



Presidential approval and power concentration as leverage of political support: Evidence from Latin America

Politics

1–17

© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/02633957251403882

journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Asbel Bohigues** 

University of Valencia, Spain

Mariana Sendra 

University of Deusto, Spain

Abstract

This article examines how presidential approval influences political support, conditional on the degree of power concentration in the executive. While previous research shows that presidential approval influences democratic and tolerant attitudes, this study advances the argument that, in certain contexts, citizens' evaluations of presidential performance become proxies for their assessments of the political system as a whole. Consequently, these evaluations affect political support, measured through respect for institutions and support for the political system. Moreover, this effect is conditioned by cross-national variation in the degree of power concentration in the executive. The analysis focuses on Latin America, drawing on the AmericasBarometer (2006–2023). The findings reveal that presidential approval is positively associated with political support, but that such relationship is contingent: concentrated power strengthens political support when approval is high yet undermines it when approval declines, creating strong incentives for presidents engaged in executive aggrandisement to sustain broad approval.

Keywords

Latin America, presidential approval, political support, power concentration

Received: 18th March 2025; Revised version received: 14th October 2025; Accepted: 17th November 2025

Introduction

This article aims to analyse the effects of presidential approval and power concentration in the president on political support, namely, support for the political system and respect for institutions, with comparative evidence from Latin America. At least since Linz (1990), the literature has addressed the perils of power concentration in the president. In

Corresponding author:

Asbel Bohigues, Department of Constitutional Law, Political Science and Administration, Faculty of Law, University of Valencia, Avda. dels Tarongers s/n, Valencia 46022, Spain.

Email: asbel.bohigues@uv.es

this article, we go one step further and explore how presidential approval and concentration of power within the presidency may erode not only institutions and the system, as literature has long noted, but also the support and respect they might enjoy.

For so particular a goal as this, we focus on Latin America, a region marked by the presidential configuration as well as both strong and weak presidents and institutions (Cox and Morgenstern, 2001; Levitsky and Murillo, 2013). For data, we rely on the AmericasBarometer surveys (LAPOP lab, 2024) for the years 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016/2017, 2018/2019, and 2023, with respondents amounting to over 160,000 Latin Americans, surveyed in 18 countries across 18 years. We concentrate on the following two questions: the degree to which citizens support the political system and respect political institutions.

Our theoretical proposal posits that higher presidential approval leads to higher political support; that is, higher support for the political system and higher respect for its institutions. This, we argue, is because in the Latin American context, marked by both presidentialist design and personalism (Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid, 2020), there is a tendency to identify institutions and the political system as a whole with the figure of president. This association would lead those who more disapprove the president's performance to equate the president with the political system's overall functioning, thereby respecting and supporting the system less than those who approve it.

In addition, this research considers current levels of concentration of power in the president, and how this may also erode political support, directly or indirectly. We argue that in contexts of higher concentration of power in the figure of the president, the effect of presidential approval on political support will be stronger than in contexts where power concentration in the president is lower. The article therefore takes concentration of power in the president into consideration as a continuous variable with different levels, and not as a constant in the region.

Building on mixed-effects linear regressions, we confirm both theoretical expectations. First, presidential approval is a strong and statistically significant predictor of political support: higher levels of presidential approval are associated with more respect for political institutions and stronger support for the political system. Second, although power concentration generally exerts a negative effect on political support, our main finding is that its impact varies depending on how citizens evaluate presidential performance. At the country-year level, greater concentration of power in the presidency is associated with lower levels of support for the political system and weaker respect for institutions. However, this effect is mitigated when presidential approval is high, while the positive relationship between approval and political support is simultaneously reinforced. These results suggest that presidents who concentrate power may nonetheless sustain legitimacy as long as citizens approve of their performance – thereby enabling the weakening of democratic institutions and checks and balances, as previous studies have shown (Singh and Carlin, 2015). When approval declines, however, power concentration undermines political support. Thus, executives engaged in authority aggrandisement have strong incentives to cultivate and maintain broad popular approval.

The article proceeds as follows. After this Introduction, we review the literature on political support, presidential approval and the attitudinal effects of power concentration. Next, we present the data and our methodology, followed by our analysis and results. The final section discusses our main findings and draws conclusions.

Political support and presidential approval

The Eastonian definition of political support as the extent to which individuals evaluate political objects positively or negatively was reinforced by Norris (2011: 20), for whom the concept must be considered a 'psychological orientation' of citizens toward democratic government. In short, the notion of political support carries with it a multi-dimensional mix of attitudes about political leaders, institutions and the system as a whole.

Easton (1975) drew an important conceptual distinction between specific and diffuse political support. While the former focuses on elected and appointed officeholders, responsible for making and implementing political decisions within the nation-state, the latter represents relatively abstract feelings towards the nation-state and its agencies. Specific support for incumbent officeholders is expected to fluctuate over time, in response to short-term contextual factors, such as the performance of a particular administration, major shifts in public policy or changes in party leadership. Conversely, political institutions persist even though incumbent leaders are removed from office. Generalised support towards the community and regime helps citizens accept the legitimacy of the system even when people are highly critical of particular political processes, incumbent party leaders, or specific public policies and outcomes (Norris, 2011). In this research, we assume that specific support (for a president) is meaningfully associated with diffuse support (for the political system and respect for institutions), the latter being a key factor related to the legitimacy and stability of democracies (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Norris, 2011; Claassen, 2020; Claassen and Magalhães, 2022).

This association stems from the fact that political support has both affective and evaluative foundations. From the affective perspective, political support is shaped by various political and cultural factors. For instance, citizens may accept the authority of the nation-state and its institutions out of blind loyalty or strong patriotic sentiment ('my country, right or wrong') (Norris, 2011: 21). High levels of social capital (manifested as social and political trust) also motivate citizens to support a regime even during difficult times (Chen, 2017; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). Previous research has highlighted the 'winner-loser gap' as one of the most important affective drivers of political support (Banducci and Karp, 2003; Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022). That is, in the short term, system support can be shaped by whether one's preferred candidate or party won or lost an election. Winners are more likely to perceive that their views and interests are represented in government (Daoust et al., 2023), whereas losers may derive less utility from the political system and, as a result, express greater dissatisfaction with its functioning (Curini et al., 2012). Thus, the effects of electoral outcomes on political support are especially pronounced among voters with high levels of affective and perceived ideological polarisation (Janssen, 2024). Supporting a winning party can lead citizens to express more favourable views of the protection of freedoms, even in regimes where democracy is weak (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022), and to be less critical of how democratic institutions operate (Banducci and Karp, 2003).

On the other hand, the evaluative perspective conceptualises support as an individual's attitudinal or behavioural orientation towards a political object, based on rational assessments (Easton, 1975). In this sense, support may be more conditional, depending upon a more rational calculation of state performance (Norris, 2011: 21). Acknowledging that high and sustained levels of political trust and regime support do not necessarily prevent a decline in support during periods of severe economic hardship or perceived political underperformance (Newton, 2006), the evaluative perspective holds that political support

is closely tied to citizens' dissatisfaction with political system outcomes. These outcomes may include perceptions that the national economy has stagnated or worsened compared with the previous year, that income distribution is unfair or that the incumbent president is performing poorly (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2020). In short, low political support is understood as a short-term reaction to negative evaluations of government performance.

This perspective finds even more evidence in Latin America's presidential systems, where the political system and government are at times scarcely perceived by citizens as separate entities. Due to the region's prevailing presidential form of government, where presidents receive a direct mandate from citizens and are both the symbolic and legitimate embodiment of the nation (Melo, 2023), centrality of power is placed in the figure of the president, above and beyond political parties, unions or any other actors. In such scenarios, citizens are less likely to account for exogenous factors affecting political and economic performance, making it more difficult for them to distinguish governmental competence from mere chance when evaluating governments (Campello and Zucco, 2016).

Prior research has already shown that presidential approval in Latin America fosters group identification between those who evaluate the president positively and those who do so negatively. This identification, in turn, can strongly influence how individuals assess the political system and shape their attitudes towards political participation and civic culture (Carlin and Singer, 2011; Singer, 2018, 2021; Sendra and Bohigues, 2023).

Indeed, Carlin and Singer (2011) suggest that specific support for the president, grounded in mixed support for polyarchy, undermines diffuse support for free contestation and participation. Furthermore, those who perceive government performance as positive would be less likely to express support for vertical accountability (protecting free speech and civil liberties, or preserving opposition party rights) (Singer, 2018). Often, in contexts where democratic practice has waned, they will not even acknowledge poor institutional performance or the low level of democracy (Singer, 2021). Moreover, individuals who evaluate the president's performance more positively tend to express lower support for civil liberties extended to system critics, including their rights to run for public office, engage in peaceful protest or appear on television (Sendra and Bohigues, 2023).

In addition, whether negative evaluations of system outputs, such as economic performance, may lead individuals to 'punish' incumbents by withdrawing their support, while positive evaluations encourage continued support, then electoral 'winners' and 'losers' (i.e. those who did or did not vote for the president) may change their minds and revise their evaluations of the administration in response to ongoing system performance. We therefore argue that presidential approval, as an evaluative factor, is a more flexible and accurate indicator of current support for the president than retrospective electoral alignment, such as the winner–loser gap.

Thus, building on the above evidence, we expect that *presidential approval will positively predict political support* (H1).

Power concentration and political support

While we argue that responses to political support questions are shaped by evaluative considerations, such as presidential performance, we also develop theoretical expectations linking this performance-based assessment to an institutional factor: the concentration of power in the executive; specifically in the figure of the president in the Latin American context. This research aims to disentangle how models of presidentialism (with

high concentration of power in the figure of the president)¹ influence political support, depending on the level of presidential approval. We aim to extend the ‘happy medium’ thesis, which posits that regime support in Latin America is highest when executives possess moderate legislative power (Singh and Carlin, 2015), by emphasising that this relationship is contingent on citizens’ approval or disapproval of presidential performance.

Linz indicated that a style of presidential politics that results from zero-sum elections and a head of government whose survival is separate from that of the legislature can imperil democracy (Linz, 1990: 60–62). Indeed, the winner-take-all elections tend to generate a sense of plebiscitarian legitimacy, where a president may see themselves as the only elected representative of the popular will and thus conflate his supporters with ‘the people’ as a whole. Moreover, the institutional attributes of presidentialism – competing claims of political legitimacy from president and legislature, rigidity of fixed terms, low incentives to form coalitions – all contribute to democratic instability. Several scholars have continued to tweak, update and re-litigate these central propositions (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Brussino and Alonso, 2021; Cassell et al., 2018; Hiroi and Omori, 2009; Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997; Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2025).

The literature also identifies the strength of presidents as a feature that affects the workings of the political system. Presidents may strengthen institutions of horizontal accountability (such as the legislature, judiciary and ombudsperson’s office) or they may weaken, bypass or manipulate these institutions. The executive branch may respect the rule of law or else routinely violate it (Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid, 2020). In Latin America’s presidentialism, the system of checks and balances has often failed to contain presidential ambitions (O’Donnell, 1998). Meanwhile, the region’s ‘reactive’ legislatures often lack the resources and power to carry out their own policy agenda and are restricted to amending and vetoing executive proposals (Cox and Morgenstern, 2001). However, this dynamic may not hold in multiparty contexts such as Brazil, where presidents are compelled to form coalitions with the diverse parties represented in parliament².

Still, presidents with greater authority and institutional and legislative powers are in a better position to unilaterally drive the policy agenda (Cheibub and Limongi, 2002; Scartascini et al., 2010; Martínez-Gallardo, 2012). Indeed, there are currently numerous presidents in Latin America who have interfered with the judiciary, bypassed or manipulated the legislature, and ignored the law with impunity (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Constitutional limits on power have often been cast aside, when found inconvenient: witness the recent repeal of presidential term limits in many countries. Some presidents have in fact ruled with a sort of ‘delegative democracy’ (O’Donnell, 1994) that amounts to little more than their own whims, even when democratic competition has remained intact.

Overall, in contexts where presidents are strong and the other branches of government are weak, the former can act with fewer constraints and more easily politicise the governing apparatus (Polga-Hecimovich, 2021). As a consequence, the lines between the figure of the executive and the system itself become blurred, driving citizens to perceive institutions and those who occupy them as indistinguishable. Hence, the way in which presidential authority is exerted has direct consequences for the citizenry’s views on the political system. In fact, when it comes to presidential investiture, citizens may also express concern about how power is exercised by the president and for what purposes (Reeves and Rogowski, 2022). The public’s lack of knowledge on the details of executive orders and other tools of presidential power does not indicate that citizens have no opinions regarding their use. Core values influence citizens’ basic beliefs about the structure of

government. Even in the absence of specific knowledge on the mechanics of unilateral action, core values shape citizens' assessments on the acceptability of unilateral authority (Reeves and Rogowski, 2022). In this line and relying on the previous evidence, we expect to confirm that *in contexts of higher power concentration in the president, citizens' political support will be undermined* (H2).

Nevertheless, this perception might be moderated by the degree of the president's performance approval. In theory, citizens should prevent excesses of power by signalling their willingness to withdraw their support from presidents who undermine democratic institutions (Fearon, 2011; Weingast, 1997); yet presidents who undermine democratic institutions often maintain significant popular support. In many countries, favourable public opinion has, in fact, facilitated efforts by presidents to undermine constitutional checks and balances (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Przeworski, 2019). Evidence shows that incumbency shapes preferences regarding presidential power, whereby representatives from incumbent parties are more supportive of a stronger executive (Alles, 2025). For instance, individuals who support the incumbent also tend to support executive aggrandisement (Albertus and Grossman, 2021; Simonovits et al., 2022; Singer, 2018). Scholars have also studied how power and agency shape accountability as well as the psychological processes behind the actions of principals, suggesting that the principal–agent relationship is affected by group identities nurtured by a political leadership. For instance, evaluations of the economy by individuals have more bearing on presidential approval where the president has strong legislative powers and makes frequent use of decrees (Carlin and Singh, 2015). The same has been found outside of Latin America: in Turkey, those who prefer a stable government despite the risk of it being undemocratic as well as those who feel satisfied with the level of democracy have a higher probability of feeling closer to (or voting for) the officialist AKP, whereas non-AKP supporters declare their preference for a parliamentary system and dissatisfaction with that party's performance on democracy (Öney and Ardag, 2022).

In addition, the diversity of individual attitudes and orientations must also be taken into account. Separating those who express delegative attitudes from those who express liberal attitudes, Booth and Seligson (2005) showed that liberal citizens are more critical of the judiciary and legislature than are delegative citizens, but they are also more likely to ascribe the performance of the judiciary and legislature to those institutions themselves. In this vein, analysing the relationship between delegative democracy, public attitudes and institutional support, Walker (2009) compares the effects of regime attitudes on institutional support in Central America. He found that if a significant percentage of democratic citizens expresses delegative preference, this is likely to lower the accumulation of a 'reservoir of goodwill' that translates to institutional loyalty for the judiciary and legislature. Consequently, a high level of support for unrestrained presidentialism is unlikely to contribute to the horizontal institutional accountability necessary to consolidate democratic governance (Walker, 2009). The same rationale can be connected to authoritarian and populist attitudes and styles that erode institutional respect. As chief executives with weak formal attributions have managed to move towards authoritarianism, the framework of official rules and procedures may prove rather defenceless (Weyland, 2020). For instance, Bessen (2024) showed that populist discourse can increase support for executive aggrandisement by framing presidents as champions of 'the people' and the institutional opposition as an obstacle to the popular will. In the same line, comparing regime support among voters who voted for the incumbent president ('winners') and those who did not ('losers'), in countries with both populist and non-populist

presidents, evidence shows that the difference in regime support between winning and losing voters is larger when a populist president rules. Although democracy is at risk, or has already been eroded, support for the regime is greater among winning voters. That is to say, voters who see themselves as represented by the actions and declarations of populist rulers are also those who express more support for the regime and more confidence in the institutions (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2021).

In sum, following this line of reasoning, political support is not expected to decline among citizens who approve of the president's performance. Even in contexts where strong presidentialism may weaken democratic institutions, presidential supporters are likely to perceive the political system as fair and effective. Therefore, the negative correlation between power concentration in the presidency and political support is expected to reverse as presidential approval increases. Likewise, whether the relationship between presidential approval and political support is positive, power concentration should amplify this positive association. In other words, our central expectation is that *the higher power concentration in the presidency, the stronger the positive effect of presidential approval on political support* (H3).

Data and method

We rely on the AmericasBarometer from LAPOP lab (2024) for datasets from the region, ranging from 2006 to 2023, the most recent wave.³ This provides models with over 160,000 individuals surveyed in 18 countries⁴ across 18 years, for a total of more than 130 country-years.

The AmericasBarometer includes for all country-years two specific questions that operationalise the very idea of political support: *'To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of [country]?' and 'To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country]?'.* The interviewee selects a number on a 7-point scale, where 1 means 'not at all' and 7 'a lot'. We do not posit distinct theoretical expectations for each question, and have chosen to keep the questions separate, to better test our expectation regarding how presidential approval impacts political support⁵. Both questions are available in all countries and years, and they capture distinct dimensions of the broader concept of political support. By including these two complementary items in our analysis, we provide a more comprehensive explanation of the covariation between presidential approval and political support.

Thus, our main independent variable at the individual level is approval of the president's job performance. The AmericasBarometer question is as follows: *'Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President [incumbent]?'.* The interviewee picks a number on a 5-point scale, where 1 is 'very bad' and 5 'very good'.

Following previous works (Sendra and Bohigues, 2023; Singer, 2021), we also included an additional variable to control the effect of the 'winner-loser gap': the possibility of having voted for the president (i.e. the winning candidate) in the past⁶. We do this through a categorical variable with four options: 'did not vote in the last elections'; 'blank/null vote'; 'voted for the losing candidate'; 'voted for the winning candidate'⁷. This approach allows us to incorporate a key predictor identified in the literature, the winner-loser gap (expanded to include blank and null voters as well as abstentionists), while simultaneously accounting for our central argument concerning the effect of presidential approval.

We also include a number of controls at the individual level: ideology (1 = left to 10 = right), interest in politics (1 = no interest to 4 = a lot of interest), gender (binary, 1 = woman), urban/rural (binary, 1 = urban), age (continuous), and education⁸ (0 = none to 3 = tertiary).

As regards the country-year level, we consider the degree of power concentration by turning to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Presidentialism Index. The label of this index may be misleading, since it focuses on the extent to which there is ‘systemic concentration of political power in the hands of one individual who resists delegating all but the most trivial decision-making tasks’ (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997: 63), and the extent to which such individual is free from constraints by other institutions or actors (Coppedge et al., 2024: 300–301). The 0–1 scale is coded such that lower scores mean less concentration (more democratic) and higher scores more concentration (less democratic)⁹. As noted, the label of the index may be misleading, since the Presidentialism Index is available for all countries, including those with parliamentary systems. Regardless of this label, and of V-Dem’s own conceptualisation of presidentialism, the index effectively captures the concentration of power in the figure of the executive, whether that is a president in a presidential system or a prime minister in a parliamentary system. Accordingly, in this article we refer specifically to power concentration in the president, given that all Latin American countries in our analysis operate under presidential systems.

In addition to the power concentration, we include as a country-year level control the current economic performance – a key dimension in the evaluation of Latin American presidents (Carlin et al., 2022) – of each country-year from the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI).¹⁰ Table A1 in the Appendix displays the descriptive statistics of all variables.

Since we are interested in both individual and country-year level variables, and since interviewees are nested in country-years, we estimate a multilevel mixed-effects linear regression. The model assumes a random intercept and a random slope for the rating of the job performance of the president. The model also includes a cross-level interaction between power concentration, at country-year level, and presidential approval, at individual level. This allows us to test not only whether support for the political system and respect for institutions are conditional on presidential approval (H1) and the concentration of power in the president (H2), plus controls, but also whether the effect of presidential approval is reinforced when power concentration is higher (H3).

Analysis

Table 1 displays the multilevel mixed-effects linear regression¹¹ – two models for each dependent variable, with and without the cross-level interaction. We employ two-level models in which individuals – the unit of analysis – are nested within country-years¹².

In line with the literature, the president’s job rating is a consistent predictor of both respect for political institutions and support for the political system, thus confirming H1: the more positively citizens rate the president’s performance, the more they respect institutions and support the political system.

Similarly, having voted for the winning candidate does indeed have a positive impact on support for the political system when compared with citizens who voted for a losing candidate or ‘blank/null’, or who did not vote. However, when it comes to respect for institutions, the differences vanish between those who voted for the winner and those who

Table 1. Determinants of Respect for Political Institutions and Support for the Political System.

	Respect for institutions		Support for political system	
	(1.1)	(1.2)	(2.1)	(2.2)
<i>Individual</i>				
Presidential job rating				
Voted winning (ref.)	0.37	(0.01)***	0.52	(0.02)***
Losing	-0.04	(0.02)*	-0.14	(0.02)***
Blank/Null	-0.22	(0.04)***	-0.36	(0.05)***
Didn't vote	0.00	(0.02)	-0.09	(0.01)***
Interest in politics	0.14	(0.01)***	0.20	(0.01)***
Ideology	0.05	(0.00)***	0.05	(0.00)***
Urban	-0.19	(0.01)***	-0.14	(0.02)***
Woman	0.14	(0.01)***	0.05	(0.01)***
Age	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Studies	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.04	(0.01)***
<i>Country</i>				
Economic performance	-0.05	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.05)
Power concentration	-0.81	(0.20)***	-1.45	(0.22)***
<i>Cross-level interaction</i>				
Presidential job rating $\times$ Power concentration				
Constant	3.60	(0.27)***	3.01	(0.38)***
Country-years	137	137	137	137
N	166,125	166,125	165,369	165,369

***<0.01; **<0.05. *<0.1. Standard errors in parenthesis. Stata command *mixed*.

Source: Own elaboration.

did not vote. Nevertheless, even considering electoral behaviour, presidential approval as measured by the rating of the president's performance remains positive and significant, as expected.

Regarding the other control variables at the individual level, all have similar effects on both dependent variables: the more citizens are interested in politics and lean towards right-leaning positions, the more they will respect institutions and support the political system. In parallel, we see more institutional respect and support from rural areas (negative coefficient for 'urban') and among women. Age and level of studies are not statistically significant, except for the negative coefficient of education in support for the political system.

As for the country-year level: first, economic performance has no effect at all on political support, neither on respect for political institutions, nor on support for the political system. Conversely, the degree of power concentration in the hands of the president does have attitudinal consequences. Greater concentration of power in the president leads to an overall decrease in respect for institutions and in support for the political system, thus confirming our second hypothesis.

Furthermore, when combining individual presidential approval with the levels of concentration of power in that president, the effect of presidential approval is stronger when power concentration is higher, as the cross-level interaction shows, which yields statistically significant positive coefficients for both dependent variables (respect and support). At the same time, presidential approval mitigates the negative relationship between power concentration and political support, thus confirming our third hypothesis.

To visualise this interaction more clearly, we include Figure 1 based on Models 1.2 and 2.2 from Table 1¹³, with the two endpoint responses to the question on presidential approval: 'very bad' (1) and 'very good' (5)¹⁴. The plots show that, in contexts where the concentration of power in the president is lower, the gap between those who approve and disapprove of the presidential performance is reduced. When there is low concentration of power, those who disapprove of the presidential performance respect institutions and support the political system less than do those who approve it, but to a much higher extent than in contexts of high concentration of power in the president.

Figure 1 also suggests that those who approve of the presidential performance consistently exhibit higher levels of respect for institutions and support for the political system because, we argue, 'their' president (whom they perceive as performing well) is understood to be in charge of those institutions and political system. Regardless of the degree of power concentration around 'their' president, their levels of respect for institutions and support for the political system remain mostly unaffected. On the opposite side, those who disapprove of the presidential performance will always respect institutions and support the political system much less than do those who approve of it. Nevertheless, this gap is considerably reduced when the concentration of power in the president is tempered. However, the gap never disappears entirely: even in a context with almost no power concentration – the country-year with the lowest score are Chile (2014, 2017, 2023), at 0.02 – the gap between those who approve and disapprove still exists, and the levels of political support differ significantly.

Put differently, Figure 1 also depicts a conditional dynamic whereby the negative association between presidential power concentration and political support is moderated by levels of presidential approval. When presidential approval is low, the relationship between power concentration and political support is negative – higher concentration corresponds to lower levels of support. As presidential approval increases, however, it exerts

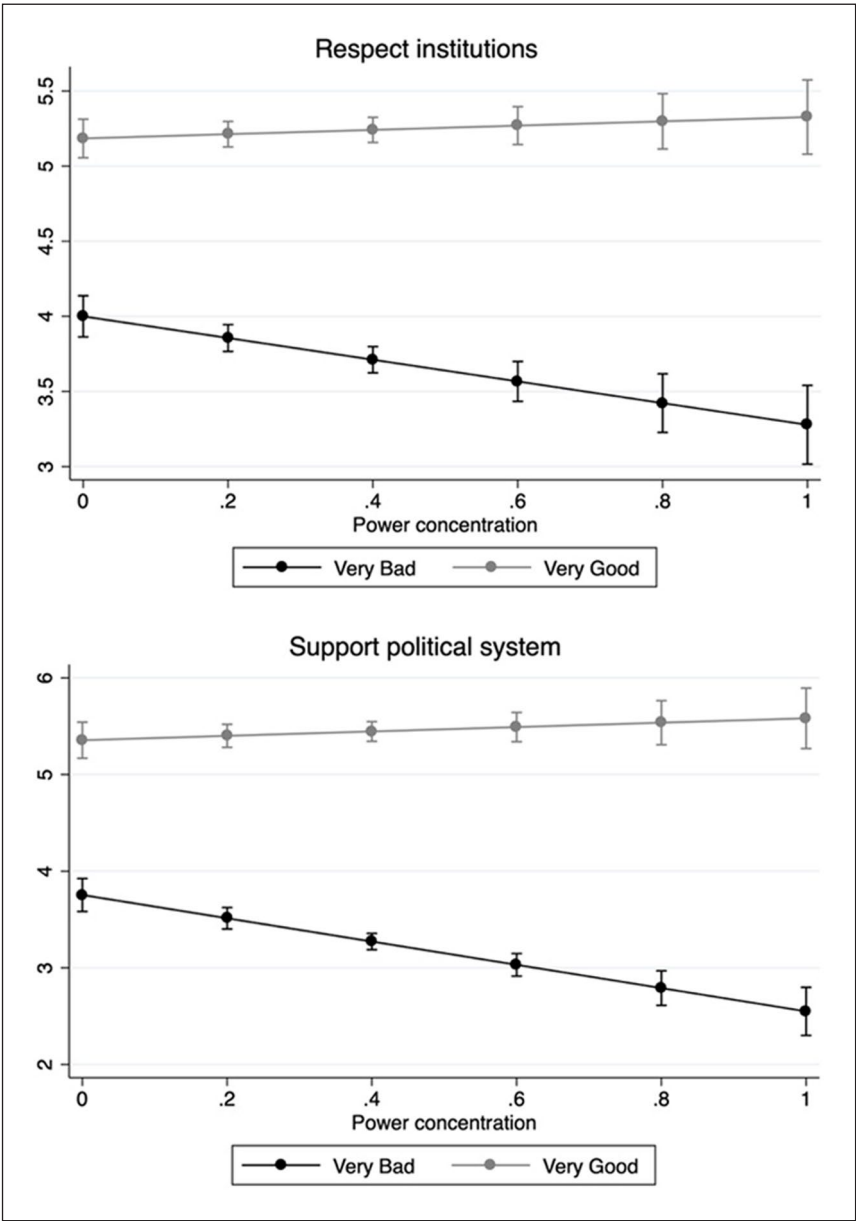


Figure 1. Marginal Effects: Presidential Approval across Concentration of Power on Respect for Political Institutions and Support for the Political System. Linear predictions, fixed portions. Stata command *margins*. Adjusted predictions with 95% CIs. Source: Own elaboration, from Table 1.

a positive moderating influence on this association. This effect is evident in that the predicted average levels of citizens’ support for the political system and respect for institutions remain relatively high rather than declining as power concentration rises.

These findings suggest that power concentration, in and of itself, shapes citizens' political attitudes. Presidential approval is positively associated with political support – measured as respect for institutions and support for the political system – and this effect is amplified in contexts where power concentration in the presidency is greater. As shown in Figure 1, power concentration widens the gap in political support between those who disapprove and those who approve of the president's performance. At the same time, when presidential approval is very high, the degree of power concentration becomes largely irrelevant – political support remains strong across all levels of concentration. Nevertheless, the steepest increase in political support occurs under high power concentration. This indicates that concentrated presidential power is compatible with strong political support, provided that approval remains high.

Discussion and conclusions

Half a century ago, Easton (1975) discussed the distinction between diffuse and specific political support; over 30 years ago, O'Donnell (1994) warned of the perils of delegative democracy in which a majority confers a president extraordinary powers to govern. This article seeks to bring these two strands of the literature by focusing on the attitudinal consequences of power concentration in the president on political support.

Following analysis of AmericasBarometer data for 18 Latin American countries across 18 years, we have confirmed our three hypotheses: presidential approval positively predicts political support (H1); power concentration in the president undermines citizens' political support (H2); and at higher levels of concentration of power in the president and presidential approval, the positive effect of presidential approval on political support becomes stronger and the negative effect of concentration of power on political support becomes weaker (H3). In other words, power concentration in the executive (president, in Latin America) is found to have attitudinal consequences at both the individual and country-year levels, moderated by presidential approval.

The individual effect here identified is related to the evaluative perspective of political support, measured by presidential approval. The better citizens evaluate president's job performance, the more they respect political institutions and support the political system. This finding speaks to the core of regime stability, as this regards not specific institutions but rather any institution and the system as a whole. With evidence from Latin America, this article shows that presidential approval extends beyond a simple evaluation of presidential performance; it significantly influences citizens' political support.

The country-year level effect identified here is twofold. First, greater concentration of power in the presidency erodes political support within a given country; consequently, reducing presidential power concentration could strengthen such support. Second, the degree of power concentration conditions the individual-level effect of presidential approval: in highly concentrated contexts, the gap between those who approve and those who disapprove of the president's performance – regarding respect for institutions and support for the political system – widens substantially. Viewed differently, high presidential approval can offset the decline in political support that tends to occur under contexts where presidents strongly concentrate power.

On this matter, our article addresses presidentialism as an institutional design prone to personalization (Luján and Acosta y Lara, 2024) and power concentration. This has allowed us to theorise about how the public identifies presidents with the political system and its institutions. Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of personalization and power concentration is

not exclusive to presidentialism (Musella and Rullo, 2024), as parliamentary systems can and do experience personalization (Musella, 2022) and power concentration, as in Hungary (Pozsár-Szentmiklósy, 2024). Nonetheless, our case is limited to Latin America, where presidentialism has long been associated with differing degrees of power concentration. For that reason, this work has addressed power concentration in presidents – as a continuum and not as a constant – while relying on the V-Dem index, available for all countries (and not only those considered presidentialist). Thus, the theoretical and methodological proposal here applied could certainly be expanded to regions marked by parliamentarism, such as Europe.

This article has encountered some limitations that can and should be addressed in future research. For example, the present work does not theorise around time differences, or dig into specific cases, whether of countries or of particular presidencies. We consider these two subjects to be beyond our present scope but acknowledge that they deserve attention in future works. Our findings open several avenues for future research. One promising direction involves exploring the political support of those who fall outside the traditional winner–loser dichotomy, such as blank/null voters and abstentionists. Another line of research concerns the implications of political support across varying levels of liberal and electoral democracy. Reverse causality also merits attention: does political support shape evaluations of presidential performance? Furthermore, in contexts of democratic backsliding led by the president, disapproval may reflect not simply low political support, but a form of democratic resistance. Each of these areas highlights the continued potential for advancing the study of presidential approval beyond the confines of the winner–loser gap, both in Latin America and in broader comparative contexts. While these important questions lie beyond the scope of the present article, they underscore the richness and relevance of this field.

The central aim of this research is to highlight an overlooked dimension of the ‘perils’ of presidentialism. Singer (2021) warned that presidential supporters are less likely to recognise signs of democratic erosion, as they tend to remain satisfied with democracy and to trust electoral institutions and outcomes. In this regard, our findings make two main contributions. First, the article shows that, revealingly, the more citizens disapprove of the president, the less likely they are to support the political system and to respect its institutions – underscoring the significant influence that performance evaluations exert on political attitudes, often extending to systemic legitimacy. Second, the fact that this pattern intensifies as more power is concentrated in the presidency yields a substantial implication: presidents who concentrate power may prevent political discontent and even bolster regime legitimacy, provided that citizens approve of their performance. Conversely, when presidential approval declines, power concentration in the executive erodes political support. Thus, presidents pursuing measures that weaken democratic institutions or undermine checks and balances – for instance, the aggrandisement of executive authority – have a clear incentive to maintain high public approval, potentially through effective macroeconomic management or policy performance, so that citizens continue to support them and the political system.

Acknowledgements

Previous versions of this article were presented at the CEL research seminar at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, XI Congreso de WAPOR Latinoamérica, 2024 Society for Latin American Studies-SLAS Conference, and XII Conference of the Nordic Latin American Research Network-NOLAN. We thank Matthew M. Singer, Ryan E. Carlin and Pedro C. Magalhães for their helpful comments which helped to improve the article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Asbel Bohigues  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9875-7743>

Mariana Sendra  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3750-3045>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See Llanos and Marsteintredet (2023) for a discussion on presidentialism in Latin America.
2. For a review on the debates over coalition presidentialism in Brazil, see Power (2010).
3. LAPOP fieldwork was conducted in years 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2023. We did not consider the 2021 wave, in which some variables of interest such as ideology were missing. The distribution of fieldwork across countries and years is presented in Appendix A, Table A5.
4. Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and the Dominican Republic.
5. Neither support for the political system nor respect for political institutions are significantly correlated with presidential approval. The Pearson correlation coefficients are -0.002 and -0.001 , respectively. The correlation between support for the political system and respect for political institutions is moderately positive (0.458).
6. Presidential approval and having voted for the president do not strongly covary. Among electoral winners (those who voted for the winning candidate), 55% approve of the president's job performance (good + very good). However, this convergence weakens across other categories: 34% of winners report a neutral stance (neither approve nor disapprove), while among electoral losers (those who voted for a losing candidate), only one-third disapprove (bad + very bad), 23% actually approve, and 44% remain neutral. This limited collinearity is reinforced by the inclusion of voters who cast blank or null ballots (3% of the sample) and those who did not vote at all (28%). Nearly one-third of the total sample does not fall within the winner–loser dichotomy, yet these individuals also express approval or disapproval of presidential performance. Full descriptive statistics on vote recall and presidential approval are presented in Appendix A (Tables A2, A3, and A4). Alternative models that exclude the vote recall variable are shown in Appendix C (Table C3); results do not differ significantly from those reported in Table 1.
7. Certainly not all presidents voted for by citizens were in office at the time of the fieldwork. For example, Pedro Castillo in Perú in 2023.
8. In the waves considered, LAPOP asked about education in two ways: years of schooling (until 2018/2019) and highest level of education reached ('none', 'primary. incomplete or complete', 'secondary incomplete or complete', 'tertiary/university/higher, incomplete or complete'). We reduced the latter to four categories ('none', 'primary', 'secondary', 'tertiary', whether complete or not) and recoded the former to the same four categories: none = 0 years of schooling, primary = 1–9 years, secondary = 10–14 years, tertiary = 15–18+ years.
9. This index, in fact, covers *de iure* and *de facto* power, and is formed with the following V-Dem indicators, coded by country-experts: executive respect for the constitution, whether there are mechanisms for oversight of the executive other than the legislature, whether the legislature controls its own resources, and investigates the executive in practice, high court independence, lower court independence, compliance with high court, compliance with judiciary and autonomy of the electoral management body that captures whether or not the President can influence its decisions and actions.
10. The quantitative reference indicators of BTI's economic performance are GDP, GDP per capita, purchasing power parity, GDP growth, inflation, unemployment, foreign direct investment, current account balance, public debt, cash surplus or deficit, tax revenue and gross capital formation (BTI 2024).

11. In addition to these models, we ran alternative models that included other independent variables as controls: the Liberal Democracy Index and Political Polarization from V-Dem at the country-year level, and support for democracy as well as egotropic and sociotropic economic evaluations of the economy (see Appendix C, Table C2). We also estimated the models without Venezuela and Nicaragua (Table C5). We found no significant divergences with the models here presented, and the main findings hold the same except for the interaction on respect for political institutions, where it is not significant. Also, although we examine eight different years, we have not theorised on time effects but only on overall effects across country-years. In addition, we estimated alternative models using an ordinal measure of presidential approval based on its five response categories ('very bad', 'bad', 'neither good nor bad', 'good' and 'very good'), including interaction terms with the country-year level variable of power concentration (Hainmueller et al., 2019). The results, presented in Appendix C, Table C1, do not differ significantly from those reported in Table 1.
12. We also estimated an alternative two-level model using the 18 country-year level units and individual observations, incorporating survey-wave fixed effects (see Appendix C, Table C4), and also a three-level model where individuals are nested in country-years, which are in turn nested in countries (see Appendix C, Table C6). As an additional robustness check, we estimated models separately for each survey wave; results are reported in Appendix C, Tables C7 to C14. Overall, the findings are consistent with those presented in Table 1, with the exception that power concentration and its interaction term lose statistical significance in some models. Presidential approval, however, remains a positive and significant predictor across all models.
13. Because statistical interactions are symmetrical, it is strongly recommended to examine both sides of the interaction (Berry et al., 2012). Accordingly, in Appendix B, Figures B3 and B4, we plot the effect of power concentration across presidential approval on political support. These complementary visualisations confirm that the effect of power concentration is negligible among individuals who rate the president's performance positively, while among those who evaluate the president negatively, the effect varies significantly depending on the level of power concentration, replicating the pattern shown in Figure 1 of the article.
14. Appendix B includes Figures B1 and B2, which display the estimated slopes for all response categories to the presidential approval question.

References

- Albertus M and Grossman G (2021) The Americas: When do voters support power grabs? *Journal of Democracy* 32(2): 116–131.
- Alles S (2025) Institutional opportunism: how electoral fortunes shape preferences for power-sharing institutions in Latin America. *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 50(2): 196–213.
- Banducci SA and Karp JA (2003) How elections change the way citizens view the political system: Campaigns, media effects and electoral outcomes in comparative perspective. *British Journal of Political Science* 33(3): 443–467.
- Berry WD, Golder M and Milton D (2012) Improving tests of theories positing interaction. *The Journal of Politics* 74(3): 653–671.
- Bessen BR (2024) Populist discourse and public support for executive aggrandizement in Latin America. *Comparative Political Studies* 57(13): 2118–2151.
- Booth JA and Seligson MA (2005) Political legitimacy and participation in Costa Rica: Evidence of arena shopping. *Political Research Quarterly* 58(4): 537–550.
- Booth JA and Seligson MA (2009) *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Political Support and Democracy in Eight Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bratton M and van de Walle N (1997) *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brussino S and Alonso D (2021) Citizens and democracy: Political legitimacy processes in Latin American democracies. In: Zúñiga C and López-López W (eds) *Political Psychology in Latin America*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp.11–33.
- Campello D and Zucco C (2016) Presidential success and the world economy. *Journal of Politics* 78(2): 589–602.
- Carlin RE and Singh SP (2015) Executive power and economic accountability. *The Journal of Politics* 77(4): 1031–1044.
- Carlin RE and Singer MM (2011) Support for polyarchy in the Americas. *Comparative Political Studies* 44(11): 1500–1526.

- Carlin RE, Hellwig T, Love GJ, Martínez-Gallardo C and Singer MM (2022) When growth is not enough: Inequality, economic gains, and executive approval. *Political Science Research and Methods* 10(2): 298–316.
- Cassell KJ, Booth JA and Seligson MA (2018) Support for coups in the Americas: Mass norms and democratization. *Latin American Politics and Society* 60(4): 1–25.
- Cheibub JA and Limongi F (2002) Democratic institutions and regime survival: Parliamentary and presidential democracies reconsidered. *Annual Review of Political Science* 5(1): 151–179.
- Chen D (2017) Local distrust and regime support: Sources and effects of political trust in China. *Political Research Quarterly* 70(2): 314–326.
- Claassen C (2020) Does public support help democracy survive? *American Journal of Political Science* 64(1): 118–134.
- Claassen C and Magalhães PC (2022) Effective government and evaluations of Democracy. *Comparative Political Studies* 55(5): 869–894.
- Coppedge MJ, Gerring CH, Knutsen SI, Lindberg J, Teorell D, Altman F, et al. (2024) *V-DEM Codebook V14* (V-Dem). Varieties of Democracy Project, March. Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
- Cox GW and Morgenstern S (2001) Latin America's reactive assemblies and proactive presidents. *Comparative Politics* 33(2): 171–189.
- Curini L, Jou W and Memoli V (2012) Satisfaction with democracy and the Winner/Loser Debate: The role of policy preferences and past experience. *British Journal of Political Science* 42(2): 241–261.
- Daoust JF, Plescia C and Blais A (2023) Are people more satisfied with democracy when they feel they won the election? No. *Political Studies Review* 21(1): 162–171.
- Easton D (1975) A re-assessment of the concept of political support. *British Journal of Political Science* 5(4): 435–457.
- Fearon JD (2011) Self-enforcing democracy. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126(4): 1661–1708.
- Haggard S and Kaufman R (2021) The anatomy of democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy* 32(4): 27–41.
- Hainmueller J, Mummolo J and Xu Y (2019) How much should we trust estimates from multiplicative interaction models? Simple tools to improve empirical practice. *Political Analysis* 27(2): 163–192.
- Hetherington MJ and Rudolph TJ (2015) *Why Washington Won't Work: Polarization, Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis*, Vol. 104. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hiroi T and Omori S (2009) Perils of parliamentarism? Political systems and the stability of democracy revisited. *Democratization* 16(3): 485–507.
- Janssen L (2024) Sweet victory, bitter defeat: The amplifying effects of affective and perceived ideological polarization on the winner–loser gap in political support. *European Journal of Political Research* 63(2): 455–477.
- LAPOP Lab (2024) *Americasbarometer*. Center for Global Democracy. Available at: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop
- Levitsky S and Murillo MV (2013) Lessons from Latin America: Building institutions on weak foundations. *Journal of Democracy* 24(2): 93–107.
- Linz JJ (1990) The perils of presidentialism. *Journal of Democracy* 1(1): 51–69.
- Linz JJ and Stepan A (1996) *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-communist Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Llanos M and Marsteintredet L (eds) (2023) *Latin America in Times of Turbulence: Presidentialism Under Stress*. New York: Routledge.
- Luján D and Acosta y Lara F (2024) Assessing electoral personalism in Latin American presidential elections. *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 16(3): 275–299.
- Mainwaring S and Shugart MS (eds) (1997) *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martínez-Gallardo C (2012) Out of the cabinet: What drives defections from the government in presidential systems? *Comparative Political Studies* 45(1): 62–90.
- Martínez-Gallardo C, Love GJ, Hartlyn J, Carlin RE, Hellwig T and Singer MM (2025) Executive approval dynamics in presidential and parliamentary democratic regimes. *Comparative Political Studies* 58(3): 526–561.
- Meléndez-Sánchez M and Vergara A (2024) The Bukele model: Will it spread? *Journal of Democracy* 35(3): 84–98.
- Melo MA (2023) Strong presidents, robust democracies? Separation of powers and rule of law in Latin America. *Brazilian Political Science Review* 3(2): 30–59.
- Monsiváis-Carrillo A (2020) La indiferencia hacia la democracia en América Latina. *Íconos: Revista De Ciencias Sociales XXIV* 66): 151–171.

- Monsiváis-Carrillo A (2021) El efecto divergente del populismo: Presidentes populistas y apoyo al régimen en América Latina. *Política y Gobierno* 28(1). <http://www.politicaygobierno.cide.edu/index.php/pyg/article/view/1403>
- Monsiváis-Carrillo A (2022) Permissive winners? The quality of democracy and the winner–loser gap in the perception of freedoms. *Political Studies* 70(1): 173–194.
- Musella F (2022) *Monocratic Government: The Impact of Personalisation on Democratic Regimes*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Musella F and Rullo L (2024) The personalization of government: Concept and comparative analysis. *Democratization* 1: 1–22.
- Newton K (2006) Political support: Social capital, civil society and political and economic performance. *Political Studies* 54(4): 846–864.
- Norris P (2011) *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Donnell G (1994) Delegative democracy. *Journal of Democracy* 5(1): 55–69.
- O'Donnell G (1998) Horizontal accountability in new democracies. *Journal of Democracy* 9(3): 112–126.
- Öney B and Ardag MM (2022) The relationship between diffuse support for democracy and governing party support in a hybrid regime: Evidence with four representative samples from Turkey. *Turkish Studies* 23(1): 31–55.
- Polga-Hecimovich J (2021) The bureaucratic perils of presidentialism: Political impediments to good governance in Latin America. *Journal of Policy Studies* 36(4): 1–14.
- Power TJ (2010) Optimism, pessimism, and coalitional presidentialism: Debating the institutional design of Brazilian democracy. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 29: 18–33.
- Pozsár-Szentmiklósy Z (2024) Informal concentration of powers in illiberal constitutionalism: The case of Hungary. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 16: 289–314.
- Przeworski A (2019) *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reeves A and Rogowski JC (2022) *No Blank Check: The Origins and Consequences of Public Antipathy Towards Presidential Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rhodes-Purdy M and Madrid RL (2020) The perils of personalism. *Democratization* 27(2): 321–339.
- Scartascini C, Stein EH, Tommasi M, Jones MP, Saiegh S, de Sousa MM and Hughes S (2010) *How Democracy Works: Political Institutions, Actors and Arenas in Latin American Policymaking*. Washington: Inter-American Development Bank.
- Sendra M and Bohigues A (2023) Presidential approval, tolerant attitudes, and economic performance: The case of Latin America. *Political Studies Review* 21(4): 662–679.
- Simonovits G, McCoy J and Littvay L (2022) Democratic hypocrisy and out-group threat: Explaining citizen support for democratic erosion. *The Journal of Politics* 84(3): 1806–1811.
- Singer MM (2018) Delegating away democracy: How good representation and policy successes can undermine democratic legitimacy. *Comparative Political Studies* 51(13): 1754–1788.
- Singer MM (2021) Fiddling while democracy burns: Partisan reactions to weak democracy in Latin America. *Perspectives on Politics* 21(1): 9–26.
- Singh SP and Carlin RE (2015) Happy medium, happy citizens: Presidential power and democratic regime support. *Political Research Quarterly* 68(1): 3–17.
- Walker LD (2009) Delegative democratic attitudes and institutional support in Central America. *Comparative Politics* 42(1): 83–101.
- Weingast BR (1997) The political foundations of democracy and the rule of the law. *American Political Science Review* 91(2): 245–263.
- Weyland K (2020) Populism's threat to democracy: Comparative lessons for the United States. *Perspectives on Politics* 18(2): 389–406.

Author biographies

Asbel Bohigues is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Valencia. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Salamanca. He is also the co-editor of the *Revista Latinoamericana de Opinión Pública*. His research lines include comparative politics, democracy and elites, with a regional specialization in Latin America.

Mariana Sendra is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Deusto (Bilbao, Spain). She holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Salamanca. She is also the Coeditor-in-Chief of the *Revista SAAP*. Her research is related to political representation of voters' preferences and attitudes, with an emphasis on right-wing populism in Latin America and Europe.