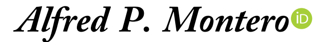
Critical Debates

Polarization and Populism in Latin America



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Laura Gamboa, *Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies Against the Erosion of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Figures, tables, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index, 306 pp.; hardcover $105.00, paperback $34.99, ebook $34.99.

Samuel Handlin, *State Crisis in Fragile Democracies: Polarization and Political Regimes in South America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Figures, tables, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index, 321 pp.; hardcover $113.00, paperback $34.99, ebook $34.99.

Matthew Rhodes-Purdy, Rachel Navarre, and Stephen Utych, *The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index, 285 pp.; hardcover $110.00, paperback $34.99.

Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, eds. *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*. The Brookings Institution Press, 2019. Notes, bibliography, index, 311 pp.; paperback $35.15.

Anthony W. Pereira, ed. *Right-Wing Populism in Latin America and Beyond*. Routledge, 2023. Figures, tables, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index, 318 pp.; hardcover $180.00, paperback $49.99, ebook $49.99.

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Polarization has been increasing in Latin America since the early 2000s and, along with populism, has given rise to a scholarly discussion of its nature, its origins, and how to measure it. This article analyzes theoretical and comparative insights from several recent works on polarization and populism in Latin America. These studies underscore the truism that polarization and populism are politically manufactured in a

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context of sustained mass discontent with "politics as usual." Latin America is not the region that comes most to mind when we think about polarization. Latin America lacks many of the ascriptive identities based on religious, ethnic, linguistic, geographical, and sectarian cleavages that are more salient in other regions and that have linked polarization to violent conflict. Nevertheless, Latin America has not been a stranger to polarization. Polarization has been associated with democratic breakdowns as well as more recent erosions of democracy in the region. One way of thinking about Latin American democracy is in terms of how political systems manage different levels and types of polarization.

At its most basic, polarization is defined as the division of society into "mutually antagonistic 'us' vs. 'them' camps [and the collapsing of] normal cross-cutting interests and identities into two mutually exclusive identities" (Somer and McCoy 2019). This describes both the structure of political competition and the behavior of political elites and masses. Regarding structure, it is helpful to think of the concept in spatial terms. On a standard gamut, polarization is the hollowing out of the center and the increasing salience of the poles at the extreme ends; each of these based on socio-political identities. This is in contrast to broadened pluralism, in which multiple political voices and various coalitions are possible across a multi-nodal spectrum and surrounding a median voter situated at the center of the spectrum. In behavioral terms, polarization presumes at the extreme ends of the gamut a high degree of solidarity attached to a single socio-political identity and the strong preference of actors, elites, and masses, for one or the other pole. This contrasts with transversal alliance-formation based on cross-cutting cleavages such as those common to social democratic politics (Kitschelt 1994). To follow Adrienne LeBas (2018, 62), polarization flattens and cleaves. It reduces political conflict to a dominant divisive narrative, most often articulated by an incumbent authority and intensified by the reactions of the opposition to that authority.

Beyond this basic spatial-behavioral definition, "polarization" is a polysemic term with many dimensions that get distinct levels of attention by different authors. One major dimension involves, as the editors of this special issue note, two "natures"—ideological and affective (see Sarsfield, Moncagatta, and Roberts in this issue). Polarization is ideological in conventional left-right and liberal-conservative terms regarding policy preferences, but it can also be affective, involving emotions and identities regarding others. Affective polarization takes the form of attitudes of affinity directed at in-group elites and co-partisans and attitudes of hostility towards out-group elites and co-partisans. As Sarsfield et al. note, ideological and affective polarization are analytically distinct and may be independent. In other words, polarization can operate on socio-cultural and socio-political identity axes that run orthogonally to the left-right gamut (Roberts 2021; Ostiguy 2020). Another major dimension of polarization is the level of analysis. Polarization can occur at the elite or the mass levels. In some cases, these two levels are not independent since partisan campaigns can polarize the electorate and polarized electorates generate incentives for elites and their organizations to campaign to where their constituents are (Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). The works under review tend to keep

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in mind both levels of analysis, but the roles of incumbent executives and their polarizing political strategies emerge repeatedly as pivotal in these works. For example, the Manichean discourse of populists can deepen affective polarization of electorates. As I note below, this is one reason why populism is studied in close connection with polarization, though these are conceptually distinct phenomena.

Given the polysemy of the term, the field enjoys no consensus regarding measurements of polarization. Many cross-national analyses employ the expert-coded party polarization measure from the V-DEM project due to its coverage and standardization (Pemstein, Marquardt, and Tzelgov 2020), but several qualifications accompany these uses, most prominently that coders infer scores from outcomes they already know (Treisman 2023, 12). Scholars wishing to explore mass-level polarization employ other measures based on social surveys. The works under review use these or they develop their own measures for elite and mass-level indicators of polarization. Turning to measurement in qualitative studies, several known empirical indicators that are consistent across cases involve eroding civility in political discourse, demonization between political opponents, stigmatization, marginalization of minorities, ideological chauvinism, widespread use of stereotyping of political opposites, the prevalence of identity and "culture war" politics, legislative gridlock, and Manichean rhetoric at the elite and the mass levels. Where these indicators appear in a political system that is both *structurally* and *behaviorally* cleaved and flattened in the way described above, one can be more certain that the case is a polarized one.

Regardless of the indicators used, quantitative or qualitative, there is a deep-seated consensus in the field that polarization has increased across political systems and that the *intensity* of polarization can challenge democracy (Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). Polarization may represent the most fundamental breaking down of "basic democratic trust" (Schedler 2023). Deeper polarization in Latin America has coincided with the collapse or erosion of traditional and centrist left/right parties in the region (Lupu 2016; Seawright 2012). Anti-party sentiments and attitudes against the political class as a whole have accompanied many of the cases of polarization in Latin America (Meléndez 2022; also see the articles by Luna and by Samuels and Zucco in this special issue).

In what follows, I consider the works under review on these salient dimensions and with the definitions discussed here. I echo the editors of this special issue in their clarification that "polarization cannot be understood with a narrow fixation on either elite or mass-level political dynamics," but that "reciprocal interactions" between political elites and organized (and even unorganized, anomic) social actors conditioned by democratic institutions are at the heart of the phenomenon in Latin America. The sections that follow analyze the works under review in terms of their key contributions to understanding these reciprocal interactions. I divide the analysis into sections on structural catalysts of polarization, trajectories, and processes of polarization, the role of populism, and implications for democracy. The final section offers some concluding thoughts on the emerging research program on polarization in Latin America.

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Catalysts of Polarizing Politics

Some of the works under review focus on the distal and structural factors that lay the groundwork for the emergence of polarization. Two major structural causes are (1) economic disruption and dislocation and (2) the erosion and collapse of political representation, particularly in the form of traditional parties of the center-left and center-right. These conditions may channel popular discontent in ways that incite polarizing politics and introduce polarizing actors into democratic systems.

The notion that polarization is catalyzed by economic fortunes is suggested by the patterns of polarization in Latin America as measured by Moncagatta and Silva (in this special issue). They find that 18 of 19 Latin American countries followed a similar trend of experiencing more acute polarization after 2010. One possible common cause is the end of the commodity boom in the region. Among the books under review, *The Age of Discontent* by Matthew Rhodes-Purdy, Rachel Navarre, and Stephen Utych (hereafter, RPNU), makes the case for economic root causes. RPNU points to the Great Recession and its manifestations in developing countries as the basis for increasing polarization, populism, contentious politics, and *estallidos sociales*. All of these compose what the authors call the "age of discontent." The core of their argument is that economic displacement is the root cause of a range of emotional reactions that present politically in cultural anxiety and resentment. They reject the separation of economic and cultural causes, arguing that economic crises catalyze emotions of discontent that are expressed as socio-cultural grievances. Grievances of resentment and alienation are packaged as "cultural discontent"—"the perception that one's values and identities are not respected in one's own society" (p. 45). The core values and identities may not change quickly, but *perceptions* of how these are valued can. Perceived acts of marginalization easily breed resentment against out-groups and deepen in-group solidarity. These sentiments take shape along "the weakest seams," on the salient cleavages in the country cases: for instance, on race in the United States, on Catalan independence in Spain, on corruption in Brazil, and inequality in Chile. The core pattern is the same even if the specific cleavages vary by country.

RPNU draw upon their Political Systems Attitudes Study (PSAS) throughout their book to map the behavioral dynamics of discontent. Chapter 4 is the empirical heart of the work. It presents results from well-crafted experiments using a narrative approach that is kind to the uninitiated in the nuances of experimental analyses. The authors find that economic turmoil causes citizens to respond consistently with resentment and anxiety. Of these, resentment figures more prominently, fostering internal narratives in respondents that some out-group actor is responsible for whatever societal malady or injustice animates their grievances. The result is cultural discontent that makes these voters ripe for populists and other outsiders to persuade with anti-establishment appeals. For RPNU, the larger causal narrative is clear, and it has economic roots.

Notably, there is no robust association between the intensity of economic crises and the social reactions that follow. Comparatively modest economic disruption in Chile led to the massive *estallido social* of 2019, but deeper structural crises in Spain

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were accompanied by a response that was largely channeled into partisan competition (*pace* the brief mobilization of the Indignados movement in 2011). RPNU argue that the capacity of the political system to respond to these social and political reactions is the key to understanding how these outbursts are channeled. Political systems that provide citizens with the means to participate and feel a sense of efficacy (strong democratic voice), are "better able to ride out economic downturns" (p. 70).

The sweeping, inter-regional analysis of *The Age of Discontent* challenges geographic patterns of economic crises and discontent that have framed scholarly and policy thinking in recent years. The pattern that the "losers of globalization" and those "culturally left behind"—the white working class in the United States and Europe—supported exclusionary right-wing populists, while those displaced by the end of the commodity boom in Latin America toiled in the informal sector and supported inclusionary left-wing populism, is no longer evident (cf. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Economic dislocations and their related cultural reactions led to support for left-wing populism in Spain and Greece and right-wing populism in Brazil. For RPNU, the political forms of these reactions are simply sensitive to local political contexts. The takeaway insight is that the core dynamics of polarization are more universal and cross-regional.

Economic crises are not the only catalysts to shape the current age of discontent. Crises of political representation have also undercut the efficacy of mass publics to exert what RPNU call "strong democratic voice" (participation). RPNU focus on citizens' perceptions of their own inefficacy, but there is more to crises of representation than perception. Real institutional breakdowns have accompanied the rise of anti-establishment polarizing populists in Latin America. In many cases, economic crises and massive corruption scandals precede the decline or collapse of traditional and centrist-right and center-left parties, paving the way for the rise of anti-establishment leaders and their parties.

This is where Samuel Handlin's *State Crisis in Fragile Democracies* offers an important contribution. Handlin sees the origins of the current patterns of political party polarization in new configurations of politics that emerged in response to "state crises." Like RPNU, Handlin delves into mass discontent with basic state institutions such as bureaucracies, legislatures, presidents, and security forces in the post-Cold War era, but he adds a second dimension to the analysis that encompasses the weaknesses of the state in Latin America in this period. The discrediting of the neoliberal model and the failures of policy paved the way for a reaction against "politics as usual" that saw the decline and collapse of traditional parties in several countries. Distinct trajectories of politics developed from these state crises and polarization played a key role in each one. In cases in which state crises and high polarization against established parties accompanied the presence of a strong, radical left (Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela), anti-establishment politics succeeded. In these cases, the dominant political strategy became one of "polarizing populism" that encompassed "anti-systemic appeals and calls for state reform with radical economic policies" (p. 8). In cases with strong non-radical leftist parties but with more moderate state crises and more muted levels of polarization, pro-system leftists guided the response to state

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crises (Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay). Finally, where state crises were accompanied by a weak political left and low polarization, democracy continued but in a low-level equilibrium (Paraguay and Peru).

In contrast to RPNU, Handlin sees noneconomic variables and processes at the heart of the story of political change. He defines "state crises" as having two dimensions: the incapacity of the state to fulfill its core functions (the objective dimension) and the public's perception and discontent with state incapacity (the subjective dimension). In Handlin's South American sample, strong leftist parties and their radical reform programs play the key roles in making the most of polarization; consolidating their control over the state and initiating radical policies in ways that erode democracy. The study focuses on Venezuela and Brazil as two contrasting cases and adds short case studies of Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Peru. Focusing primarily on the 1990s and 2000s, Handlin examines the development of radical left-wing politics with rising polarization in Venezuela, but also Bolivia and Ecuador. In these cases, existing, system-supporting leftist parties were undermined by state crises. Polarizing leftist outsiders emerged with anti-systemic appeals that connected well with where median voters in those systems were situated. Where state crises were muted or nonexistent, major leftist parties were able to consolidate their positions on the center-left and govern without significant polarization. Brazil fits this second sequence. The state crisis in Brazil during the 1990s and early 2000s was less extensive, allowing a moderating leftist party, the Workers Party, to emerge as a viable system-sustaining option to support reform. The rise of Lula da Silva to the presidency in 2002 (after three failed previous campaigns) and his alliances of mutual convenience with center-right parties in the congress to pass social and economic reform reflects the consolidation of a "weakly polarizing party system."

RPNU and Handlin coincide on numerous major points. First, although economic discontent plays the key role in RPNU's work, their analysis agrees with Handlin's that the intensity of economic crises does not correlate with the degree of discontent. There is a qualitative dimension in both causal narratives that favors a focus on how political actors, parties, and institutions respond to discontent and whether citizens feel they have a voice as well as a vote. In short, these authors demonstrate the "reciprocal interactions" at the core of polarization emphasized by the editors of this special issue. Second, whether it is state crisis (Handlin) or economically-rooted discontent (RPNU), both studies highlight the advent of outsider candidacies, anti-establishment politics, and higher levels of polarization. In this sense the catalysts and correlates of polarization are known, even though the actors that make the most of the political opportunities created by these conditions act in ways that are sensitive to the institutions and historical trajectories of each case.

The Trajectories of Polarizing Politics

The discussion of catalysts of polarization suggests that polarization plays out over long periods of time. "Ages of discontent" do not arise out of singular crises; they emerge

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from a series of crises, socio-economic structural and demographic changes, and cultural shifts that form trajectories over decades and can only partially be captured in analytical snapshots. The polarizing rhetoric of incumbents refers not just to the present but imbeds current circumstances in frames about the past. If divisive narratives are both drivers and indicators of polarization, their longitudinal nature requires a better understanding of the evolving structures of polarized political competition over time.

The Carothers and O'Donohue volume provides an explicit understanding of the need to capture patterns of polarization over time. The editors begin by identifying salient "analytic complexities" in the scholarship on polarization. One is the distinction between positive and negative polarization. Drawing on Lupu (2015), they argue that "in new and emerging democracies that are trying to build stable party systems, some degree of polarization may be useful" (p. 5). But at "a certain degree of intensity," polarization can have negative effects on politics (Somer et al. 2021). The editors do not offer a bright-line test for when positive polarization becomes negative; they make only the observation that the tipping point relies on the "national context." This is the organizing principle of their volume. Echoing RPNU, Carothers and O'Donohue argue that how political contexts channel mass discontent will determine the levels and effects of polarization. Another analytic complexity is the distinction between levels of analysis—elite and mass polarization. The former has most often been treated in terms of political parties and politicians and the latter as the electorate, but the editors note that the boundaries are more fluid, allowing "elite" to include non-politicians such as grassroots actors and organizations such as unions or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Mass polarization may exist among "informed" and "engaged" voters and not within the larger and less engaged electorate, which might remain quite unpolarized, as Carothers illustrates in his chapter on the United States. Once again, the definition of boundaries is a function of the national political context—which socio-political identities constitute the poles that become polarized.

An edited volume that embraces an inductive approach to polarization leads into chapters that favor an analysis of national patterns of polarization. Each chapter examines polarization in an electoral democracy over time, often over decades: Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, Turkey, and the United States. The editors divide these cases into examples of severe polarization and non-severe cases. Severely polarized political systems are those that fuse elite and mass polarization so that politics is dominated by two, large blocks composed of elites and nonelites, and the binary structure of political competition is sustained over time. Only two of the countries in the sample (Turkey and Kenya) fit the description of ultra-severe or "pernicious polarization" (Somer et al. 2021). Most of the chapters profile cases that range from "severe" (the United States, India, and Poland) to more moderate or low levels of polarization (Colombia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Brazil).

The main comparative and theoretical contribution of the volume is what can be gleaned from the cases about the trajectories of polarization over time. The prevalent trajectory begins with the emergence and definition of "poles" that

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define the socio-political identities that polarize, crowding out tertiary identities. The contending solidarities may be crafted by political elites out of deep-seated cultural, demographic, and socio-historic cleavages, such as in the cases of India, Kenya, Indonesia, and Turkey. In the US case, it is the advent of the "culture wars" with their origin in the polarities between conservatives and liberals during the 1960s and 1970s. As an enduring two-party system, US politics may be especially suited for the development and persistence of polarization as the erstwhile conservative and liberal poles shift right- and leftward over time and they map onto the two parties easily. In the more volatile party systems of Latin America, the definition of poles has occurred in a different way. The erosion and collapse of traditional parties has left vacuums into which incumbent presidents or maverick and outsider challenger candidates and movements have been able to re-define the poles of the political system. The process of pole-construction involves creating solidarity around socio-political identities—the integration of social and economic groups, partisan factions, subnational organizations, and leaders—first in the incumbent pole and then in an opposition pole. Increasing conflict with out-group actors reinforces solidarity in the in-group and vice versa. Meanwhile, moderate or centrist groups are crowded out or they adhere to one of the poles. The competitive dynamic moves from positive to negative as pluralism is cleaved into two increasingly irreconcilable and mutually antagonistic forces. The prevalence of stereotyping, anti-partisanship, Manichean discourse, and the personalization of the incumbent's authority are tell-tale signs of this polarizing competition.

It bears underscoring that polarization does not develop organically from latent, structural cleavages of different kinds (e.g., ethnic, religious, demographic, geographic, etc.), but is instrumental. Across the cases, expected political returns from employing polarizing strategies motivate opportunistic incumbents to define an in-group pole and an opposite. The process may play out in an uneven and asymmetric way with potential in-group members not accepting the proposed leadership and those in the other pole not finding the means to organize. In other words, the solidarity of the poles is a variable. The crucial point is that incumbents deploy polarizing narratives that take hold to some extent, determining sides on policies, orientations towards the state and the market, distribution, and all of the other significant questions a political system faces. For instance, Erdoğan and the AKP in Turkey used polarizing rhetoric early on to oppose the secularist values of the military, the judiciary, and the state bureaucracy, thereby defining the space of his project for the country. In similar fashion, the leaders of the PiS in Poland used divisive narratives to "[open] up new battlefields to keep its electoral base mobilized, [ensuring] its continuing grip on power, and remake the Polish state in a majoritarian and illiberal fashion" (p. 127). Initially, this aspect of polarization begins as generative and positive in the way described by Lupu (2015) and LeBas (2018). But at a given point, it can turn negative as worldviews become increasingly Manichean and entrenched, threatening democracy in the pernicious and severe cases.

Reactive dynamics shape the transition from positive to negative polarization as incumbents use polarizing strategies to which opponents respond, further defining the

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differences between the poles. In conventional political competition, these cleavages are driven by differences in policy advocacy and representation that can occasionally be bridged with encompassing alliances. In polarizing dynamics, the differences become increasingly personal and visceral at both the elite and mass levels, making traversal politics ineffective or impossible. The solidarities of the poles can themselves develop by internalizing polarizing logics as factions within parties and social organizations come together and root out "disloyal" or "dissident" actors of the same unit. The treatment of so-called "RINOs" (Republicans-In-Name-Only) in the US Republican party and dissident Peronists within Kirchnerismo in Argentina are prominent examples. This is a reminder that poles are not necessarily parties but solidarities that cohere around socio-political identities that are not necessarily encompassed by partisanship. In summary, the overarching trajectory of polarization relies across cases on opportunistic political executives deploying divisive narratives over time that shape political competition as much around issues of socio-political identity as over policies.

The Carothers and O'Donohue volume does not offer many insights into trajectories of polarization at the mass level. For this, it is useful to tap RPNU's book once again. Among the works under review, *Age of Discontent* represents the most complete study of the microlevel pathways of polarizing politics. Like Carothers and O'Donohue, RPNU begin with incumbent-based polarizing strategies. For cultural discontent to transition into democratic discontent, RPNU argue that political actors are needed to trigger the salient cleavages that activate socio-cultural grievances during periods of economic crises. Discontent may rely on long-brewing sentiments of alienation and displacement and they can manifest as continued resentment and anxiety, but it takes political actors to quicken these orientations and channel them for political ends. The tactics political agents can use vary, but to hook into cultural discontent they must animate social narratives that reflect widespread anxieties and resentments. RPNU find evidence for the recurring patterns: narratives of discontent offered by political actors tap underlying emotional reactions to economic dislocation and crisis. The authors shy away from proposing some "general theory of discontent," noting that the range of possible factors shaping the content and impact of social and political narratives is too complex (p. 67). But there is one explanatory factor that they find in virtually all of their cases and that is "democratic voice." This is understood on two dimensions as government responsiveness (weak voice) and participation (strong voice) (pp. 67–70). Economic disruption triggers more intense emotional responses where governments are less responsive and citizens perceive themselves as having a low capacity for participating and exercising voice.

Not all trajectories of polarization at the elite and mass levels lead to pernicious polarization. It is striking that the majority of the sample included in the Carothers and O'Donohue volume are not cases of pernicious nor of severe polarization. What the chapters do show is that a diversity of trajectories is possible. Most of the cases demonstrate that phases of more acute polarization often follow periods of more moderate polarization. For example, an event such as the 2016 Peace Accord between the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and the Revolutionary Armed

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Forces of Colombia (FARC), can initiate a new phase of intense polarization as incumbents and opposition differ on the agreement. Andreas Feldmann, in his chapter, shows that this elite-driven polarization spread to Colombian society, with pro- and anti-accord cleavages emerging among voters and reshaping electoral competition around the issue. Of course, the 2016 Peace Accord represents enduring underlying issues of justice, land reform, and who can compete in political society; the event just ignited these longstanding questions and political leaders such as Álvaro Uribe, Iván Duque, and Gustavo Petro gained by politicizing them. In other cases, periods of polarization can be bookended by more moderate or low levels of polarization. As Mignozzetti and Spektor demonstrate in their chapter, the Brazilian case follows an overall moderate trajectory of polarization. The modal pattern is best represented by the electoral duopoly of the PT and the PSDB during the 1990s and 2000s. The 2013–2023 period saw spikes of polarization with the 2013 massive street protests against the political class, later the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, the months preceding the imprisonment of Lula da Silva for corruption, and the run-up to the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro as president. Yet party leaders "on both sides of the divide failed to tighten the bonds with their followers . . . Brazilians generally were angry with their political class as a whole . . . " (p. 235). Polarization leveled off at the elite level, especially after the election of Lula da Silva in 1922, as *Bolsonarismo* failed to galvanize consistent congressional opposition to the PT president.

One factor that works to moderate levels of polarization is suggested by Eve Warburton's chapter on Indonesia and Mignozzetti and Spektor's chapter on Brazil: clientelism (and to some extent, corruption as well). In these cases, the focus of political competition among elites is consistent access to state patronage. Where competition does not exclude joint access, the result is a form of oligarchic pact that creates an imperative to weaken partisan competition and produce coalitions bound less by ideology and program and more by a common interest in capturing state resources. Where major sectors of the political class exchange access to patronage as part of the normal and quotidian way of doing politics, as is the case in Brazil's model of "coalitional presidentialism" and in the larger pattern of state corruption, political elites see fewer returns to employing a polarizing strategy. This explains why *Bolsonarismo* could not sustain its hold on congressional parties of the big center-right (*o Centrão*) after Bolsonaro's failed re-election. The imperative to gain access to state resources by dealing with a newly elected Lula in 2023 dissuaded these parties from backing the quixotic efforts to question the election results and engineer Bolsonaro's continuation in power. This is further evidence that the expected returns to polarizing strategies differ across political systems and may explain distinct trajectories of polarization.

The Role of Populism in Polarizing Trajectories

Polarization and populism need not be strongly linked. While all populists are polarizing, not all polarization trajectories involve or are driven by populism. Not all

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polarizing incumbents employ populist tactics or performances. Remembering that polarization has structural and behavioral aspects, populism can and does emerge in non-polarized pluralist structures and with rivalries that are not invested in divisive narratives the way that all cases of polarization require. Even so, no review of scholarship on polarization would be complete without a consideration of new work on populism, given the importance of the phenomenon to many cases of polarization.

Recent scholarship on populism in Latin America no longer associates populism closely with the left. The ebbing of the left turn in the region has been accompanied by a greater diversity of populist movements and leaders. Recent years have seen the emergence of right-wing forms of populism that, like the left-wing variants, thrive on polarizing politics. Anthony Pereira's volume focuses on this phenomenon of right-wing populism with "exclusionary and overtly authoritarian" orientations. Right-wing populism shares with the left-wing variety the claim to channel the people. Likewise, right-wing populists are mavericks or outsiders positioned against the established political order. Right-wing populists, however, diverge from their leftist counterparts in several ways. Right-wing populists evince an intolerance for multiculturalism and pluralism; they tap into grievances of personal insecurity due to crime or economic displacement, the latter channels the aspirational segments of the lower-middle and working classes that experienced declining household incomes in the wake of the commodity boom's end. *Mano dura* approaches to crime have emerged as talismans of right-wing populist appeals, taking advantage of societies increasingly polarizing on personal security concerns (Bejarano 2013; Carreras and Visconti 2022). These appeals are reinforced by the erosion of the quality and availability of housing and public services that have accompanied the slippage of large segments of the middle class into poverty and precarity. And in seeking to blame those responsible, they will "punch down" to the "indolent poor," "delinquents," and other undesirables they believe are allowed to run rampant by corrupt elites who place their own interests above those of the nation's security. One tension in right-wing populism in Latin America is that, unlike variants in the United States and Europe that embrace protectionism, right-wing populists in the region have not abandoned neoliberalism. Proclamations, such as Javier Milei's self-identification as an "anarcho-capitalist," introduce recognized tensions between the goals of market-oriented adjustment and the social protection of working-class supporters.

Another distinctive aspect of the appeals of right-wing populists is that their discourses resonate with particular and increasingly identifiable groups across cases. Evangelical Christians, export-oriented agrarian interests, and other sectors that embrace "traditional values" align more consistently with conservatism. Cecilia Lero's chapter in Pereira's volume highlights connections between "new middle class" actors who resent policies that benefit the rich and the poor and ignore their socio-economic and physical insecurity. These resentments catalyzed support for *mano dura* populists such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Sérgio de Lima's chapter shows that Bolsonaro's politicization of public security resonated with active-duty police officers, many of whom ran for office predominantly with right-wing and center-right-wing parties that embraced similar hardline, public security

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appeals. Nationalist proclamations, some with racist and anti-ethnic overtones or misogynistic and heteronormative/anti-LGBTQ+ messaging, may not link clearly to particular socio-economic segments, but these appeals are more associated with right-wing populists. The chapter by de Souza Sturari and Moretti-Pires underscores how right-wing populists have magnified their appeals with fake news (disinformation) to deepen identitarian bonds between the populist leader and the base. Of course, more comparative work is needed to test the idea that this tactic is more prevalent among right-wing populists. Finally, populists may deepen their base of support not just through appeals but through distribution. Avritzer and Rennó note in their chapter that Brazilians who received emergency assistance (*auxilio emergencial*) from Bolsonaro's government during the first year of the pandemic evinced strong support for his policies.

The connections among polarizing populism, mass discontent, and larger economic transformations and crises may occur in both right-wing and left-wing cases, but they are constructed differently. For instance, RPNU find that conservative and traditionalist groups are far more receptive to right-wing populist narratives that fuel the cultural discontent associated with economic dislocation. The authors note that the left with its contending narratives embracing multiculturalism and opposing patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, and neoliberalism respond to completely different populist narratives than those that emerge on the right (pp. 114–15). In the Pereira volume, the contributions by Rettl, Ferrari, and Lero link larger economic changes to populist strategies and to behavioral orientations in much the same way. The chapter by Avritzer and Rennó demonstrates how the deepening of anti-political attitudes among the Brazilian middle classes empowered Bolsonaro's "negationism"—a combination of anti-science and anti-institution orientations that eventually brought *Bolsonarismo* into conflict with judicial, health, and subnational actors and institutions.

Implications for Democracy

Scholars of Latin America have long associated polarization and populism with the breakdown and the erosion of democracy (Linz 1978). Polarization, by escalating the stakes of political competition between mutually distrustful forces, contributes to the weakening of basic democratic functions. Democratic erosion, more than breakdown, is the more likely danger associated with polarization. In the post-Cold War era, Latin America has seen fewer coups, but incumbents with hegemonic intentions have proven to be a greater concern (Bermeo 2016, 2022; Svolik 2015). Conventional measures of polarization, such as the V-DEM indicator, are not associated with democratic breakdown among liberal democracies under either coups or incumbent takeover scenarios, but there is an association with democratic backsliding (Treisman 2023, 13–14). Handlin, in his book, reminds us that high levels of political polarization can "cushion undemocratic executives" by guaranteeing a support base for a broad range of actions, including anti-democratic ones, and polarized incumbents may create incentives for the opposition to also engage in

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undemocratic action in response (pp. 53–54). In short, where polarizing populist outsiders secure strong reform mandates, horizontal accountability is more likely to falter.

But the empirical record does not show that this is inevitable. Sometimes would-be autocrats fail to entrench their rule, even in the context of high polarization. Laura Gamboa's *Resisting Backsliding* takes up the question of why some hegemonic aspirants in power succeed in eroding democracy while others fail. Her analysis addresses this question in two stages: first, the factors that determine the election of hegemonic aspirants to executive office and, second, the factors that explain whether such rulers in power erode democracy. Gamboa argues that the variables that explain these leaders' rise are different from those that explain whether they can undermine democracy once they are in power. Democratic erosion can be a slow and gradual process that can result in the replacement of democracy with a competitive authoritarian regime. But this, Gamboa argues, depends on the reactive dynamics between incumbents and the opposition. Specifically, she claims that the combination of tactics and goals sustaining the opposition's challenge to the executive affect the incentives and costs of repression. Opposition tactics that are extra-institutional and undemocratic, reduce the costs and increase the incentives for incumbents to repress these actors. Opposition goals that are radical and anti-regime do the same. However, institutional tactics with moderate goals stand a better chance of restraining aspiring autocrats wishing to move beyond horizontal constraints on their authority. Hybrid possibilities also exist. Moderate extra-institutional strategies (e.g., civil resistance) and radical institutional strategies (e.g., impeachment) can protect democracy, but they also introduce a measure of risk in creating incentives for executives to repress.

Even as Gamboa's argument emphasizes the strategic interactions of political elites, it is sensitive to the international context. In the post-Cold War era, would-be autocrats are watched more intently by international actors, raising the cost of repressing democratic and moderate opposition (Levitsky and Way 2010; Guriev and Treisman 2022). Besides the existence of international audiences with a normative preference for democracy that reinforce incumbents' desires to retain a democratic face, Gamboa points to other scope conditions for her sample. One is that the opposition has enough time to muster a response to an aspiring autocrat. Another is the support base for incumbents, which explain their rise and their political sustainability despite opposition.

Employing a mixed methods approach, Gamboa first uses quantitative techniques to demonstrate the economic, behavioral, and structural factors that explain the rise to power of executives with hegemonic aspirations. In this portion of the book (Chapter 3) she confirms the insights of RPNU, Handlin, and some of the authors in the Pereira volume that economic, state, and other kinds of systemic crises assist polarizing populists to get elected. When turning to the second question of how these aspiring autocrats erode democracy, Gamboa tests the structural variables once again with this distinct dependent variable. Development, growth, state capacity, and party system institutionalization explain some cases, but not others. She also tests other measurable variables such as mineral resource economics and presidential approval, noting that these factors do not predetermine democratic erosion.

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She confirms that polarization, while an important part of the strategy of incumbents with hegemonic intentions, is not by itself a cause of democratic erosion.

These chapters provide an excellent overview and empirical analysis of much of the recent research on the determinants of democratic erosion. Yet the real empirical contribution of *Resisting Backsliding* is in the well-crafted set of case studies that Gamboa employs with process-tracing techniques to carefully unpack the causal sequences proposed by her main argument. Her sample encompasses the 11 Latin American presidents with hegemonic intentions who tried to erode democracy. Eight of these are explained by the argument. But in order to test the argument further, Gamboa focuses on a paired comparison of Venezuela and Colombia, and this is where she deploys her impressive process-tracing analysis.

One of the major innovations offered by *Resisting Backsliding* is that it treats democratic erosion as a sequential process. This resonates with the other works under review that emphasize polarization trajectories. Neither democratic backsliding nor polarization are one-shot games. This implies a multidirectional and fluid landscape of incumbent and opposition interactions. To be sure, pernicious polarization can lead to a spiral as reactionary/radical interactions between incumbents and oppositions create incentives for presidents to undermine checks on their power and control the media and for oppositions to up-the-ante with undemocratic actions. But it is also possible for "positive polarization" to enable oppositions to form more cohesive solidarities that push back and weaken incumbent hegemony with institutional tactics and goals. In this regard, the relationship between polarization and democratic erosion is neither linear nor unidirectional. Where both factors stand initially may not determine how they evolve together. As Gamboa's cases demonstrate, the initial balance of power between incumbents and oppositions shift over time as strategic choices shape opportunity structures.

This focus identifies the dynamics that explain democratic erosion and its absence, but one might also ask if it explains democratic endurance, especially under difficult circumstances. As Mainwaring and Masoud (2022) have shown in their collection on "democracies in hard places," some of the most unlikely democracies that have endured did not do so primarily because oppositions knew how to limit incumbents' power. In many of these cases, polarization became an ongoing feature of democratic competition. One puzzle to analyze further is how *sustained* trajectories of polarization and democracy work together, positively and negatively, without the erosion of liberal democracy. Scholars may find that opposition tactics and strategic goals may work in parallel with the polarizing strategies of incumbents to make political competition within democratic processes more sustainable over time.

Concluding Thoughts

In one way or another, the various explanations for the emergence of polarization in Latin America accentuate factors that attempt to understand patterns across space and time. But polarization takes too many shapes and forms across the region for one set of explanations to claim sufficiency. As noted above, levels of polarization do not register

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clear associations with the intensity of economic crises. Institutional weaknesses of representation and participation take several forms and degrees across cases that appear similarly polarized. Polarization in some cases is intensified by the advent of a populist leader, left or right, and with different preferences for democracy. In other cases and periods of time, polarization functions without a populist incumbent. Understanding the variety of forms polarization can take in Latin America requires moving beyond the structural catalysts of polarization to understanding its causal processes and trajectories in their national, historical context.

Given the role of economic and state crises, it bears asking if a return to growth and heightened prosperity would reduce discontent and thereby moderate polarization in Latin American democracies. The Lero chapter in the Pereira volume suggests not. In what easily reminds one of Samuel Huntington's classic arguments concerning political order, Lero highlights the way in which "new middle class" actors that emerged during the high-growth period of the commodity boom in Brazil gained an ability to travel abroad. Their interactions with advanced capitalist societies in particular deepened their resentments about institutional weaknesses and corruption at home. In such cases, it was not crisis that caused discontent but a kind of socio-political culture shock that galvanized support for anti-system candidates such as Bolsonaro, at least among the new middle class in Brazil. Similarly, in India, as analyzed by Niranjan Sahoo's chapter in the Carothers and O'Donohue volume, the acute social mobility of the new middle class has led to the development of "homogenous urban communities" that have become more susceptible to polarizing narratives about other classes, castes, and religions. These are just clues that expectations created by economic growth and development may not contain polarization but redirect and even accentuate it. Just as generations of social scientists studied the effects of socio-economic modernization on democracy, many new questions will emerge from the study of the effects of socio-economic transformation on polarization.

The role that polarization plays in explaining democratic strength remains contingent on its interaction with other factors. And it should not be forgotten that moderate levels of polarization by themselves may even strengthen democracy. Polarization during periods of electoral volatility can stabilize the party system and enhance the survival of democracy by giving voters stable, ideological, and socio-cultural cues that keep them participating in the electoral process (Moraes and Béjar 2023). Sarsfield et al. (in this issue) note that "polarization is arguably necessary for parties to challenge entrenched social hierarchies" and it may not be good for democracy to rely on "partisan programmatic convergence," especially at the center, where many traditional parties in Latin America have not been able to govern or even survive in recent decades.

A promising approach for the emerging research program is the focus on trajectories of polarization. It is clear that polarization can become pernicious and be part of a political strategy for hegemonic incumbents bent on centralizing power and weakening checks and balances. These are the cases that have gotten the most attention as examples of "incumbent takeover" and "autocratization." But a far larger

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number of cases involve polarizing trajectories that steer clear of eroding democracy. Most of Latin America's democracies today are weak but resilient (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2023; Levitsky and Way 2023). The field needs explanations that incorporate polarizing strategies to explain the resilience of these democracies; their weaknesses ought not be ignored, but they cannot always be steps away from democratic erosion. As some of the contributors under review attest, polarization can be positive and negative. Understanding the conditions that link polarization with democracy-enhancing effects should receive emphasis in the field moving forward.

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