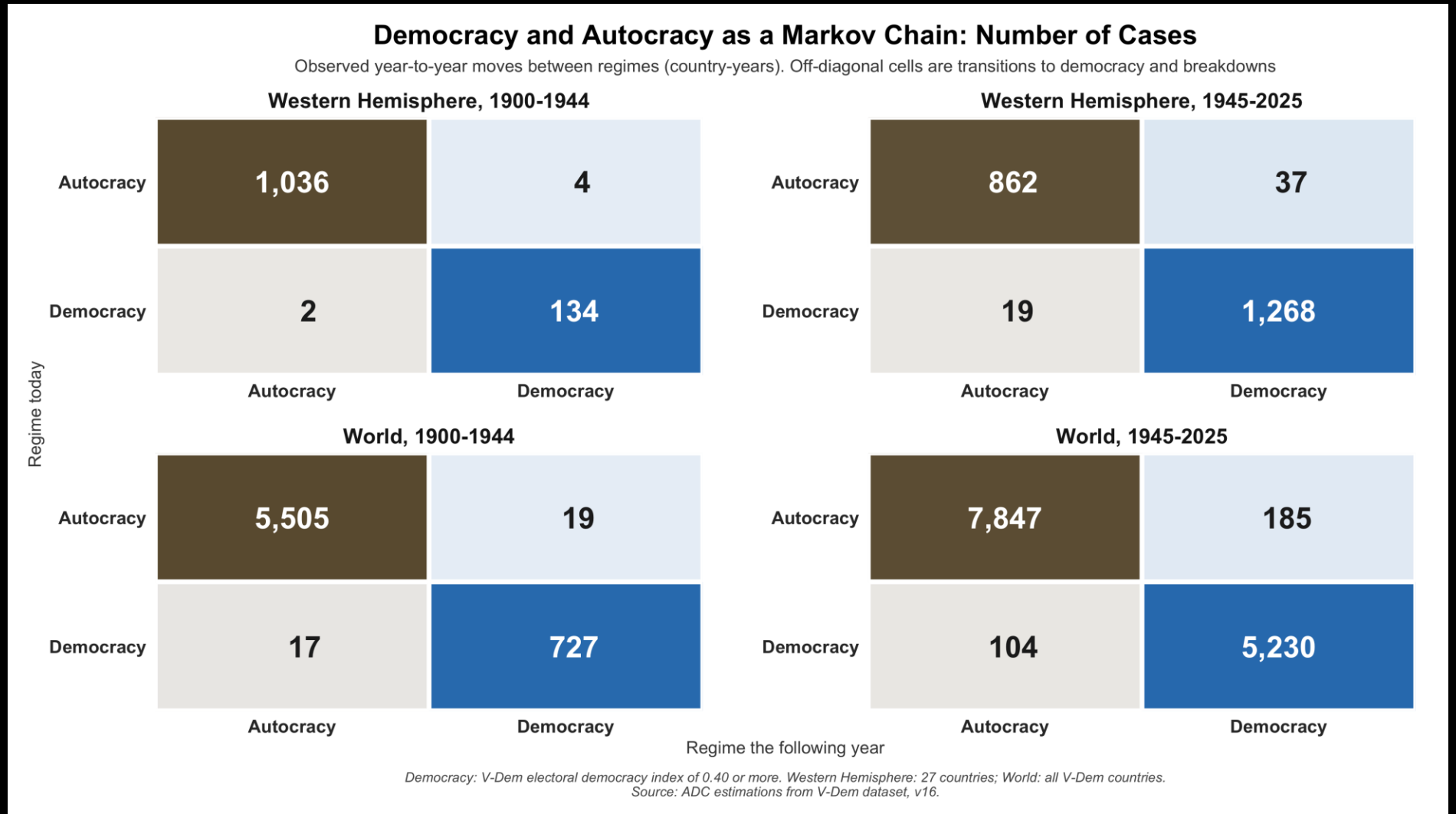
In Latin America and the Caribbean democratic recession is not new: this one will also pass

What is to be done?

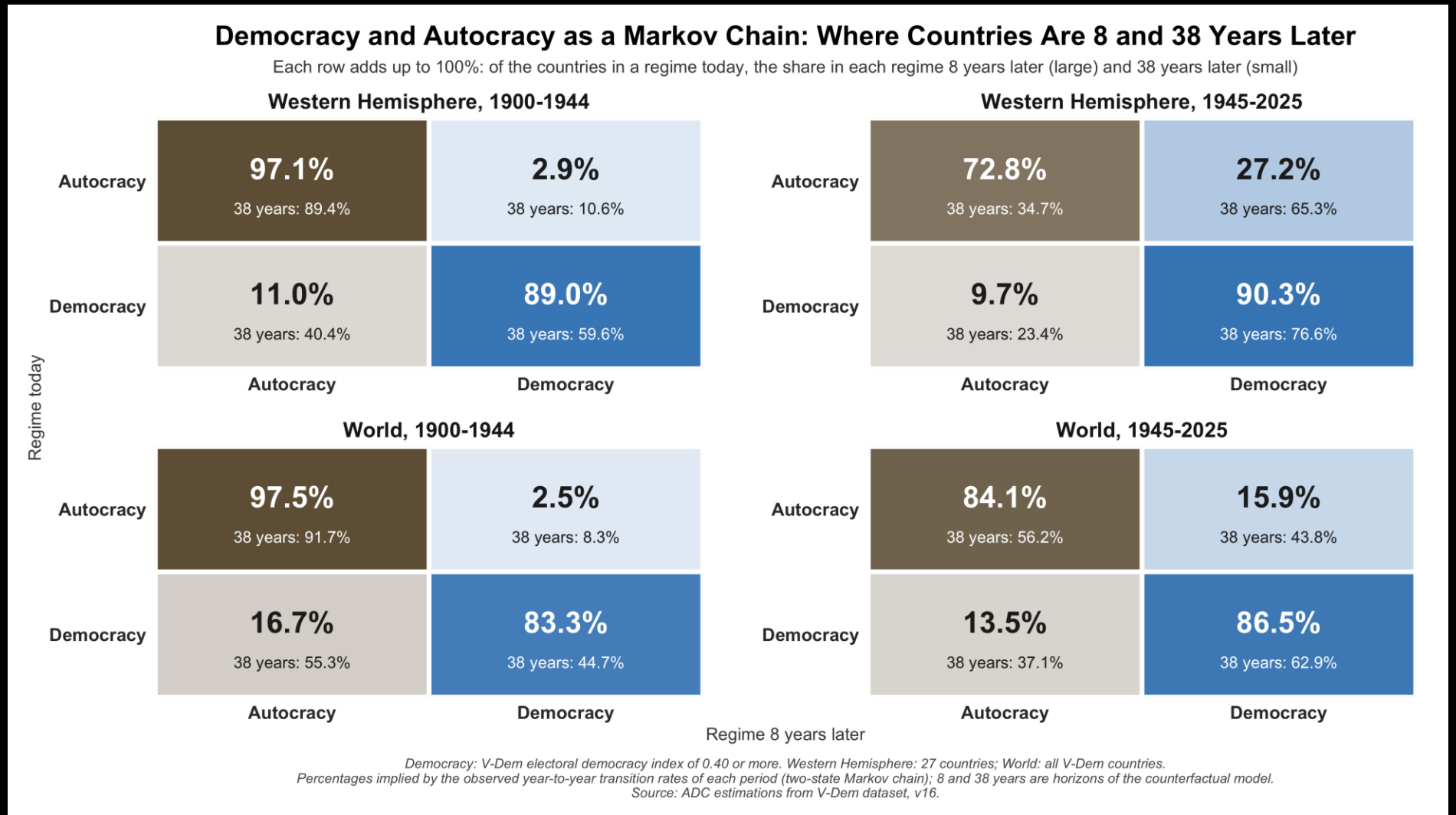
→Challenges of inequality and poverty

→Ensuring institutional resilience

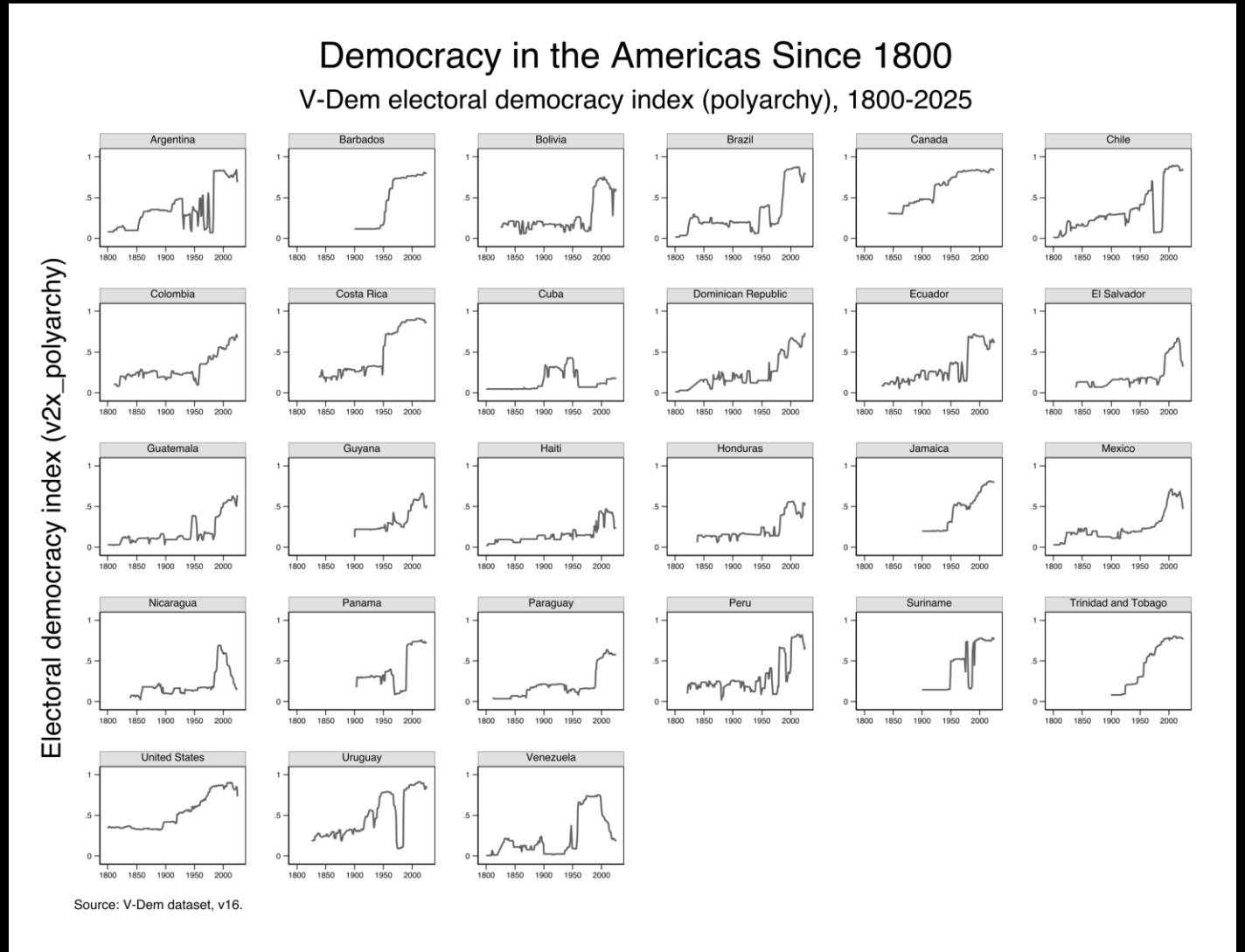
Transitology devoted an enormous social scientific effort to understand dramatic moments of change



It is hard to predict transitions in a specific year, but structural stability helps (like in demography)

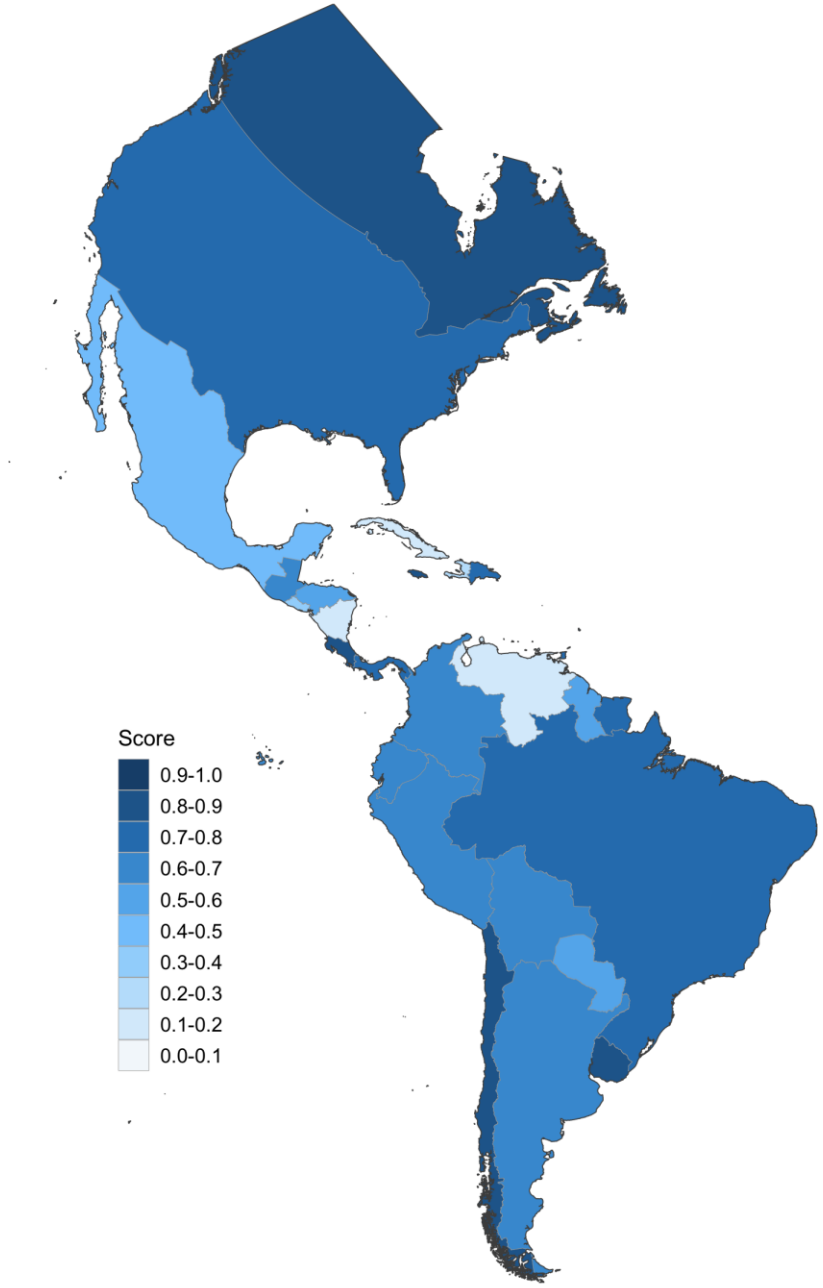


A long duree perspective: since the 19th century: what would be an unexpected regime?



Electoral Democracy in the Western Hemisphere, 2025

Electoral democracy index (v2x_polyarchy), observed score in 2025

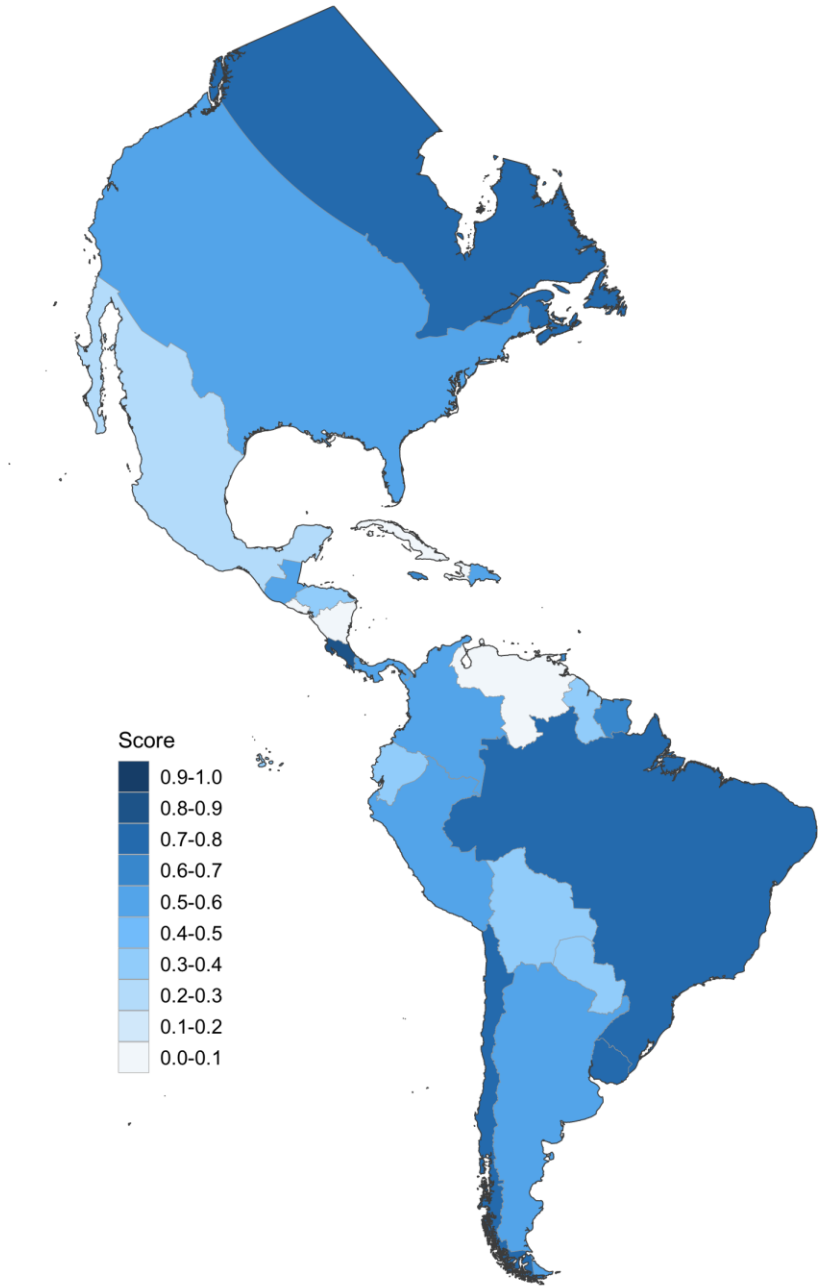


Projection: transverse Mercator centred on Buenos Aires (GRS80 ellipsoid). Boundaries: World Bank.
Source: V-Dem dataset, v16.

POSGAR projection centered in Buenos Aires), processed in QGIS with World Bank Shapefile and V-Dem V.12

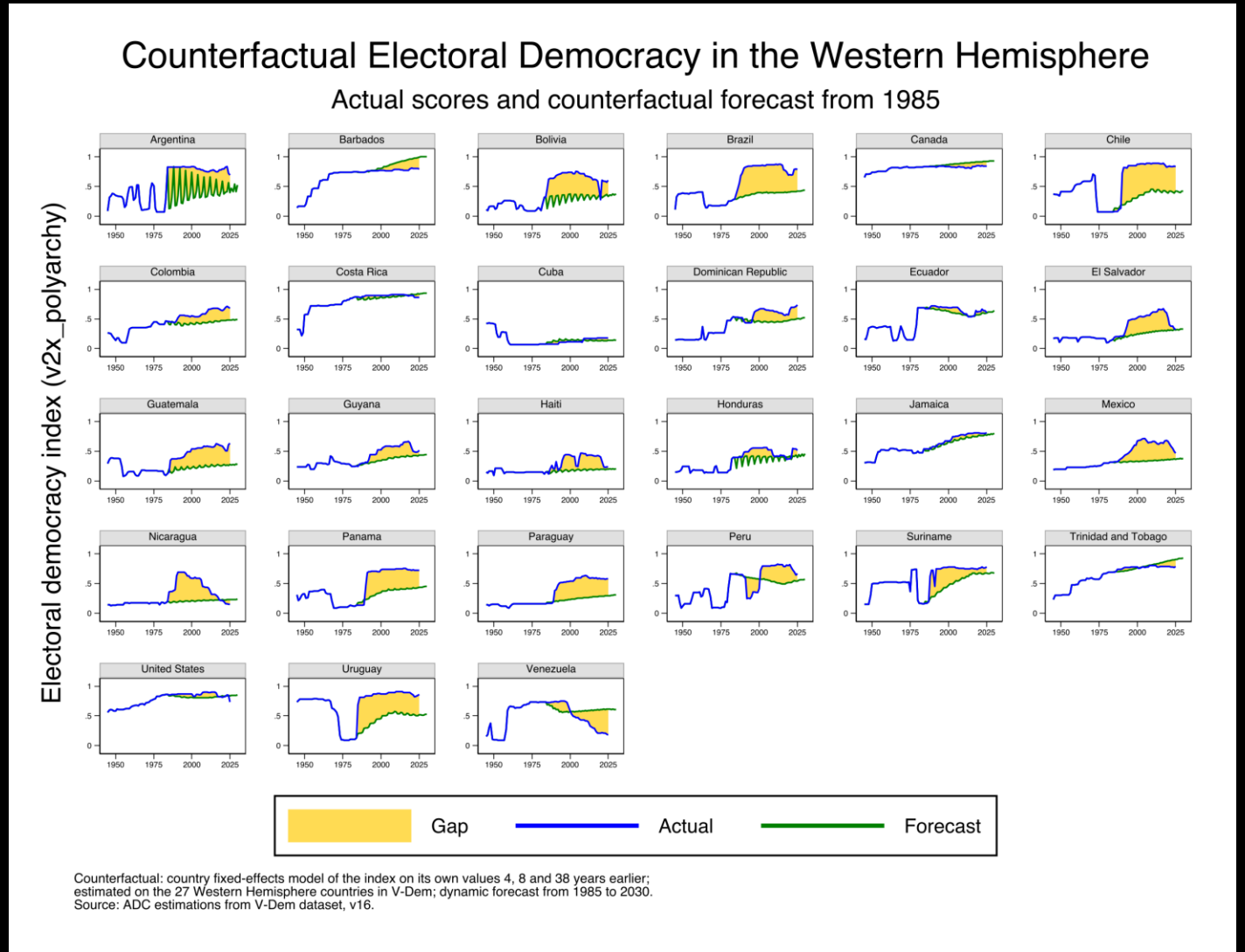
Liberal Democracy in the Western Hemisphere, 2025

Liberal democracy index (v2x_libdem), observed score in 2025

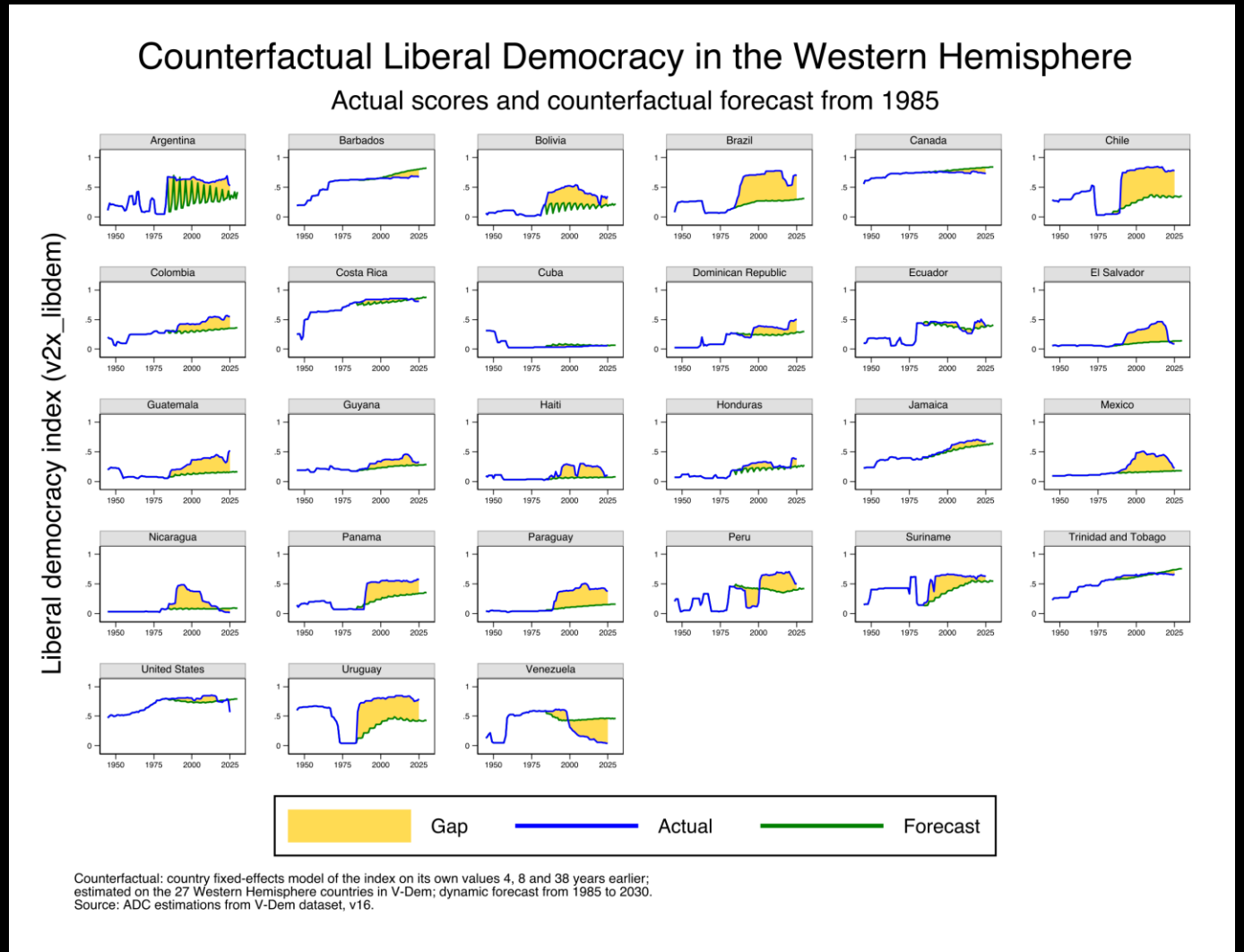


Projection: transverse Mercator centred on Buenos Aires (GRS80 ellipsoid). Boundaries: World Bank.
Source: V-Dem dataset, v16.

The third wave of democracy was a clear break from the past (basic forecasting models)

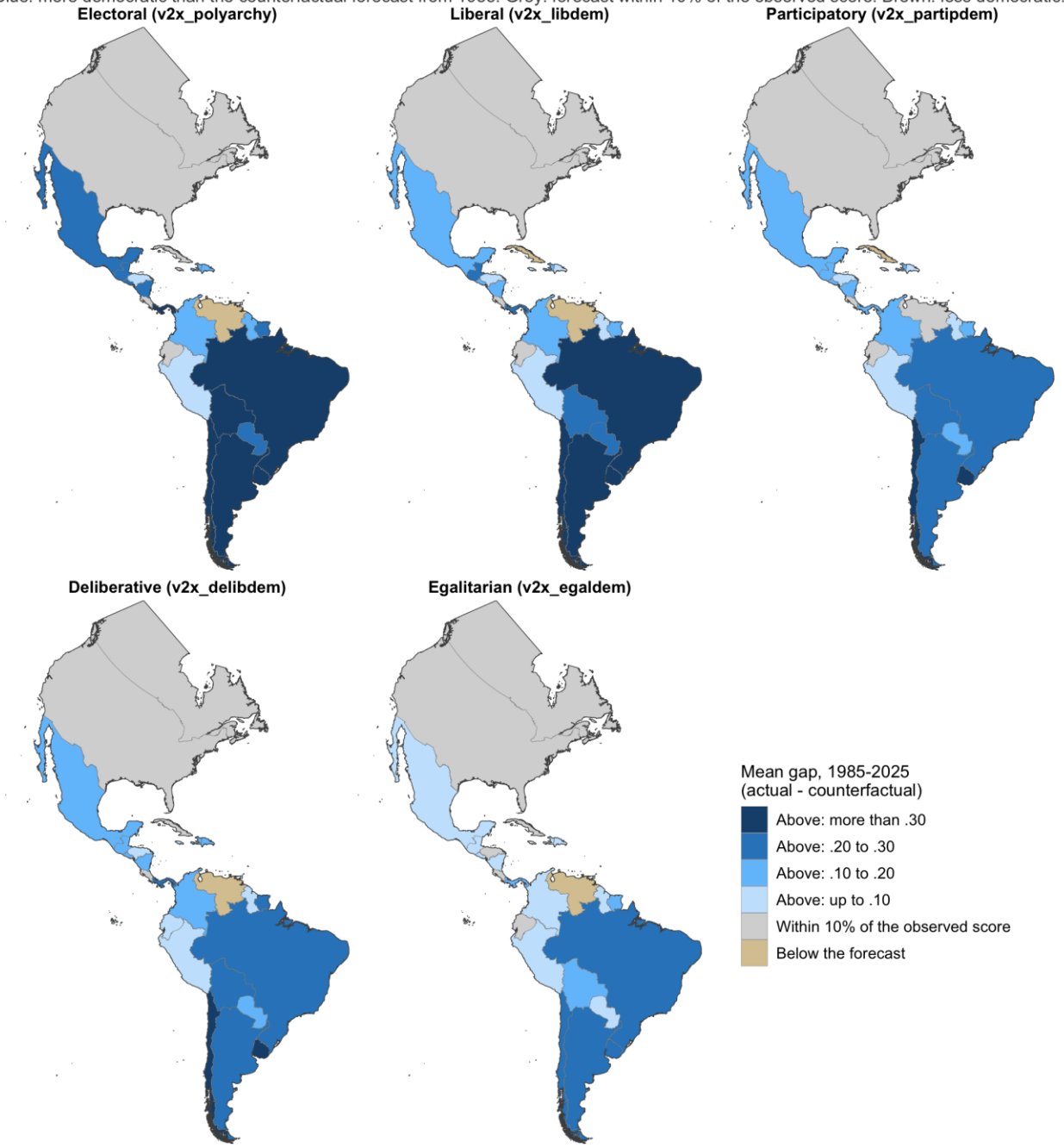


Liberal democracy is the critical indicator, the dimension most at risk (autocratic playbook)



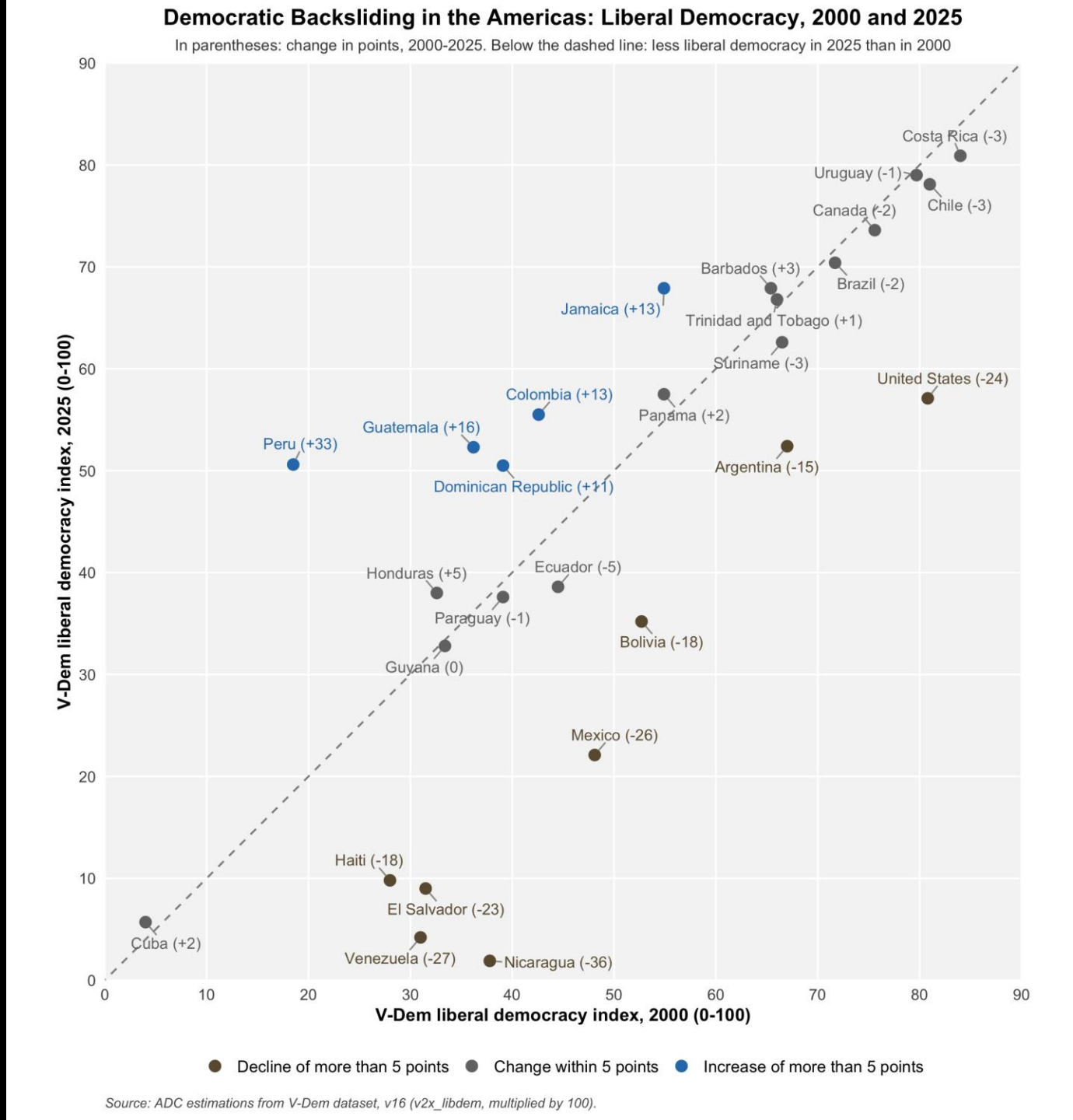
Counterfactual Democracy in the Western Hemisphere: Mean Gap, 1985-2025

Blue: more democratic than the counterfactual forecast from 1985. Grey: forecast within 10% of the observed score. Brown: less democratic.

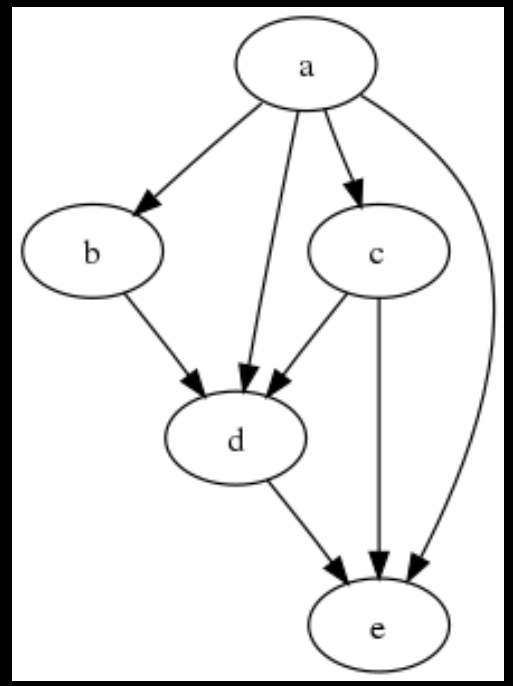


Counterfactual: country fixed-effects model of the index on its own values 4, 8 and 38 years earlier; 27 Western Hemisphere countries in V-Dem; dynamic forecast from 1985 (capped at 1).
Projection: transverse Mercator centred on Buenos Aires (GRS80 ellipsoid). Boundaries: World Bank.
Source: ADC estimations from V-Dem dataset, v16.

Democratic Backsliding in the Americas has overshadowed many cases of democratic enhancement, and the stickiness of countries stuck in between



Causal claims regarding backsliding are difficult to prove → Effects of the causes



	Annual per Capita GDP Growth (%)	Homicide Rate	GINI Index	Control of Corruption Index (2020)	Rule of Law Index (World Rank)
Argentina	0.4	5.3	42.3	-0.12	56th
Bolivia	1.8	7.0	43.6	-0.76	129th
Brazil	1.0	22.5	48.9	-0.34	77th
Chile	2.4	4.8	44.9	1.15	32th
Colombia	1.8	22.6	54.2	-0.18	86th
Costa Rica	2.6	11.2	49.3	0.78	31th
Cuba	2.9	5.0	–	-0.13	No Data
Dominican Rep.	3.5	8.9	39.6	-0.68	94th
Ecuador	0.8	7.8	47.3	-0.54	92th
El Salvador	1.4	37.2	38.8	-0.59	95th
Guatemala	1.5	17.5	48.3	-1.10	109th
Haiti	-0.1	6.7	41.1	-1.32	132th
Honduras	1.4	36.3	48.2	-0.86	126th
Mexico	0.5	28.4	45.4	-0.85	113th
Nicaragua	2.0	7.9	46.2	-1.25	131th
Panama	3.2	11.6	49.8	-0.51	71th
Paraguay	1.3	6.7	43.5	-0.87	96th
Peru	2.8	7.7	43.8	-0.49	87th
Uruguay	1.8	9.7	40.2	1.42	25th
Venezuela	–	49.9	44.8	-1.56	139th

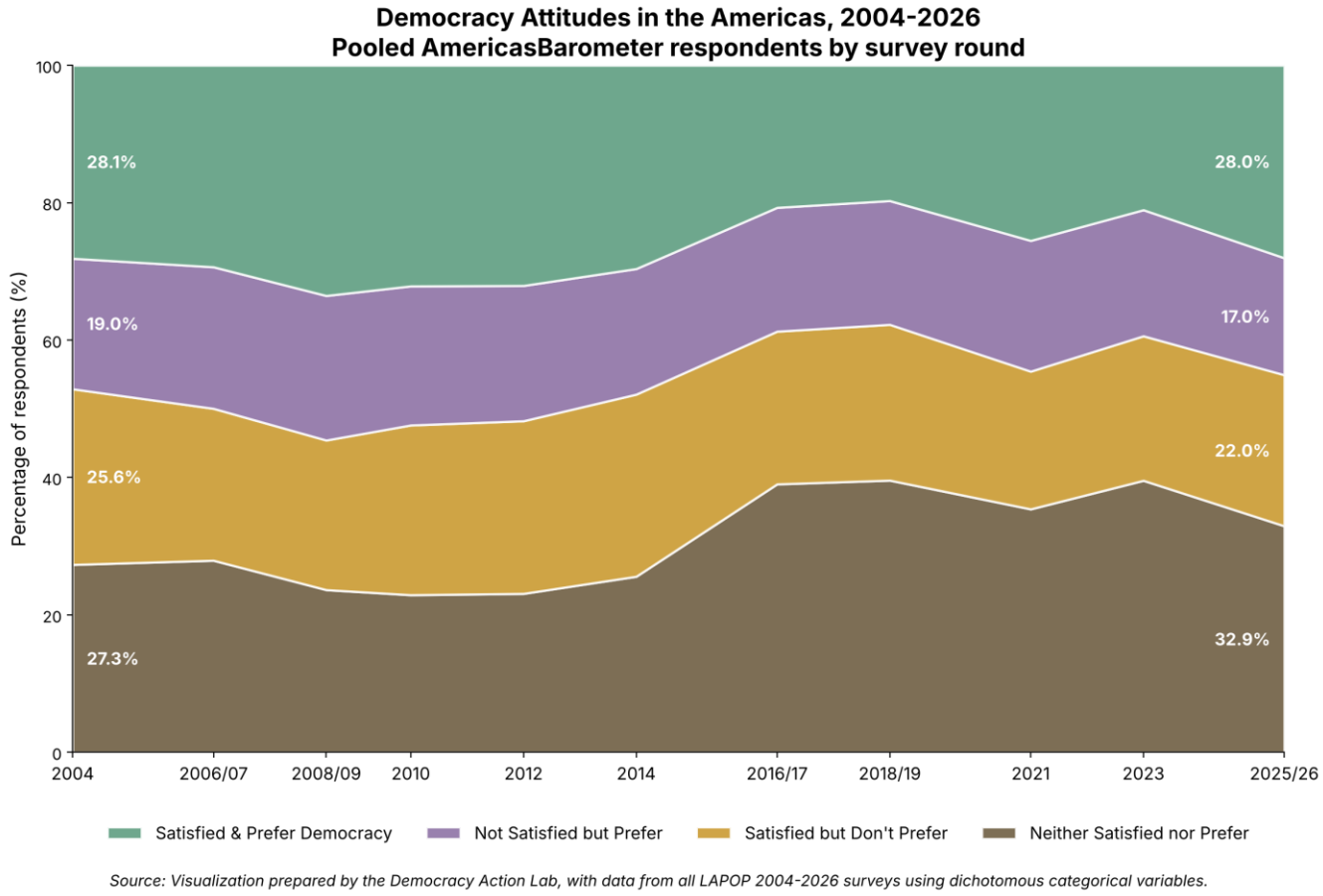
Notes: GDP per capita growth measured in constant 2015 US dollars for 1997–2021. For Cuba, growth is calculated for 1997–2020 because the WDI did not show data for 2021.

Homicide rate reports the number of intentional homicides per 100,000 people in 2020 for most countries. For Bolivia, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, data are from 2019; for Haiti and Peru, from 2018; Venezuela, from 2017; Cuba, from 2016.

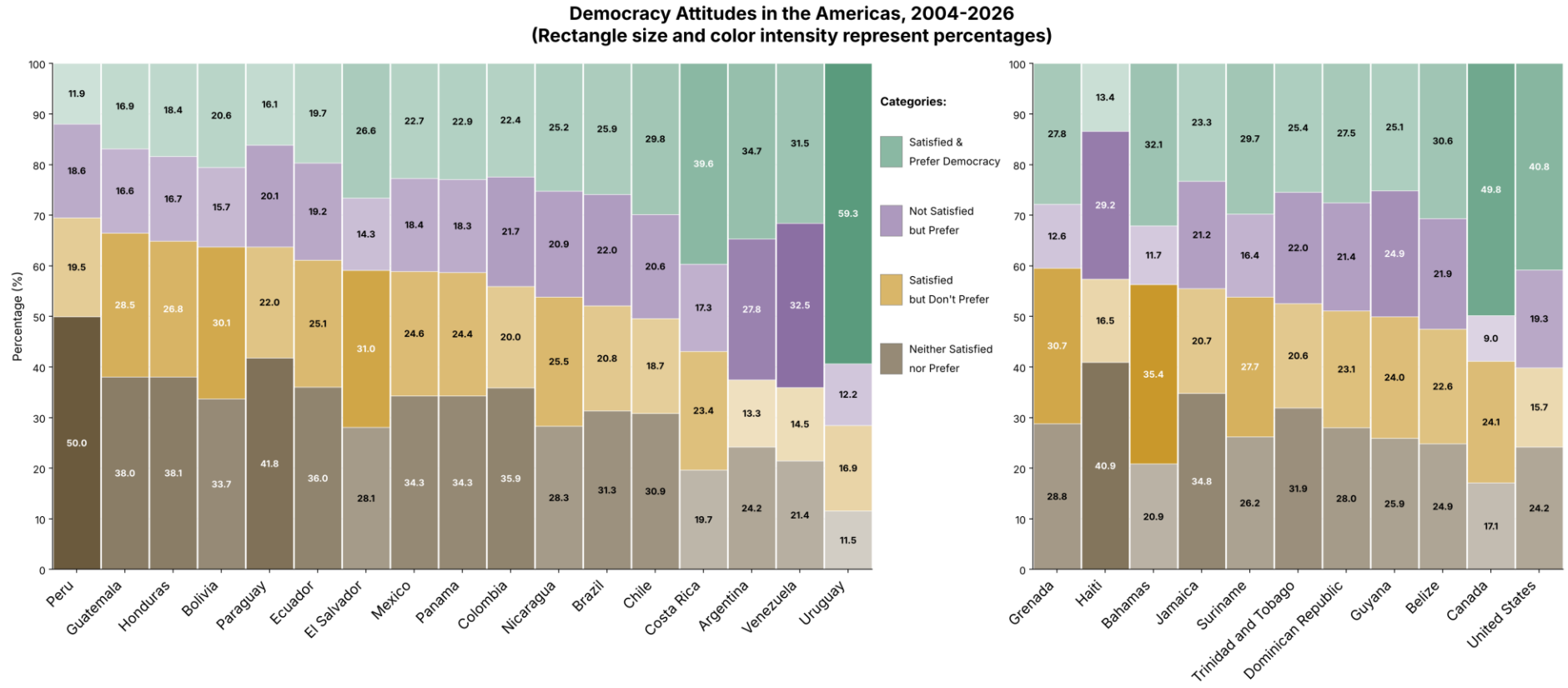
Gini index data are from 2020 for most countries; for El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama, data are from 2019; Guatemala and Nicaragua, from 2014; Haiti, from 2012; Venezuela, from 2006.

Sources: World Development Indicators for per capita GDP growth (indicator: NY.GDP.PCAP.KD), homicide rate (VC.IHR.PSRC.P5), and Gini index (SI.POV.GINI), *https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators*; Worldwide Governance Indicators for control of corruption, *https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi*.

Attitudes towards democracy as satisfaction and preference have shifted since 2014



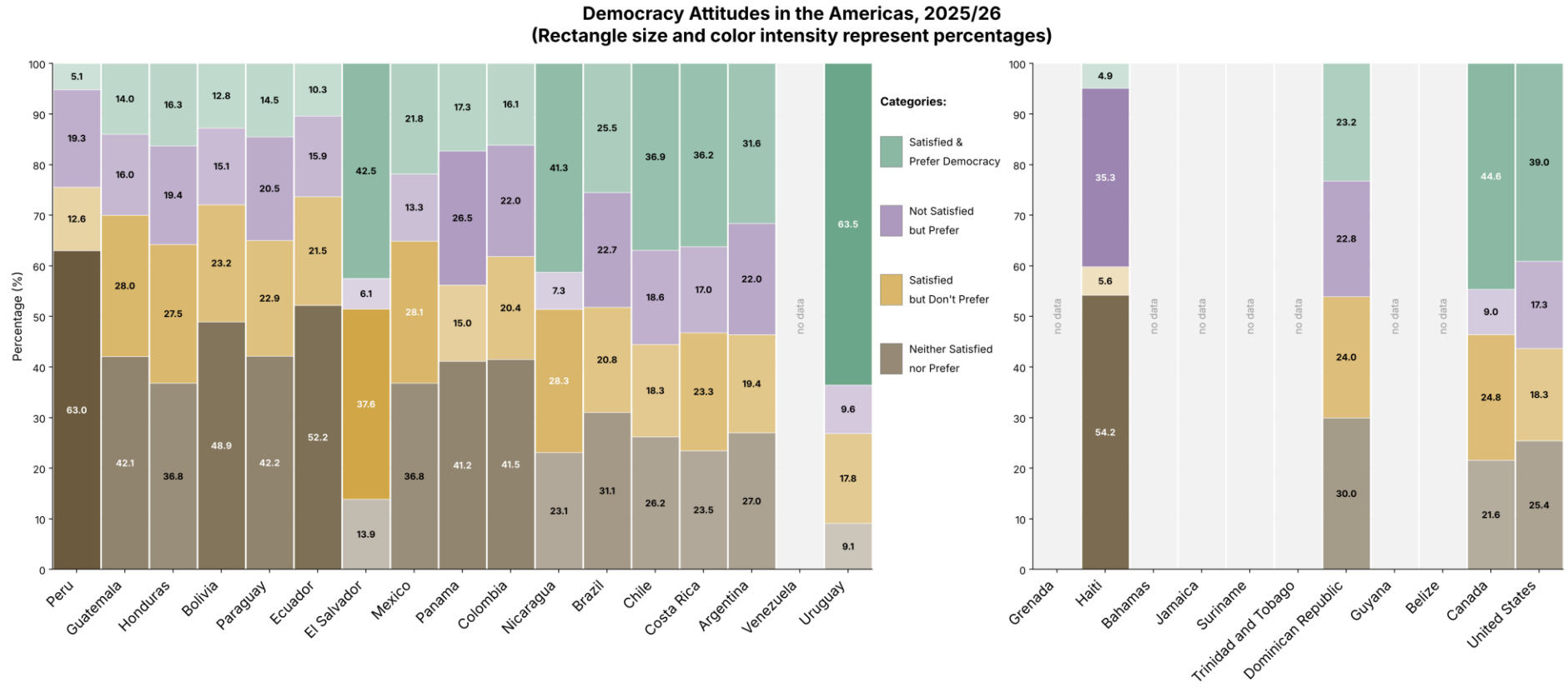
Voters have attachments and values but demand a democracy that delivers



Source: Visualization prepared by the Democracy Action Lab, with data from all LAPOP 2004-2026 surveys using dichotomous categorical variables.

Prefer democracy = 6-7 on the 1-7 ING4 scale; satisfied = satisfied or very satisfied (PN4). Cuba (2026) is not shown because PN4 was not asked there.

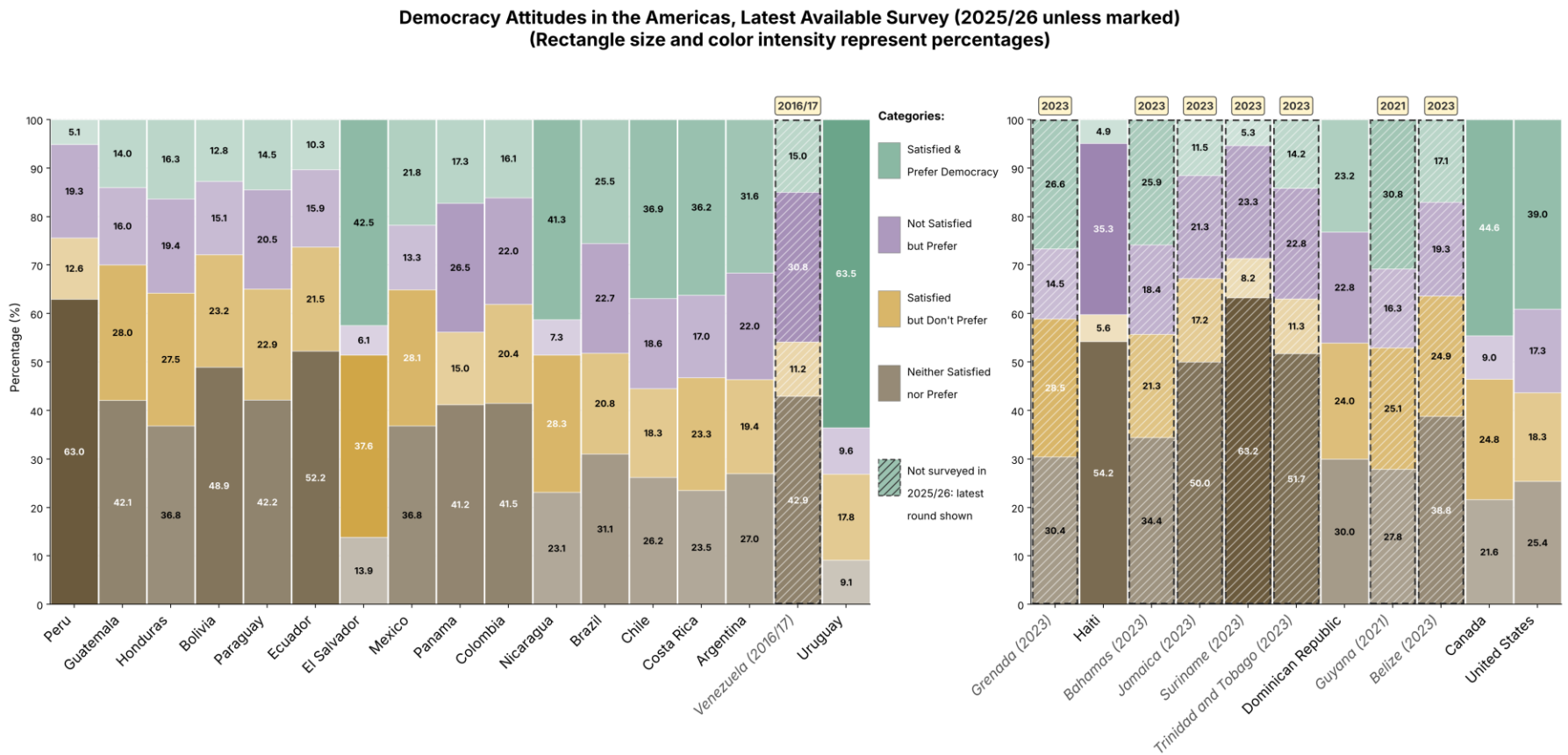
By 2026 both preference for and satisfaction with democracy are scarce



Source: Visualization prepared by the Democracy Action Lab, with data from all LAPOP 2025/26 surveys using dichotomous categorical variables.

Prefer democracy = 6-7 on the 1-7 ING4 scale; satisfied = satisfied or very satisfied (PN4). Cuba (2026) is not shown because PN4 was not asked there.

A more complete picture including last year is available



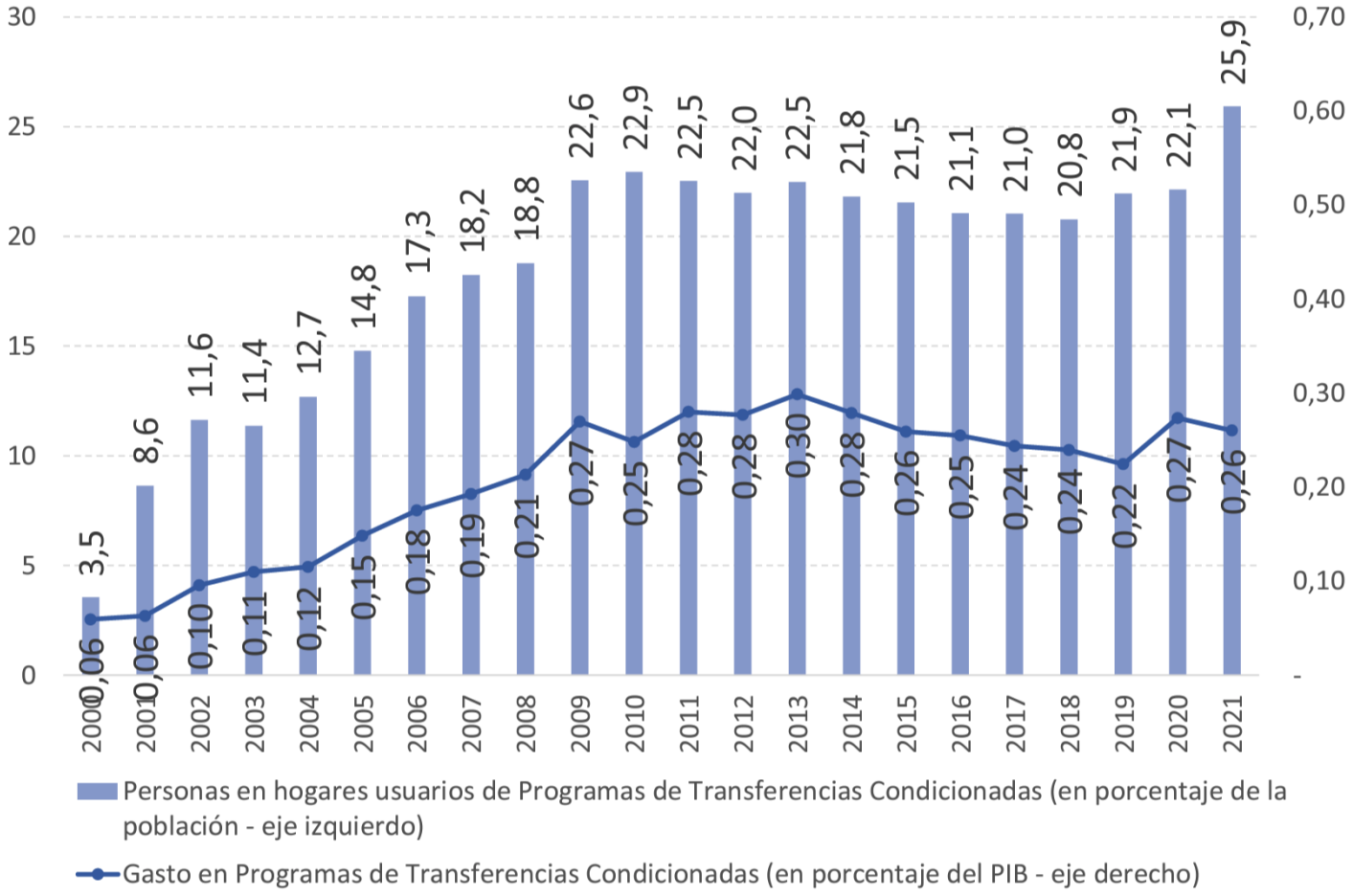
Source: Visualization prepared by the Democracy Action Lab, with data from LAPOP 2016/17-2025/26 surveys using dichotomous categorical variables.

Hatched columns with a dashed outline use the most recent earlier round (year in the box). Prefer democracy = 6-7 on the 1-7 ING4 scale; satisfied = satisfied or very satisfied (PN4). Cuba (2026) is not shown because PN4 was not asked there.

Challenge 1. CCTs are now the fundamental poverty alleviation tool in democratic countries

Conditional cash transfer programme (start/end year)	Country	Population share	Beneficiaries	GDP share	Initial year
Supérate (previously Progresando con Solidaridad) (2012–)	Dominican Republic	55.85	617,5248	0.0051	2005
Bono Juancito Pinto (2006–)	Bolivia	52.20	6,259,831	0.0016	2006
Becas para el Bienestar Benito Juárez (2019–)	Mexico	38.05	50,053,424	0.0027	2019
Asignación Universal por Hijo para Protección Social (2009–)	Argentina	28.31	13,026,609	0.0018	2002
Bolsa Família (2003–)	Brazil	27.71	59,304,936	0.0040	2001
Bono de Desarrollo Humano (2003–)	Ecuador	25.60	4,637,189	0.0009	1998
Prospera: Programa de Inclusión Social (2014–2019)	Mexico	24.76	31,245,838	0.0035	1997
Asignaciones Familiares – Plan Equidad (2008–)	Uruguay	19.61	685,650	0.0030	2008
Avancemos (2006–)	Costa Rica	17.22	892,402	0.0025	2006
Familias en Acción (2001–)	Colombia	15.19	7,827,112	0.0017	2001
Tekoporâ (2005–)	Paraguay	13.89	1,015,064	0.0013	2005
Tarjeta Uruguay Social (previously Tarjeta Alimentaria) (2006–)	Uruguay	13.80	483,054	0.0009	2006
Juntos (Programa Nacional de Apoyo Directo a los más Pobres) (2005–)	Peru	10.37	3,491,680	0.0012	2005
Programme of Advancement through Health and Education (PATH) (2001–)	Jamaica	9.18	271,856	0.0044	2001
Food Support Programme (FSP) (2005–)	Trinidad and Tobago	7.28	102,212	0.0014	2005
Red de Oportunidades (2006–)	Panama	5.98	265,824	0.0004	2006
Bono Social (previously Mi Bono Seguro) (2012–)	Guatemala	2.74	510,015	0.0005	2012
Bono Vida Mejor (previously Bono 10.000 Educación, Salud y Nutrición) (2010–)	Honduras	0.70	68,877	0.0004	1998
Chile Solidario (2002–2017)	Chile	0.28	52,484	0.0015	2002

América Latina y el Caribe (21 países): evolución de la cobertura[a] y el gasto[b] de los programas de transferencias condicionadas y otras transferencias continuas, 2000-2021[c]
(En porcentajes y porcentajes del PIB)



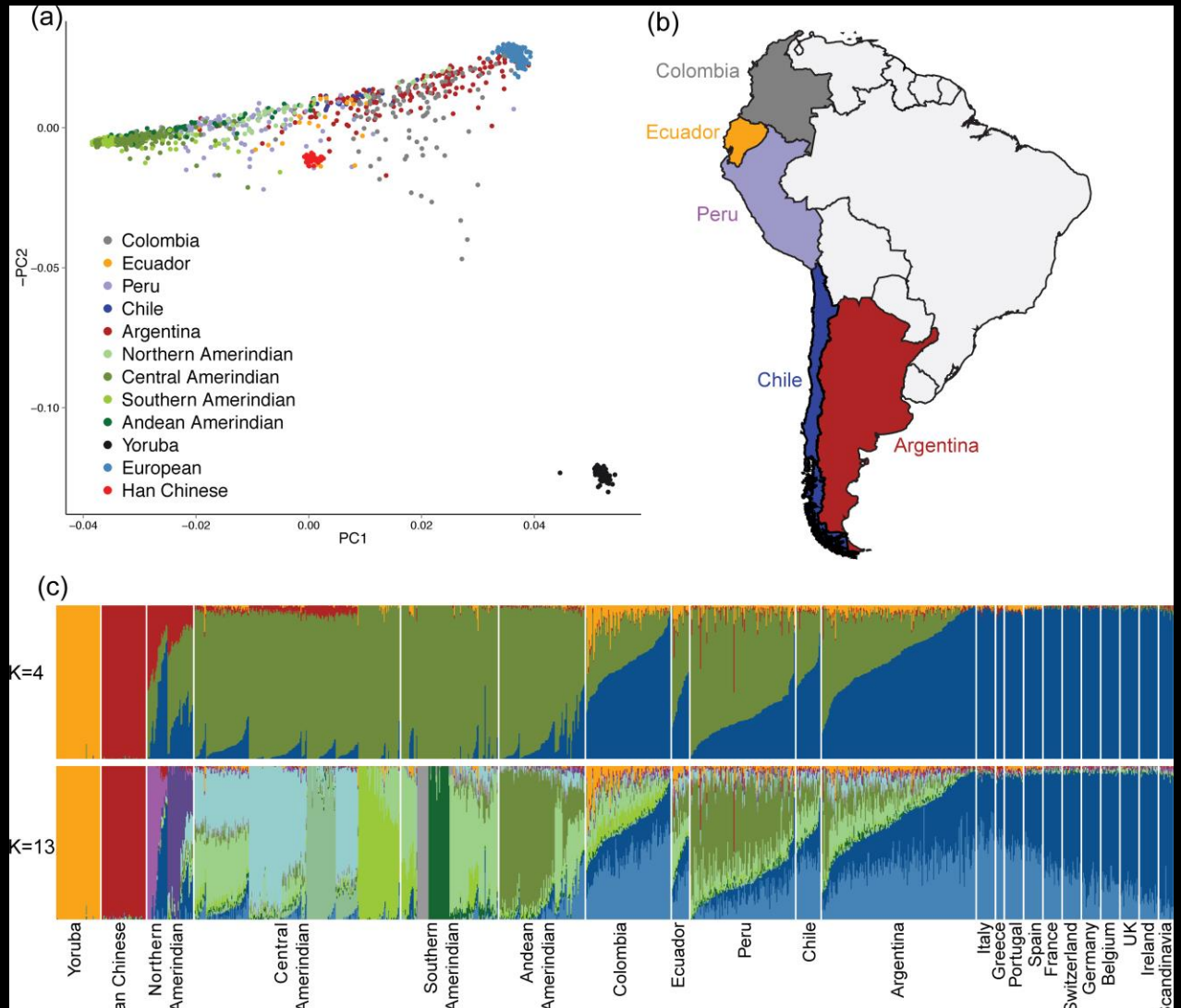
Fuente: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), Base de datos de programas de protección social no contributiva en América Latina y el Caribe, [en línea] (http://dds.cepal.org/bpsnc/).

[a] Promedio ponderado considerando información sobre programas de transferencias condicionadas y otras transferencias monetarias continuas de los siguientes países: Argentina, Belice, Bolivia (Est. Plur. de), Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haití, Honduras, Jamaica, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, República Dominicana, Trinidad y Tabago y Uruguay.

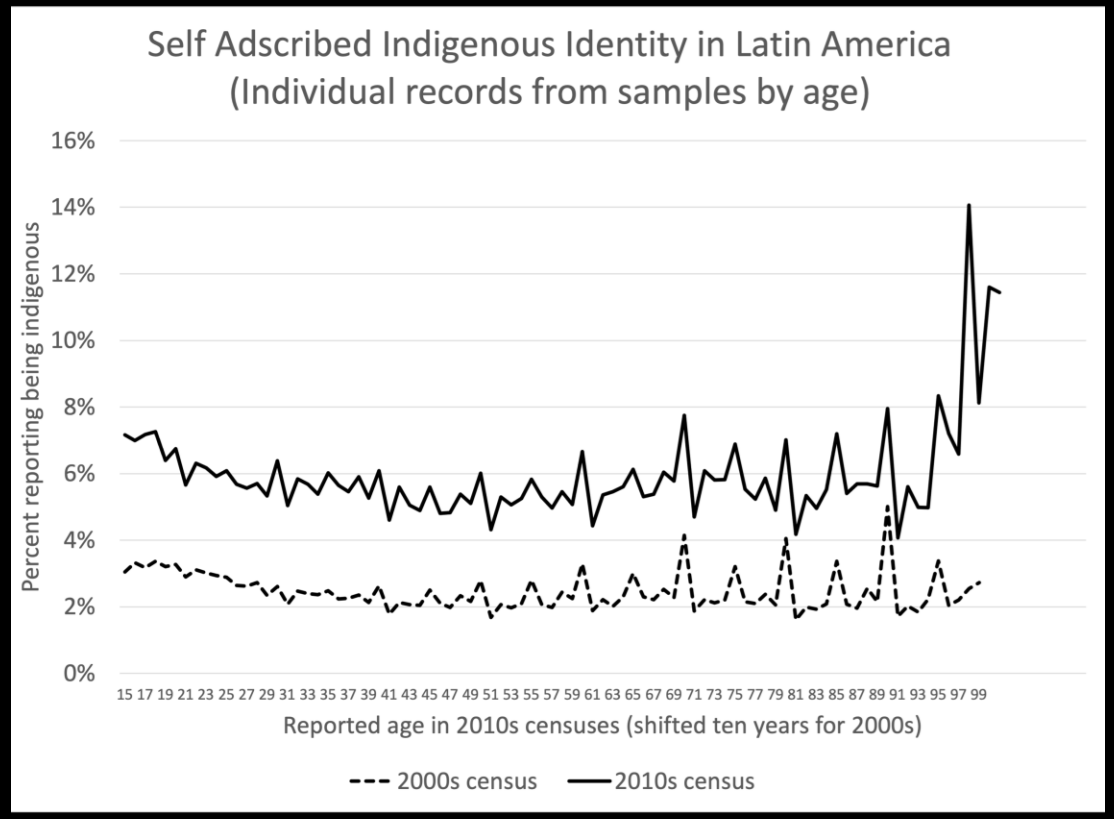
[b] Promedio simple considerando información sobre programas de transferencias condicionadas y otras transferencias monetarias continuas de los siguientes países: Argentina, Belice, Bolivia (Est. Plur. De), Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haití, Honduras, Jamaica, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, República Dominicana, Trinidad y Tabago y Uruguay.

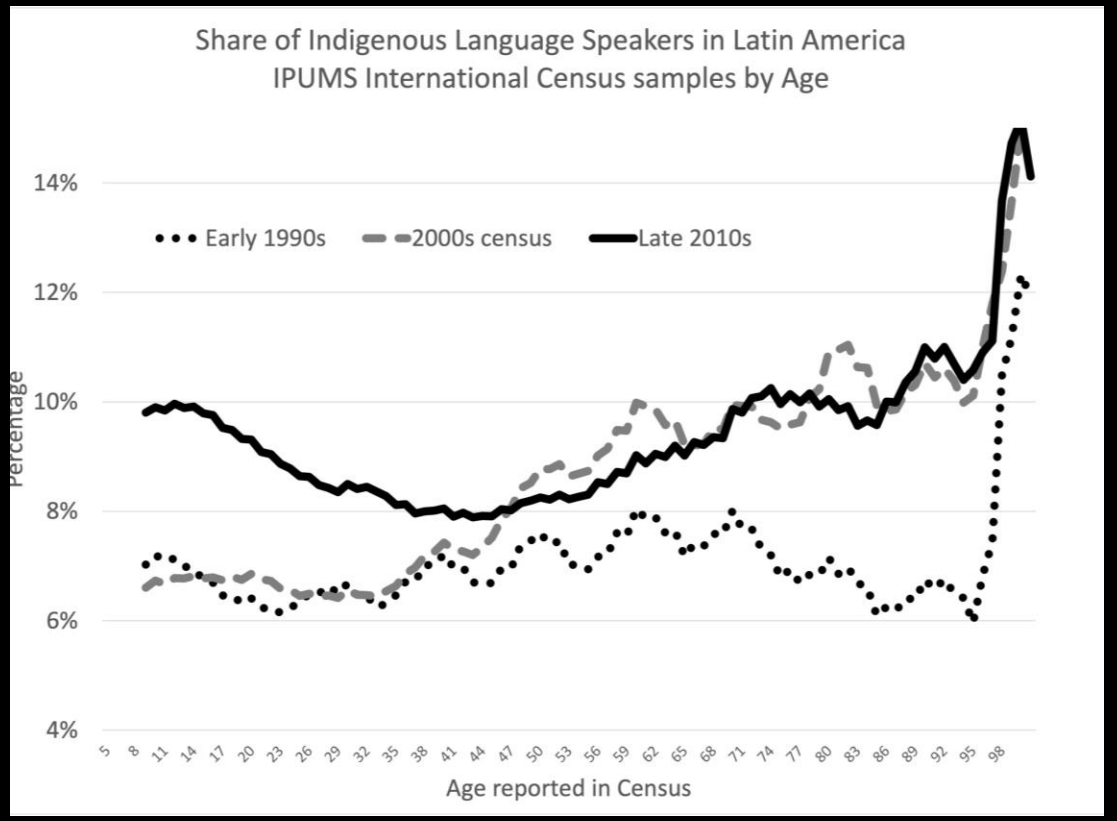
[c] La imputación de datos faltantes por programa se hace con los datos disponibles asumiendo equivalencia con el último dato disponible o una relación lineal entre los dos datos disponibles más cercanos. El promedio considera como base la población total de los países de América Latina y el Caribe, sin importar si poseen programas activos en el año de la estimación.

Challenge 2. The more complete genome reveals indigenous majority



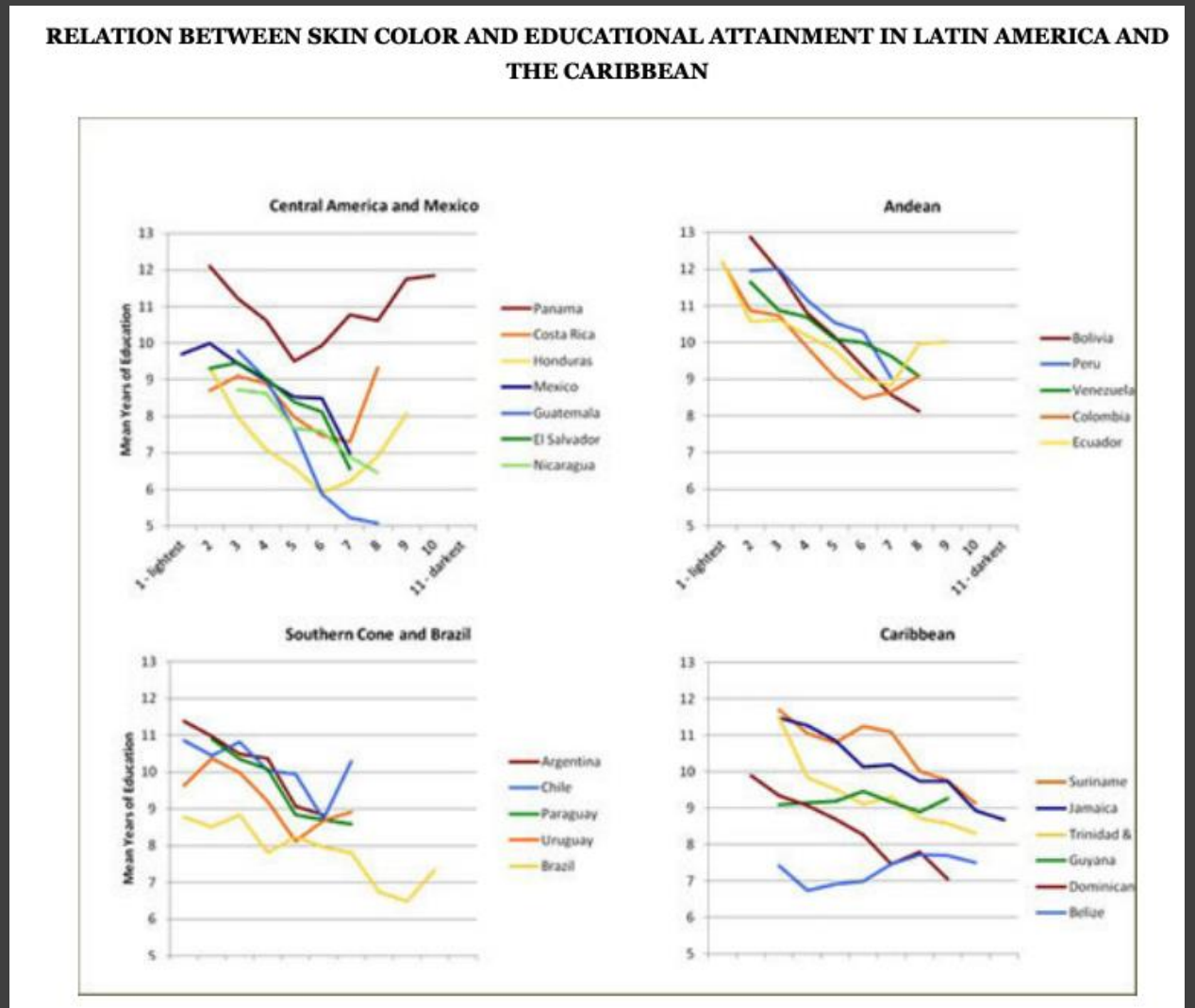
Newly visible indigenous identity is changing mobilization strategies

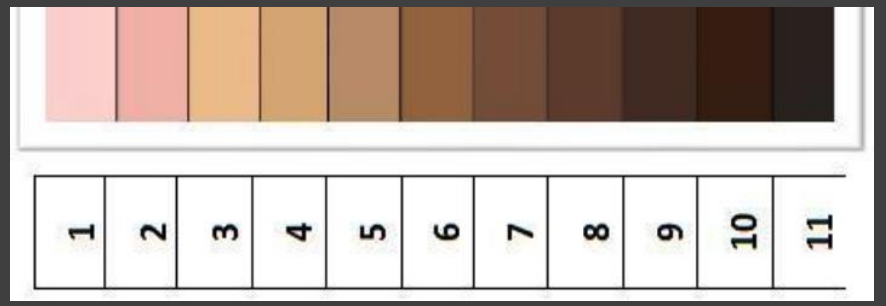


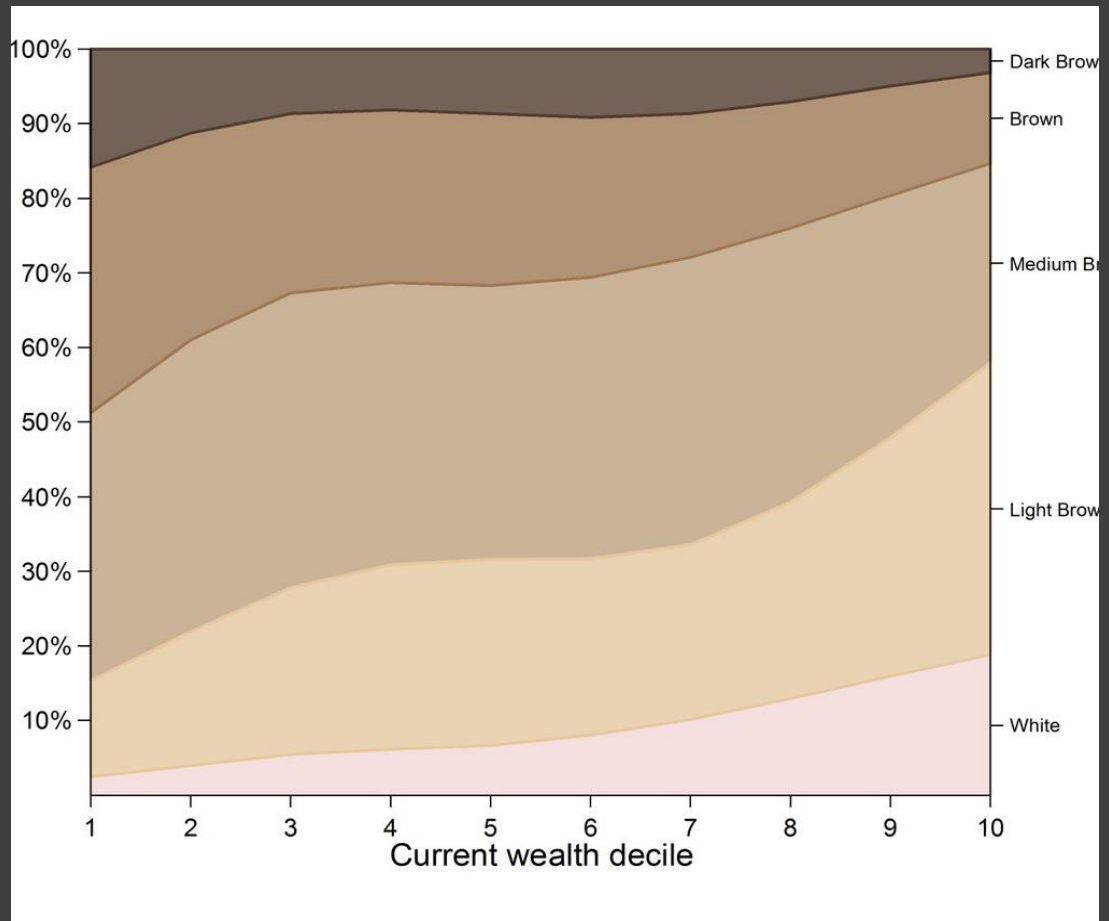


Source: Own calculations based on IPUMS International individual level Census microdata samples, including 10.2 million indigenous peoples in the 1990s, 8.6 million in the 2000s and 29.5 million in the 2010s. Specific countries in microdata samples vary across decades.

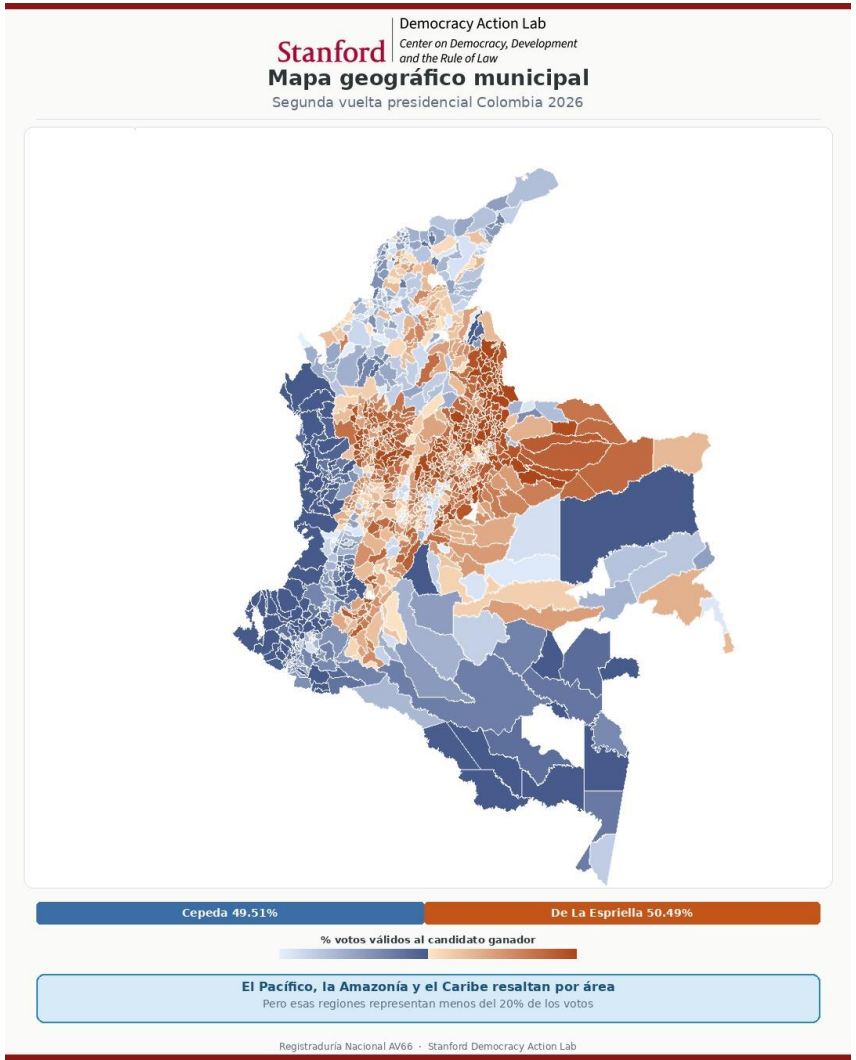
Challenge 3. Pigmentocracy and skin color phenotypes

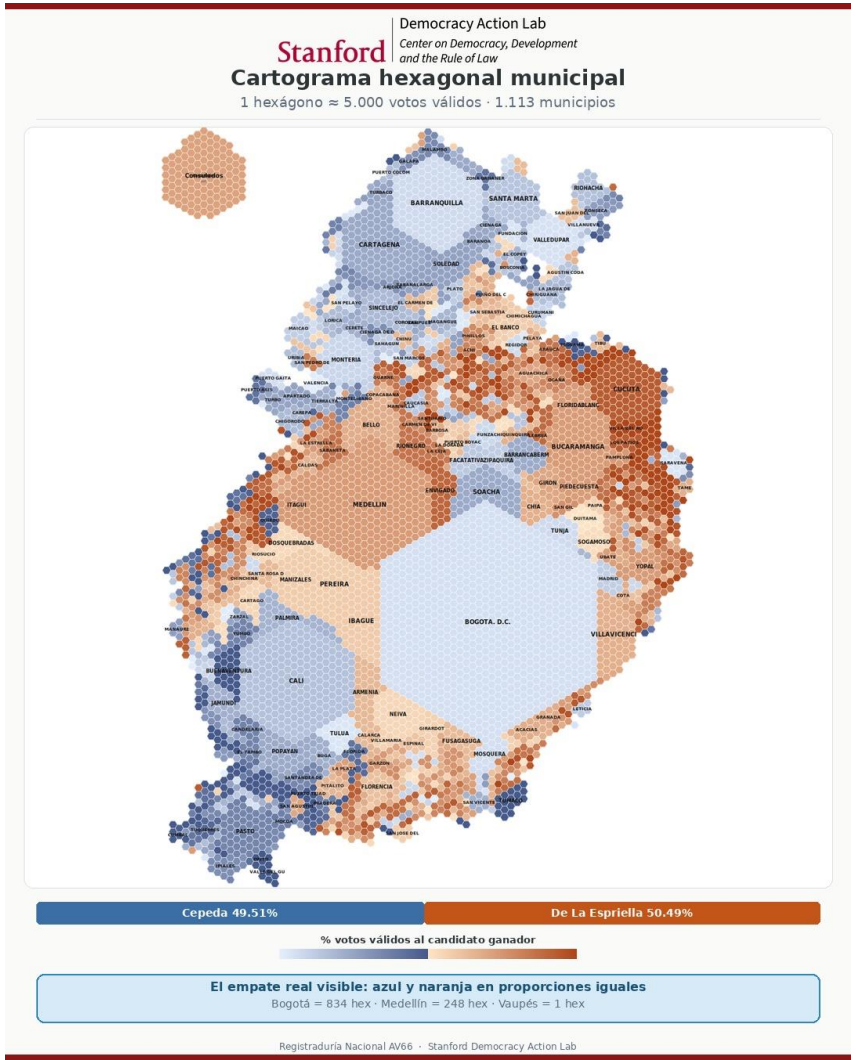




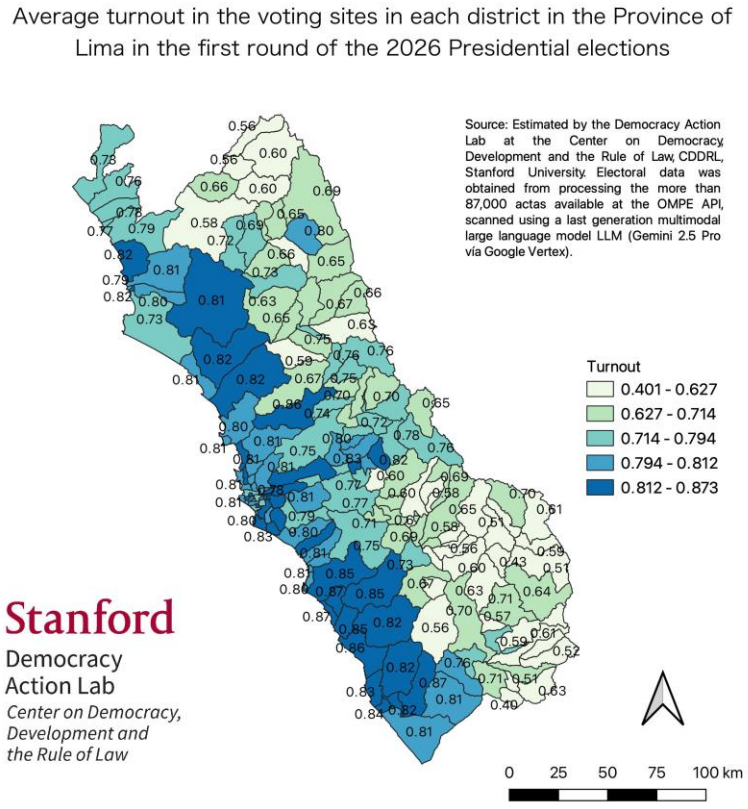


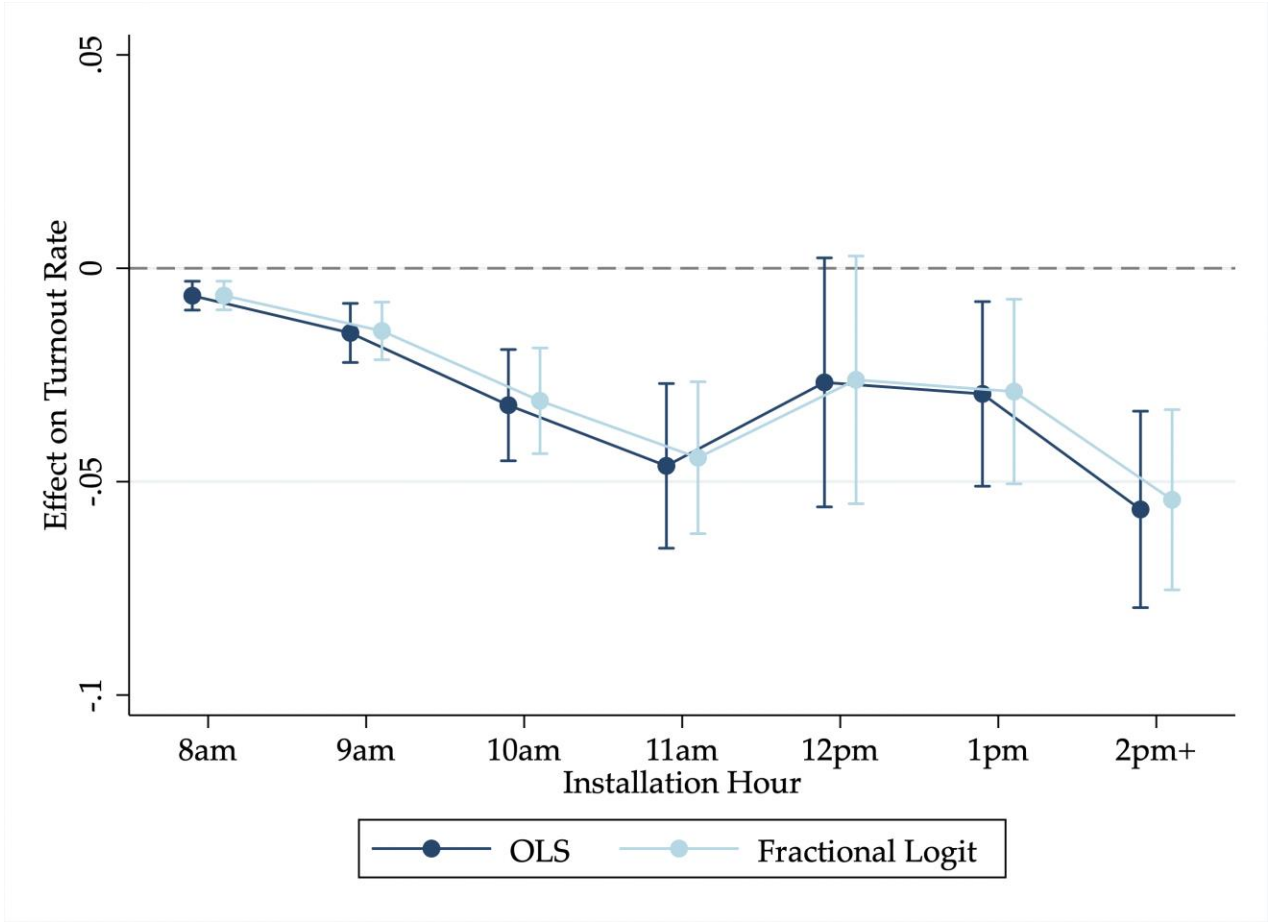
Public communication: better visual narratives reflecting facts



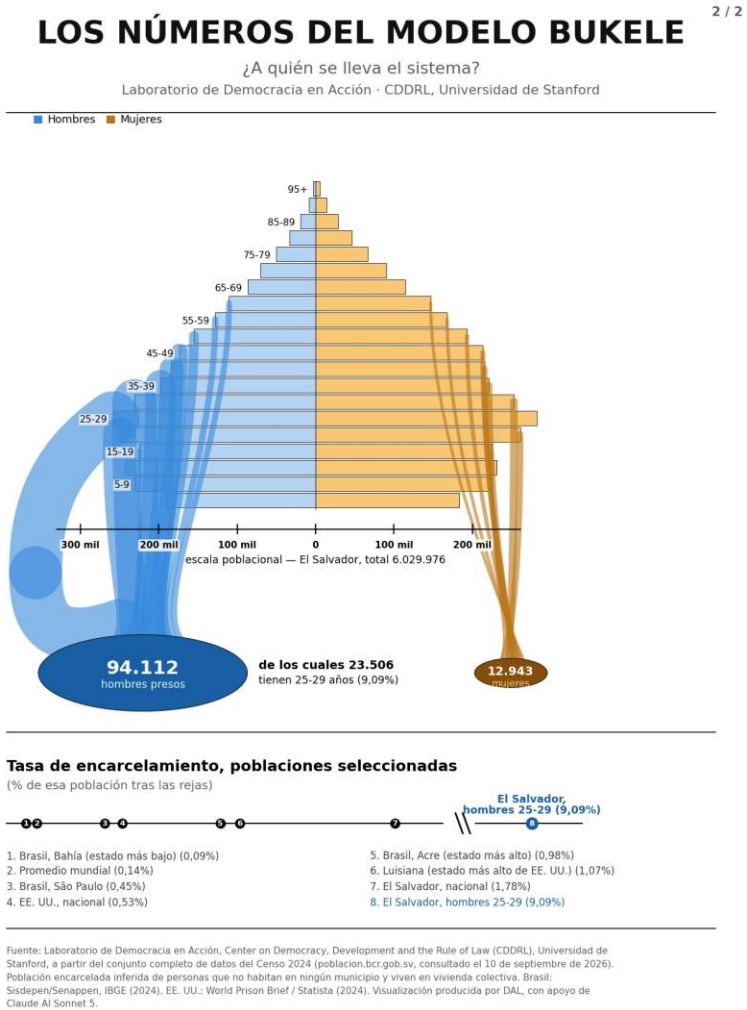


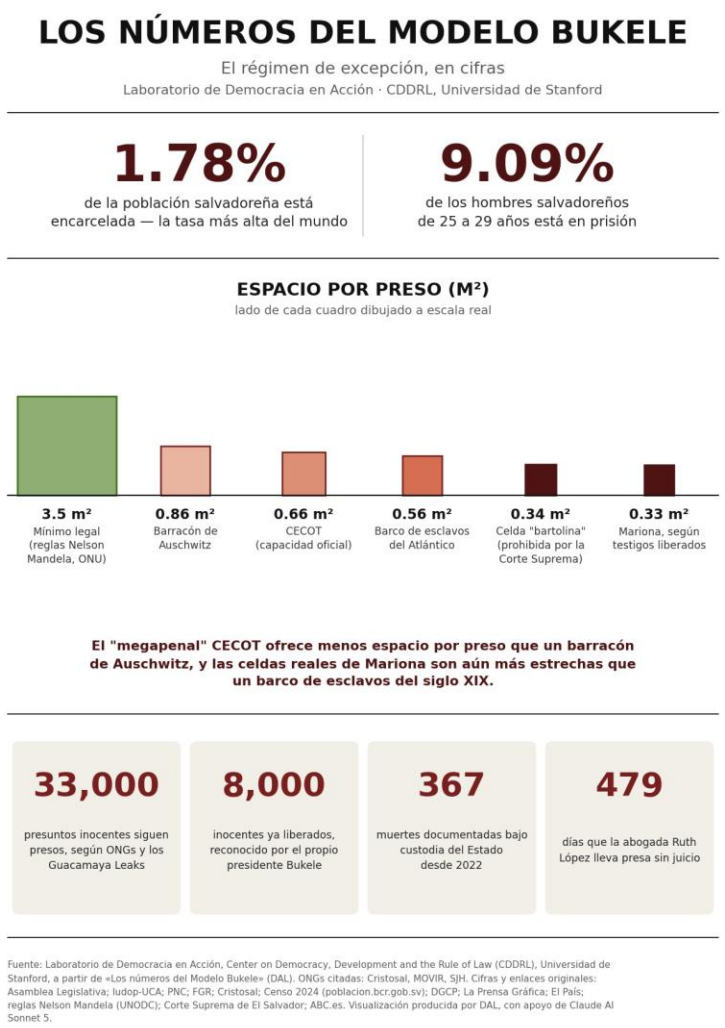
Public analysis: timely analysis for decision makers and citizens





Public advocacy: dispelling myths and post-truths repeated in political discourse





Some speculations for the future of Latin America

- Excluded groups had not been incorporated into the political arena by traditional political parties
- Low intensity democracy is mostly suffered by the historically excluded ethnic and racial groups
- Inequalities take many forms: labor markets, education opportunity, health access, center-periphery, urban-rural
- New challenge of inclusion in socially mobilized environments with major South-South migratory flows
- Populist authoritarian temptation: “A río revuelto, ganancia de pescadores”

Thanks!

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