

INTRODUCTION: POLITICS, PUBLIC OPINION AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN LATIN AMERICA

GREGORY J. LOVE  gjlove@olemiss.edu ¹

AMY ERICA SMITH  aesmith2@iastate.edu ²

¹ University of Mississippi

² Iowa State University

In early 2020, Covid-19 spread from China, first to countries such as Italy and Iran, then across the globe, causing high death tolls and the shutdown of societies (CDC, 2021). As the pandemic moved to Latin America, the region's leaders responded to the threat in wide-ranging ways. Governments deployed a variety of public health and economic measures to stem the human and financial costs of the pandemic. Some minimized the danger: from President Bolsonaro's widely criticized labeling of the disease as a "little flu" in Brazil (Friedman, 2020), to President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's (AMLO's) refusal to wear masks in Mexico (Morales, 2021). Others responded forcefully, such as Fernandez's swift lockdown in Argentina (Reuters, 2020). While some drew heavily on progressive social movements in the policymaking process, others sidelined and marginalized them (Abers *et al.* 2021). The efficacy of these responses also varied widely. Some countries, such as the Dominican Republic, experienced Covid death rates that were lower than wealthy countries such as Canada and Denmark; others saw immense loss of life, as in Peru, where 600 people have died for every 100,000. Despite this variation, the region on average has suffered terribly during the pandemic, with many countries in the top twenty for both cases and loss of life per capita (Blofield *et al.* 2020; Fernandez and Machado, 2021; Ritchie *et al.* 2020).

At the same time as Latin America struggled with the pandemic, the region also saw substantial social upheaval and political strife. Just a few examples: mass protests in Colombia, the impeachment and removal of the Peruvian president, the continuing Venezuelan migrant crisis, and deepening autocratization in several Central American countries. Immediately prior to the pandemic, Latin America's

institutions of democracy frayed badly under the stress of failed public expectations, economic challenges, and a political elite less and less attached to the rules and norms of liberal democracy (Shifter, 2020). Yet with the notable exceptions of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, Latin American countries continue to hold competitive (albeit in several cases flawed) elections where the views and actions of the public matter. In this context, the pandemic has given new urgency to a set of old questions in scholarship on public opinion and mass politics.

First, what strategies effectively encourage collective action and voluntary compliance with public efforts? Public opinion is particularly pertinent for implementing effective Covid prevention and vaccination policies because ending a public health crisis requires the public's help. Before the development and distribution of vaccines in the region, the main tools available to diminish the loss of life from Covid came in the forms of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI). While some countries, notably Brazil, also used pharmaceuticals not supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) or by scientific consensus, including chloroquine and ivermectin, the heart of the response were actions by the public, not drugs or vaccines. For NPIs such as social distancing or universal mask-wearing to be effective, the public must trust the government or scientific and public health experts, and adhere to costly behavioral modifications (Rasmussen and Goodman, 2019). The same also goes for the roll out and implementation of vaccination plans. Effective and equitable mass vaccination requires the public's compliance and willingness to be vaccinated.

Second, how do mass publics understand, evaluate, and respond to expertise and authority? When political leaders speak about the need, or not, for NPIs or vaccination, do citizens comply? In the past 18 months, the region's leaders have taken a wide range of tactics, in terms of both policy proposals *and* leadership styles. Are some of these strategies more or less effective in reaching the public? Or does the public tune out political leaders and focus on messages from subject experts, such as public health agencies or the W.H.O.?

Third, how do mass publics apportion responsibility and blame for policy performance? While public trust shapes implementation of public health measures, the reverse is also true. Elected politicians face incentives to respond to the preferences and demands of voters. Public opinion regarding leaders and their performance through the pandemic should influence how each government responds to the waves of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. Likewise, the public's views also shape how they respond to government efforts to minimize economic and health costs. Nonetheless, one of the core lessons from cross-national research on accountability is that citizens have a difficult time clearly and credibly assigning reward and blame to political elites. Institutional structures, globalization, and weak parties make vertical democratic accountability a constant challenge.

Finally, how can policymakers address the changing needs of informal sectors under the structural constraints facing Latin American governments? With informal sector workers in many Latin American countries exceeding half of the workforce (OECD/ILO, 2019), delivering economic support during the pandemic is particularly challenging. Because of the nature of informal work arrangements, particularly the lack of job-linked social security or health benefits, states often found they lacked the tools and resources to address the needs of these citizens when the region's economy collapsed in 2020 and Covid-19 cases and deaths began to mount. This in turn fueled the pandemic, since informal workers often felt compelled to violate public health measures to provide for their families (e.g., Carreras *et al.* 2021). Public opinion research can illuminate the types of messaging and public sector initiatives that might help marginalized groups comply with public health efforts.

The central purpose of this special issue is to illuminate new and old answers to these questions, in light of the pandemic. In June 2020, we issued a call for papers looking at all aspects of public opinion and the pandemic in Latin America. Unlike other journals publishing Covid-19 special issues, we decided that the pandemic was likely to be long-lasting and wanted papers that covered the range of the crisis. Hence, we accepted submission until July 2021. Little did we realize that even this long window would only capture part of the pandemic. No doubt scholars of public opinion in Latin America will long analyze and attempt to understand the consequences of the pandemic, as well as how politicians and publics responded. Nevertheless, the various papers in the issue provide a range of information from the initial periods of the pandemic to the early rollout of vaccines.

The papers published in this special issue offer an initial look into the political consequences of this unique global event in a variety of Latin American contexts. Each paper provides valuable insights into how the pandemic is shaping politics, public opinion and democratic accountability. Individually, the papers touch on different aspects of the linkages between political leaders, public policy, and the mass public. In general, the papers fall into one of four general areas of study, corresponding to the questions we outlined above. They also fit within a new, rapidly expanding literature that considers similar questions.¹

The first set of papers examines public opinion and public health compliance, broadly speaking. The authors ask questions such as: Who perceives the pandemic as a serious public health threat? Who respects mask and social distancing guidelines? Who expresses willingness to be vaccinated? And how do material interests as well as political trust shape these dispositions? Prior work suggests the importance of partisanship for awareness and concern about Covid (Aruguete *et al.*

1. For one important new collection, see Fernandez and Machado (2021).

2021; Borges and Rennó, 2021; Calvo and Ventura, 2021; Gramacho *et al.*, 2021; Gramacho and Turgeon, 2021). Examining a series of online surveys from Brazil, Batista- Pereira and Nunes (2021) uncover a process of polarization in Brazilian public opinion on the pandemic. While the public expressed nearly universal alarm and strong support for public health measures in March 2020, by June 2020 these attitudes were much more disparate, with variation depending on both attitudes toward Bolsonaro and media consumption. Not surprisingly, Bolsonaro supporters were more likely to express skepticism than his opponents. More interestingly, Bolsonaristas who relied to a greater extent on the Internet and social media were much more likely to express views congruent with Bolsonaro's denialism than were Bolsonaro supporters who relied primarily on traditional media sources such as television. The results suggest that populist modes of communication are potentially harmful to public health when deployed by denialist populists.

Bell-Martin and Diaz Dominguez (2021) continue this line of inquiry, investigating how political loyalties and life circumstances intersect in shaping public health views. Drawing on a national-level, face-to-face survey in Mexico limited to supporters of AMLO's MORENA party, the authors ask what can lead the supporters of a denialist president to nonetheless embrace public health precautions. The results point to the power of interpersonal social networks, as well as material concerns, to cut through partisan messaging (for similar results in the Brazilian case, see Medeiros *et al.*, 2021; Pereira *et al.* 2020). The impact of social ties is particularly powerful for those who identify as "sympathizers" rather than "militants."

Piazza and Schwier's (2021) paper focuses on the second set of questions— which public figures do publics trust for guidance in the pandemic. While the first two papers study Covid denialist presidents, many politicians in the region have *promoted* public health protections; even AMLO encouraged citizens to get vaccinated. Analyzing a nineteen-wave online survey in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, however, Piazza and Schwier (2021) find that citizens in all four countries consistently say they would be *less* likely to accept a vaccination if "politicians" promoted it (the survey item is general, without specifying the identity of the politicians). The most trusted endorsement sources were the World Health Organization, followed by family and friends; government health officials also had a weakly positive effect (Argote *et al.*, 2021). Consonant with the findings of Batista Pereira and Nunes (2021), media consumption and trust in politicians intersect to shape citizens' responses to a hypothetical vaccine endorsement from generic politicians. Thus, while the first two papers in the group suggest that politicians can *reduce* adherence to public health protections among their supporters, this paper indicates that political endorsements are not likely to be good tools for promoting public health campaigns across an entire population.

The third set of papers reverses the causal arrow between public health and political trust, with two papers examining how the initial stages of the pandemic

shaped the popularity of presidents. In the spring of 2020 many world leaders saw a rise in popularity during the onset of the global crisis, in the vein of a rally-around-the-flag effect (Mueller, 1970). While these rallies were common, they were not universal and often showed important contextual nuances. Klobovs (2021) examines if the pandemic provided an opportunity for Argentina's President Fernandez to come out from the shadow of his famous vice president, Cristina Kirchner, to improve and consolidate his public image (Tagina, 2021). Klobovs highlights how the crisis of the early pandemic, and Fernandez's swift and public actions, allowed him to establish a political image separate from Kirchner. Sosa-Villagarcia and Hurtado Lozada's (2021) contribution explores the dynamics of presidential approval in the early stages of the pandemic in a comparative context. Examining public approval of presidents in four Latin American countries, the authors highlight conditions that shape if and when a president enjoys a rally effect. In countries where the opposition was weak and the president took "decisive" actions, leaders enjoyed a boost in their popularity. However, it appears that whatever gain in public support they received was short-lived. These results broadly support other work demonstrating decline in support for many presidents during the pandemic (e.g., Abad-Cisneros, 2021; Rennó *et al.* 2021), with important exceptions (Natal, 2021).

The last paper in this special issue focuses on marginalized citizens, whom previous literature identifies as less likely to be able to comply with public health measures (Carreras *et al.* 2021). Piazza and Barbería (2021) ask whether two different kinds of public policies enabled low-income Brazilians to stay home: the *Auxílio Emergencial* (Emergency Aid) cash assistance program, and stringent public health measures. The *Auxílio Emergencial* program had potentially paradoxical effects on social distancing because most recipients lacked access to electronic banking, and were instead required to line up at physical bank locations to access the program. Analyzing a phone survey of residents of large urban areas in May 2020, Piazza (2021) concludes that neither public health laws nor the cash assistance program substantially impacted marginalized citizens' urban mobility, though the program did somewhat reduce non-work trips. The question of what *can* make an impact on low-income residents remains for future study.

While the six articles in this special issue illuminate core, longstanding concerns related to public opinion and Latin American politics, other key questions remain. One direction for future research relates to how citizens acquired and used information about the pandemic. We have some evidence that support for a denialist president inhibited information gathering (Gramacho *et al.* 2021), but surely much more remains to be said. A second question relates to how the pandemic has affected policy attitudes, from support for welfare to attitudes towards China, the

origin of the virus.² Yet a third question relates to how the pandemic has impacted core democratic attitudes. Despite initial concerns, there is increasing evidence the pandemic has not contributed to further erosion of core democratic values, both in the Brazilian case (Avritzer and Rennó, 2021; Smith, 2020) and in the Latin America and Caribbean region (Castorena and Rosario, 2021). Some scholars even speculate that the pandemic could lead to increased support for female leadership (Piazza and Diaz, 2020).

Finally, we are still clearly in the midst of the pandemic, and the virus will continue to present new and ongoing challenges for the governments and citizens of the region. For example, the ongoing rollout of vaccination programs will likely have consequences for public opinion, and events thus far unimagined may reshape how citizens are linked to their leaders. In the coming years, scholars will take on these and numerous questions in an attempt to understand if and how this unique global event reshaped the politics of Latin America.

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2. For instance, one study found high rejection among Brazilians of vaccines developed in China, particularly among Bolsonaro supporters (Gramacho and Tourgeon, 2021).

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