

# Do presidential crises jeopardize democracy?

An analysis of 12 presidential crises in Latin America using public opinion survey data.

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## Abstract

Presidential crises that do not lead to a fallback to authoritarianism has become a growing trend in Latin America during the last decades. Authors have competing views on the implications of such events for democracy in the region, but the debate has so far relied on very little comparative empirical evidence. In this paper, we fill that void by analyzing citizen levels of satisfaction with democracy before and after 12 presidential crises in Latin American countries using a pooled logistic regression model. Our results indicate that crises concluding with the president leaving office lead to a decrease in levels of satisfaction while crises that end with the president staying in office have no significant effect on satisfaction. Presidential crises therefore do appear to negatively impact democracy in the region when they terminate with the president leaving office. A possible explanation may be that these crises put in jeopardy the predictability of political processes, a public good citizens value and expect from democracy.

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## Introduction

This paper addresses a new form of political instability that emerged in Latin America at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which have been linked to presidential crises. Those are events during which democratically elected presidents are challenged to leave office before the end of their constitutional term, with or without success. They do not constitute a fallback into authoritarianism considering that they target a specific individual, the incumbent executive, rather than democracy as a regime. The way those crises relate to democracy is therefore unclear and has led to a growing interest among scholars. A growing body of literature has debated their implications for democracy in the region, scholars either claiming that they constitute a threat to democracy or a new form of presidential accountability. That being

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said, most of the empirical work on which those interpretations rely has so far focused on identifying the origins of presidential challenges and falls (Hochstetler, 2006; Hochstetler & Edwards, 2009; Marsteintredet, Llanos, & Nolte, 2013; Pérez-Liñán & Polga-Hecimovich, 2017). We have strikingly little empirical evidence to properly assess the impact of such crises on the prospects for democracy in the region, even less so in a broad comparative framework. Hochstetler and Samuels (2011) took a first step in that direction by measuring the impact of presidential crises on the levels of support for democracy. Yet, their analysis relies on only three surveys and uses aggregate measures, potentially explaining why they find inconsistent and inconclusive results. We therefore believe there is a necessity for large N study of crises' impact on citizen attitudes, and aim to fill that void.

To do so, we verify how the findings of authors that have studied presidential crises can be generalized to better understand how Latin American citizens perceive those events. More specifically, we focus on the impact of those crises on citizen levels of satisfaction with democracy. Using public opinion survey data from the Latinobarometer (Latinobarómetro, 1995-2016), we measure how presidential crises affect individual satisfaction with democracy by comparing pre- and post-crisis surveys. Drawing a distinction between crises that end with the president leaving or staying in office, we relate our findings to authors' competing claims about the implications of presidential crises for democratic stability in the region.

Our paper offers a contribution on the theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, it contributes to the debate among scholars of democracy in Latin America by testing competing interpretations of presidential crises. Empirically, it offers the broadest analysis of a phenomenon that has so far mostly been studied through either case or small N studies.

## **Conflicting claims**

Free and fair elections have become the norm in Latin America throughout the last decades. For the most part, government transitions freely and regularly took place, without external interventions. That being said, democracy hasn't been stable in the region. Authoritarian fallbacks might appear to be a past trend, but they have given place to a new form of instability, characterized by institutional crises (Helmke, 2017). Therefore, Latin American countries still regularly go through political crises. They just happen to target specific individuals or organizations rather than the regime as a whole.

Among all crises, those involving presidents have received the most attention. They are often the most salient and they might very well be the ones with the most noticeable implications for democracy in the region. Scholars working on the subject have offered diverging interpretations of those crises, but one could argue that the debate revolves around Juan Linz's notorious argument on "the perils of presidentialism" (Linz & Stepan, 1978; Linz, 1990; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994). Indeed, several authors perceive presidential crises as a mere proof of the veracity of Linz's argument, while others consider those crises to constitute a new form of accountability limiting the presidents' all too often unbounded powers.

The first group of authors, offering a doubtful view of presidential crises' implications for democracy, centers its argument on the conflicting nature of presidential regimes. For them, presidential regimes generate a conflicting dynamic between the executive and the legislature, the latter having an incentive to contribute to the fall of the former (Valenzuela, 2004). The

political legitimacy of both branches of government contribute to maintain a conflicting dynamic generating perpetual instability, both the executive and the legislature seeing each other as an opponent rather than a contributor and both of them relying on their popular legitimacy to fuel their opposition toward the other branch of government (Hochstetler, 2006; Kim & Bahry, 2008). Lending support to the “perpetual conflict” argument, presidential impeachments in the region are often perceived as resulting from a political instrumentalisation of constitutional provisions rather than a fair use of a mean provided to prevent authoritarian drifts (Marsteintredet et al., 2013). If that perception happens to be generalized among the citizens of the countries where those crises happen, it could put in jeopardy the survival of democracy, considering that support for democracy has been found to be dependant upon the citizens feeling that it offers them control over the political developments, out of which government formation might be the most significant (Chu, Bratton, Lagos, Shastri, & Tessler, 2008).

A second group of more optimistic authors perceive those crises as expressing a new flexibility of presidential regimes. As Linz’s argument states, presidents in the region have traditionally benefited from quasi-unlimited powers. The recurring presidential crises thus seem to call a halt to this trend by imposing more restrictive limits on the president’s powers (Marsteintredet & Berntzen, 2008). Some authors have argued that this new possibility of managing crises by institutional procedures is akin to a parlementarisation of Latin American presidentialism (Carey, 2002; Mustapic, 2005). This claim appears to be in line with Stepan and Skach (1993), who claimed that the two major elements that make democratic consolidation easier in parliamentary regimes are its greater ease to stop a head of State from overriding constitutional provisions and to remove him from office. The perceived parlementarisation of presidential regimes would therefore be good news for democracy in Latin America. It would, as Marsteintredet and Berntzen (2008) put it, effectively reduce the perils of presidentialism in the region.

Applying the same logic, Pérez-Liñán (2005) perceives those crises as illustrations of an evolving balance of power between the executive and the legislature in favor of the latter. Looking back on Linz’s argument, authors have argued that he overestimated the rigidity of presidential mandates, many countries succeeding during the last decades to get rid of their “bad” presidents, something which Linz considered to be nearly impossible (Hochstetler & Edwards, 2009; Hochstetler & Samuels, 2011).

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Latin American democracy through presidential crises**

For a long time, presidentialism has been perceived as the usual suspect to explain the incapacity of democracy to fully establish itself in Latin America (Linz & Stepan, 1978; Linz, 1990; Stepan & Skach, 1993; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994). Presidentialism was deemed to foster a conflicting dynamic between the executive and the legislature, both branches of government facing incentives to compete with one another rather than cooperate. The seminal works of Guillermo O’Donnell also underlined how presidentialism negatively affected democratic prospects in Latin America by overly concentrating a country’s political powers (O’Donnell, 1994; O’Donnell, 1998).

As free and fair elections were becoming an ever growing norm in the region, a general shift in the literature took place during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Even though some authors continued to condemn presidentialism as improper to democratic governance (Valenzuela, 2004), most started to look at other variables to explain why democracy struggled for so long. Cheibub (2007) and Pérez-Liñán (2007) both argued that the military's political involvement was responsible for democratic instability. Helmke (2017), on her part, recently claimed that institutional power-sharing is the determinant factor; the more powerful a president is, the more unstable the regime will be.

Our understanding of how presidentialism interacts with other variables to foster instability has therefore increased a great amount during the last 15 years or so. If we now know a lot more about causes of presidential crises, we comparatively know very little about their effects. As explained earlier, authors have competing views on how they impact the democratic process. Their interpretations tend to focus mainly on institutional processes, giving great importance to political elites. When citizens are brought into the analysis, authors usually study their role and impact as challengers rather than their perception of those events. In line with Putnam's seminal work (Putnam, 1994), we believe that a proper understanding of democracy and institutional processes calls for a focus not only on elite behavior, but also on citizen attitudes.

Authors bridging that gap have found that normative preferences for democracy of elites and citizens is a major explanatory factor to account for the survival of democracy. On a relatively abstract level, most agree with Linz and Stepan's definition that democracy is consolidated when it has become the "only game in town" (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 15). A few authors investigating presidential crises have deemed normative commitment to democracy as the "only game in town" to be responsible for the survival of democracy throughout crises (Schamis, 2002; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2013; Pérez-Liñán & Polga-Hecimovich, 2017). Yet, very little is known on how presidential crises impact normative commitment to democracy.

Regime support in emerging democracies has been deemed to be "utilitarian", that is being conditional upon its perceived effectiveness (Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Fernandez & Kuenzi, 2010). Studying the Latin American context, Sarsfield and Echegaray (2005) found that support for democracy is dependent upon its perceived efficacy and, more generally, satisfaction with how it works. Moreover, findings suggest that regime preference among Latin American countries is mostly tied to short term factors affecting its "prospective operational workability" (Hawkins, Kitschelt, & Llamazares, 2010, p. 237) and evolve rapidly. Focussing on the Venezuelan case, Coppedge (2005) finds that economic decline can lead to dissatisfaction with democracy which opens the door for undemocratic demagogues and puts in jeopardy the overall regime stability.

One could think of many more events that might tarnish the "prospective operational workability" of democracy and foster skepticism toward it. If any short-term event other than economic performances can be deemed to have an effect on support for democracy and regime stability, presidential crises are among the top suspects, especially considering their salience and very practical consequences. They are also events that tend to be highly contentious, as the latest case in Brazil that led to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff has shown.

As mentioned previously, authors who studied the topic have competing views on the impact of presidential crises on democratic stability. Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) claim

that it creates an accountability mechanism, putting “bad presidents” under the threat of removal from office. Finding that corruption, scandals and state repression are powerful predictors of presidential challenges, they argue that what has been called the new instability in Latin America in fact represents a new problem-solving capacity. Accordingly, citizens play a major role considering that popular mobilization against the president highly correlates with early termination of presidencies and that the public opinion generally acts as a referee between the executive and the legislative branch’s competing legitimacy (Hochstetler, 2006; Hochstetler & Edwards, 2009). Focusing on crises in which the presidential challenge was citizen-driven, Hochstetler and Samuels (2011) contend that those events allow the evacuation of political tension inherent in presidential regimes. They claim that any negative impact of those crises are rather superficial, as democratic legitimacy is not affected by it. This finding is generalizable to a broad array of emerging presidential democracies, where political crises don’t entail a return to authoritarianism (Kim & Bahry, 2008).

The more pessimistic interpretation of presidential crises tend to focus on institutional actors and pay comparatively little attention to citizens. The few authors that do include citizens in their analysis perceive presidential crises as events that take away their power to control government formation. Chu et al. (2008) claim that for citizens to support democracy, it must offer them control over political developments, especially government formation. That ability is threatened by presidential crises, that they consider to stem from an instrumentalization of institutional procedures, along with Marsteintredet et al. (2013).

### **Presidential crises and uncertainty**

In his seminal work, Przeworski (1991) argued that democracy might not reduce political uncertainty, but it institutionalizes it. Governments and policies can change frequently and in unpredictable fashion, but the power lies in a set of rules rather than a group of individuals. For his part, Olson (1993) has argued that democracy does in fact lower uncertainty by the routinization of government transitions. Citizens knowing when and, more significantly, how a government will leave office gives them a higher level of certainty about the regime in place, therefore increasing their time horizon when taking economic decisions. Accordingly, Linz and Stepan (1996) claim that constitutions and their enforcement are the primary mechanism to reduce the level of uncertainty among the citizens. In short, most democracy theorists argue that it offers substantial guarantees by considerably circumscribing the powers of the head of state and the way he can exert them (Alexander, 2002).

Presidential crises therefore seem to threaten what appeared at first to be the most certain of all institutions in presidential setting: fixed term length (Linz & Stepan, 1978; Linz, 1990; Stepan & Skach, 1993; Linz & Valenzuela, 1994). The highly formalized relationship between the executive and the legislative branch therefore becomes more uncertain, citizens losing their ability to predict future interactions between the two governmental branches while government transition processes become more blurry. That uncertainty becomes even higher when informal procedures are used to remove the executive, since constitutions lose their ruling power. Considering the already inherent political uncertainty over regime survival in emerging democracies, caused by the newness of their democratic institutions (Lupu & Riedl, 2013), presidential crises could have significant implications for citizen perception of democratic stability. Extending Alvarez’s definition of uncertainty (Alvarez, 1998), presidential crises

widen the probability distribution around institutional procedures.

That interpretation could have significant implications for voters' attitude regarding democracy, considering many authors' findings that voters are mostly risk-averse. Studies have shown that most voters prefer a sub-optimal equilibrium situation rather than a more promising, but also more uncertain outcome: they prefer stability over uncertainty (Cinta, 1999; Quinn & Woolley, 2001). The long hegemony of Mexico's PRI has been explained in those terms, a potential change of government yielding promising but very uncertain benefits (Domínguez & McCann, 1998; Morgenstern & Zechmeister, 2001; Magaloni, 2006). Considering those empirical findings, we have strong reasons to believe that presidential crises' impact on citizen levels of satisfaction with democracy could be driven by the way in which they affect the level of uncertainty of political processes.

## Hypotheses

Authors that have shown enthusiasm toward presidential crises perceive them as a new form of problem-solving capacity. As Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) argued, they make bad presidents accountable for their actions. Therefore, if presidential crises work as an accountability mechanism, their impact on satisfaction with democracy should be contingent upon their outcome. If crises succeed at removing presidents from office, satisfaction with democracy should increase, whereas if they don't, satisfaction should decrease.

**Main hypothesis:** *Resolution of presidential crises will increase (decrease) satisfaction with democracy when presidents leave (stay in) office.*

The competing interpretation of presidential crises claim that those processes lower citizen control over political events considering that it takes away their ability to control government formation. This argument speaks well to the uncertainty literature, which postulates that democracy institutionalizes political procedures, thus reducing uncertainty or, at a minimum, bounding it to well defined processes. Since most citizens are risk averse and look for certainty, we expect once again the effect of presidential crises on satisfaction with democracy to be conditional upon the nature of their resolution. If presidents stay in office, fixed term length is enforced and democracy maintains its more predictable character, as initially expected. If crises end with the president leaving office, democracy does not succeed in reducing uncertainty and we can then expect citizens to be more unsatisfied with it.

**Competing hypothesis:** *Resolution of presidential crises will only have an effect on satisfaction with democracy when presidents leave office, and this effect will be negative.*

## Data and method

### Case selection

Few authors have studied presidential instability in a broad comparative perspective. Those that did so have tended to measure the relative impact of causes of presidential challenges and treat the outcome of crises as their dependent variable. They have focused either on elite behavior (Schamis, 2002; Pérez-Liñán, 2007; Pérez-Liñán & Polga-Hecimovich, 2017) or pressure emanating from civil society (Hochstetler & Samuels, 2011). Then again, other studies have tried to identify the root causes of presidential challenges (Hochstetler, 2006; Hochstetler & Edwards, 2009).

In contrast with these studies, we aim to measure the impact of such crises. To do so, we are mostly interested in the outcome of crises under study. Therefore, consistently with our hypotheses, we have separated the crises into two distinct outcome categories: those in which the president stayed in office and those in which the president leaves office. We do not draw a distinction between presidential removal and resignation nor between constitutional and unconstitutional exit considering that our theoretical framework doesn't make it appear to be relevant.

To test our hypotheses, we use data from the Latinobarometer, which started surveying Latin American citizens in 1995 on a quasi annual basis (Latinobarómetro, 1995-2016). Considering that we need pre-crisis and post-crisis surveys, we are limited to studying crises that happened after a first survey had been realized and for which a survey has been conducted after the resolution of the crisis. With these constraints, we identified 12 cases in which presidents were under severe pressure to leave office before the end of their constitutional term, the main challenge either coming from civil society, elected officials, armed forces, or any combination of these three groups of actors. The list of presidential crises upon which our study is based is presented in Table 1. The political crisis that Argentina underwent in 2001-2002, in which two presidents resigned within two weeks (notwithstanding interim presidents), is treated as a single crisis considering that the two presidential resignations were part of the same continued process and happened over a very short period.

We decided to exclude three crises that were initially included in our sample: the 2005 crisis in Bolivia that led to the resignation of Carlos Mesa, and two Paraguayan crises, the first in 1999 and the second in 2001. The reasons to do so were very practical. The 2004 survey that would have been used as reference category for pre-crisis measurement for the 2005 Bolivian crisis was already used to measure post-crisis levels of satisfaction with democracy for the 2003 crisis. Therefore, we had to exclude the 2005 Bolivian crisis and keep only the previous one in our model. A similar logic applies for the two excluded Paraguayan crises. Pre- and post-crisis surveys overlapped for the four crises that happened in consecutive years between 1999 and 2002. We were thus forced to exclude two of them and decided to exclude the 1999 and 2001 crises to allow for greater variation in our main independent variable. Considering that our sample includes more crises that ended with the president leaving rather than keeping office, we decided to include the 2000 crisis that ended with Luis Macchi staying in office rather than the 1999 crisis that ended with the removal of Raúl Cubas. Following that selection, we were forced to drop the 2001 crisis to avoid overlapping pre- and post-crisis measures and instead use the crisis that happened the following year.

Table 1: List of presidential crises

Country	Year	President	Outcome
Argentina	2001	Fernando de la Rúa Adolfo Rodríguez Saá	Left (both)
Bolivia	2003	Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada	Left
Ecuador	1997	Abdalá Bucaram	Left
	2000	Jamil Mahuad	Left
	2005	Lucio Gutiérrez	Left
	2010	Rafael Correa	Stayed
Honduras	2009	Manuel Zelaya	Left
Paraguay	2000	Luis Macchi	Stayed
	2002/2003	Luis Macchi	Stayed
	2012	Fernando Lugo	Left
Peru	2000	Alberto Fujimori	Left
Venezuela	2002	Hugo Chávez	Stayed

In sum, out of the 12 crises under study, eight crises ended with the president leaving office and four concluded with the president staying in office. Even though we would wish our sample to be more balanced, we are here limited by data availability and, quite simply, by the course of events. We managed to overcome the problem that the unbalanced sample poses by analyzing individual level data. The total amount of respondents in our database is 24 219, with an average of 1 009 respondents by country-wave studied. Therefore, even though we do not have a great amount of crises ending with the president keeping office, using individual level data allows us to increase our inferential leverage (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994; Geddes, 2003).

To measure the impact of presidential crises as precisely as possible, we use the last survey conducted before the beginning of each crisis as the pre-crisis measure and the first survey conducted after the end of the crisis as the post-crisis measure. In none of the crises we are studying was a survey realized during the crisis. We therefore only used consecutive surveys in our sample.<sup>3</sup> While it is usually fairly easy to identify the end of a crisis, pinpointing its beginning proved somewhat challenging and rather arbitrary in two particular cases: the 2002 crisis in Paraguay and the 2003 Bolivian crisis. In those two cases, crises resulted from a long process of mounting tension where no single event can undisputedly be identified as its outbreak. To systematize the identification of a beginning point for all cases, we used the first mention of what is considered to be a crisis' main cause in the *Latin American Weekly*

<sup>3</sup>Since there were no surveys realized in 1999 and 2012, we use only consecutive surveys, but those are not necessarily conducted in consecutive *years*. We have one occurrence where the 1998 survey is used as pre-crisis measurement and the 2000 survey as post-crisis measurement. We also have one occurrence where the 2011 survey is used as pre-crisis measurement and the 2013 survey as post-crisis measurement.



*Report* as its beginning point.<sup>4</sup> In the more challenging cases mentioned above, where crises are considered to have been triggered by sustained popular protest against a particular policy, we used *LAWR*'s first mention of a protest against that policy as the beginning point of the crisis. In the other cases, identifying which survey to use as the measure of pre-crisis level of satisfaction with democracy proved easier, either because the crisis began by a more clearly identifiable event or because the last survey realized before the crisis had been conducted long before its outbreak and therefore identifying which particular week began a crisis didn't make a difference in the selection of our pre-crisis survey. Even after that identification process, we always ended up using the last survey realized before the post-crisis measurement survey and never had to skip a survey to get a proper pre-crisis measure.

### Variable description

Our dependant variable is the answer given by respondents to a question where they are asked how satisfied they are with the way democracy works in their country. The question's wording is the same throughout all the surveys used. Respondents were asked to answer on a scale of 1 to 4, that we recoded as a binary variable. Answers "Very satisfied" and "Fairly satisfied" were thus recoded as 1 to express satisfaction with democracy and answers "Not very satisfied" and "Not at all satisfied" were recoded as 0 to express dissatisfaction with democracy.

The main independent variable is the crises' outcome. It is represented by two dummy variables: *President left office* and *President stayed in office*. They were coded 0 in all pre-crisis surveys, and every post-crisis survey had its outcome coded 1 while the other outcome remained at 0.

Controls were then added to the models to neutralize the impact of variables that could interfere in the causal relation under study. On an individual level, we controlled for expressed levels of trust toward political parties to neutralize the effect of cynicism. At the contextual level, we created a dummy variable to indicate if an election had occurred between the end of the crisis and the realization of the post-crisis survey. Another dummy variable indicates if the post-crisis survey has been realized six or more months after the end of the crisis. To control for the timing before the next elections, we also created a dummy variable indicating if the next programmed elections are in 12 months or more after the timing of the survey. Finally, we controlled for a variety of traditional sociodemographic indicators. All variables are coded from 0 to 1, except *Age*, which we left at its original value.

## Results

Our analysis tests two competing interpretations of presidential crises. The first one claims that presidential crises function as an accountability mechanism and thus allow citizens to get rid of bad presidents before the end of their term. Crises would therefore indicate flexibility rather than instability. For this interpretation to be confirmed, results should show that satisfaction with democracy increases when crises conclude with the president leaving office since they mark success to hold a bad president accountable. Conversely, satisfaction should

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.latinnews.com/latin-american-weekly-report.html>

Table 2: Determinants of satisfaction with democracy

	Satisfaction with democracy		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Post-crisis	-0.22*** (0.03)	-0.37*** (0.06)	
President left office			-0.36*** (0.06)
President stayed in office			-0.06 (0.09)
Trust political parties		1.42*** (0.05)	1.41*** (0.05)
Election between		-0.22*** (0.07)	-0.13 (0.07)
6+ months after crisis		0.44*** (0.05)	0.38*** (0.05)
12+ months before election		0.02 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.07)
Age	-0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Female	-0.06* (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
No formal schooling	0.03 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.01 (0.07)
Post-secondary education	-0.22*** (0.04)	-0.21*** (0.04)	-0.21*** (0.04)
Partner	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.03)
Unemployed	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.04)
Public employee	0.08 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
Constant	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.47*** (0.07)	-0.54*** (0.07)
n	24,219	24,219	24,219
Log Likelihood	-13,757.00	-13,310.69	-13,298.15

Source: Latinobarometer (1996-2013).

Note: Binomial logistic regression. Country dummies included but not shown.

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

decrease when the executive manages to stay in office as crises would have failed to function as an accountability mechanism.

The rival interpretation claims that presidential crises actually constitute a threat to democracy as they result from an instrumentalization of constitutional provisions. Those crises would incidently lower citizen control over political developments by overpassing the results of elections, which citizens expect to be enforced. Results confirming this interpretation would indicate that citizens' satisfaction with democracy is lowered by crises that lead to the president leaving office, since it would indicate the failure of election results to be enforced and foster higher uncertainty. Accordingly, satisfaction should be unmoved by crises concluding with the president staying in office considering that citizens would simply expect the results of elections to be enforced, and therefore never expected those crises to succeed in the first place.

The results of the three pooled logistic regression models we ran are presented in Table 2. The first model only includes a dummy variable to indicate whether respondents were interviewed before or after a crisis (*Post-crisis*) along with the sociodemographic controls. Model 2 includes the full range of control variables while *Post-crisis* remains the main

independent variable. Finally, Model 3 distinguishes between crises' outcome while keeping the controls included in the second model.

Results of the first Model indicate that presidential crises, irrespective of their outcome, foster dissatisfaction toward democracy. The inclusion of attitudinal and contextual variables in Model 2 further strengthens the negative impact of crises on citizen satisfaction with democracy. Adding a distinction between crises' outcome in Model 3 sheds more light on the impact that those events have on citizen satisfaction with democracy. Both coefficients are negative but only *President left office* reaches statistical significance, capturing virtually all the effect of the *Post-crisis* variable in Model 2. Results therefore indicate that crises leading the president to leave office have a negative impact on individual levels of satisfaction with democracy while crises that conclude with the president staying in office do not have an effect on citizens' satisfaction with democracy.

To facilitate the interpretation of results, we graphically present predicted probabilities to express satisfaction with democracy generated by running Monte Carlo simulations with the package Clarify. Results, shown in Figure 1, are based on Model 3 of Table 2 and express the predicted probabilities of respondents to express satisfaction with democracy in the three scenarios we are interested in: before a crisis, after a crisis that concluded with the president staying in office, and after a crisis that concluded with the executive leaving office. All crises were weighted equally to correct the effect of unequal sample size in different countries. The dots represent the mean predicted probabilities to express satisfaction with democracy according to every scenario, to which we added a 95% confidence interval.

The figure makes clear the different effect that crises outcome exert on satisfaction with democracy. Whereas a crisis that ends with the president staying in office doesn't foster any statistically significant effect on satisfaction with democracy, the story is different when the president leaves office. The results clearly indicate that the latter cases lead to a decrease in individual levels of satisfaction with democracy. On average, predicted satisfaction drops by 6 percentage points when presidential crises end with presidents leaving office, and this result is statistically significant at a 95% confidence interval.<sup>5</sup>

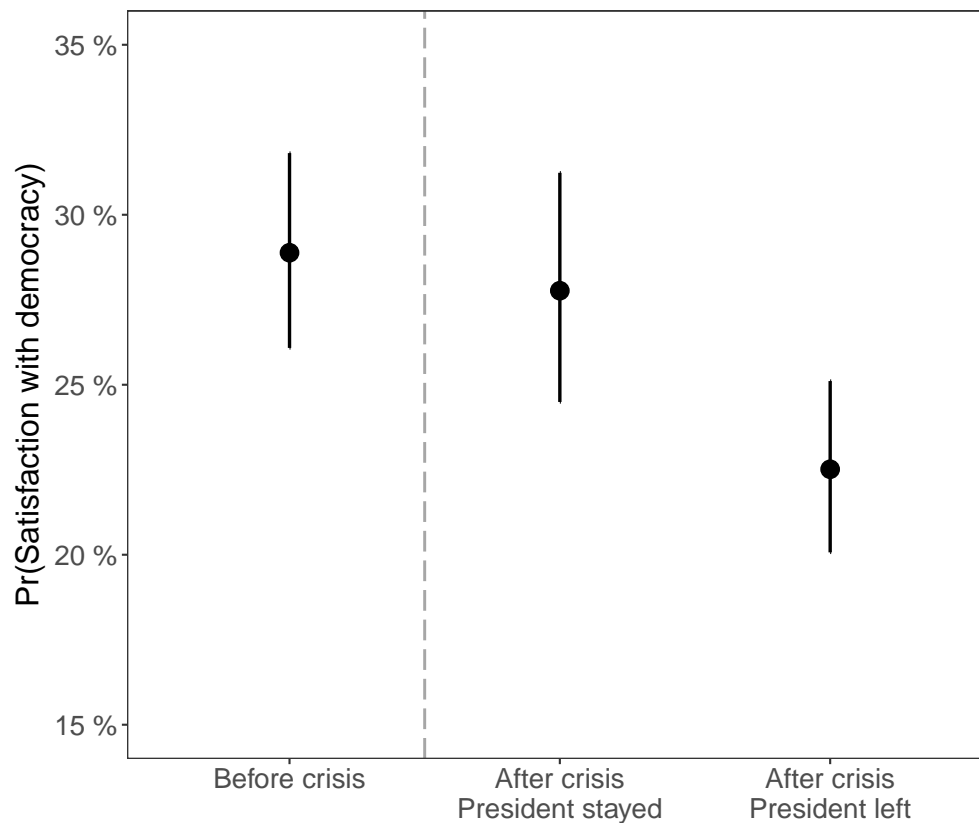
The results of our analysis allow us to formulate two broad conclusions. First, presidential crises that end with the president staying in office do not appear to have an effect on citizens' satisfaction with democracy, neither positive nor negative. The analysis shows a very slight decline in the mean level of satisfaction with democracy, but it is impossible to make inferences on the basis of such a small and statistically insignificant effect. Second, countries experiencing a presidential crisis that concludes with the president leaving office witness a significant drop in satisfaction with democracy among their citizens. This effect is statistically significant and robust to the inclusion of various contextual and individual-level control variables. Our results incidently show strong support for the competing hypothesis, but fail to do so regarding our main hypothesis.

A point needs to be made about the size of the effect we observe. Even though a drop of 6 percentage points might not appear dramatic, it nevertheless has very significant implications for two separate reasons. Statistically, Figure 1 shows that predicted satisfaction with

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<sup>5</sup>The predicted probabilities of the two crises outcome slightly fail to reach statistical significance between one another at a 95% confidence interval. This could be explained by the much smaller amount of cases in our crises list that end with the president staying in office, which lead to a larger confidence interval for that particular scenario.

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities to express satisfaction with democracy



Source: Latinobarometer (1996-2013).

Note: Predicted probabilities are generated from Model 3. Dots represent mean values with 95% confidence intervals shown.

democracy is already very low before a crisis in the countries under study, at roughly 29% on average. The margin for decrease is incidentally very low and finding a further drop of 6 percentage points therefore constitutes a strong effect. On the more substantive side, a decrease in satisfaction with democracy in countries where such satisfaction is already very low could prove highly consequential for unfolding political events. Considering that dissatisfaction with democracy has been associated with a drop in support for democracy and the rise of undemocratic populist leaders (Coppedge, 2005; Sarsfield & Echegaray, 2005), presidential crises can now be understood to jeopardize democracy when they lead to presidents leaving office before the end of their constitutional term. In light of our results, it appears interesting to underscore that two of South America's populist leaders that have been accused of scaling back their country's political rights, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, have both won elections following crises in which the president left office before the end of his term.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Evo Morales was elected president in 2005, following the resignation of Carlos Mesa during the same year,

Our results also have significant theoretical implications. They do not offer any support to the “presidential crises as an accountability mechanism” thesis as we do not find any evidence in favor of our main hypothesis. On the contrary, we do find strong evidence supporting the “presidential crises as a threat to democracy” thesis. Our analysis therefore relates well to the literature on citizens’ aversion to uncertainty. As suggested by this literature, Latin American citizens appear to expect democracy to foster stability and predictable political processes. Presidential crises are a threat to such stability and predictability, and when they lead to presidents leaving office before the end of their term, we believe citizens perceive those events as failures of democracy to bring about predictable political processes. Individuals expect to know precisely when and how presidents might leave office. Elections offer them such predictability, and they are accordingly unsatisfied when their results are not enforced as constitutionally planned. This result is particularly significant considering that presidential crises jeopardize the main foundation of presidentialism and its predictability: fixed-term mandate. Challenging it therefore fosters great uncertainty, which leads to more dissatisfaction with democracy. The lack of effect related to crises in which the president remains in office further supports our interpretation. The absence of effect can be explained by the very simple fact that citizens expect presidents to stay in office until the end of their term. Incidentally, they are not more satisfied when presidents manage to stay in office, because they were already expecting them to serve until the end of their term.

## Conclusion

Over the last decades, presidential crises have emerged as a new form of political instability in Latin America. Much has been written about the phenomenon, but very little empirical work has been done in a comparative perspective. This paper contributes to fill that void by testing competing interpretations of those events with an extensive database of individual-level data. Two conflicting theses have been tested. The first one claims that presidential crises constitute a new accountability mechanism akin to a parlementarization of Latin American presidentialism, and therefore offers more control to citizens over the political developments in their country. The second interpretation is less idealistic and claims that presidential crises result mostly from instrumentalizations of constitutional provisions, therefore constituting a threat to democracy. We added insights from the literature on uncertainty to the latter interpretation to further clarify why could presidential crises be understood as threats to democracy.

Focusing on twelve presidential crises that took place during the 1997-2012 period in the Latin American region, we analyzed the impact of those crises on the levels of satisfaction with democracy expressed by their citizens. Using public opinion survey data, we used the last survey conducted before a crisis and the first survey conducted following the crisis to measure how individuals’ propensity to express satisfaction with democracy was affected by those events. To test our hypotheses, we distinguished between two distinct outcomes of crises: whether a president stays in office or leaves office. We ran a pooled logistic regression

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whereas Rafael Correa was elected president in 2006, a year and a half after the impeachment of Lucio Gutiérrez. The latter crisis is part of our analysis, but the bolivian one had to be excluded considering overlapping surveys with the 2003 crisis in the same country that we included in our sample.

model and, on the basis of the results, we generated predicted probabilities of expressing satisfaction with democracy before a crisis, after a crisis during which the president managed to remain in office, and after a crisis that led to the president leaving office.

As expected, our results show that not all crises have the same effect. Those concluding with the president leaving office have a strong negative effect on individual satisfaction with democracy whereas we do not find any effect for crises terminating with the president staying in office. We therefore find evidence that strongly support the “presidential crises as a threat to democracy” thesis, but we do not find any evidence in favor of the “presidential crises as an accountability mechanism” thesis.

Our results illustrate that Latin American citizens expect democracy to bring about predictability in the political processes and are therefore unsatisfied with an unscheduled removal of the executive. That interpretation not only suits well our results, but it is also highly consistent with the findings of other authors demonstrating that Latin American voters are profoundly risk-averse (Cinta, 1999; Morgenstern & Zechmeister, 2001; Quinn & Woolley, 2001; Magaloni, 2006). As citizens expect democracy to foster political stability and predictability, their satisfaction with it is contingent upon its ability to deliver such public goods. If democracy fails to bring along political stability and predictability, as in the case of an unscheduled change of executive, individuals are less satisfied with democracy and become more prone to support other regime options. Presidential crises can thus be understood to jeopardize democracy in the region as they can result in declining support for democracy.

Finally, our analysis also speaks to the literature on “the perils of presidentialism”, which perceives the fixed term length of presidents as a feature of presidentialism that is detrimental to democratic regime stability. Our analysis shows a different side of the story. In the eyes of citizens, the fixed term length of presidents appears to be a sign of stability and certainty. We believe this warrants further research on the topic. Institutions have historically been mostly studied regarding how they impact political behavior, especially elite behavior. Very little is known about their impact on political attitudes in emerging democracies, and how they relate to regime stability and change. Our paper hints at a few answers, but we believe it more importantly highlights the need for further research on the topic.

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