


# *Recent Trends in Mass-Level Ideological Polarization in Latin America*

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## ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of the changes in mass-level ideological polarization in Latin America. It provides a cross-national, region-wide assessment of polarization dynamics using survey data on left-right ideological identities. A novel indicator for measuring ideological polarization at the individual level is proposed, which is more compatible with theoretical conceptualizations of ideological polarization than other existing indicators. The indicator is applied to data from the AmericasBarometer surveys to measure degrees and changes in mass-level ideological polarization in 19 Latin American countries between 2006 and 2019. The study reveals a substantial process of mass-level ideological restructuring, accompanied by a region-wide increase in ideological polarization in Latin America taking place during the second decade of the twenty-first century. We also find that ideological polarization, albeit varying in intensity from country to country, is clearly present at the mass level in the majority of countries in the region.

*Keywords:* Political polarization, ideological polarization, left-right, public opinion, Latin America

## INTRODUCTION

Polarization has become an increasingly important topic for students of politics. The occurrence of polarization seems to be a global issue: it does not distinguish between democracies of different levels of development, size, or age. Whether around political figures, processes, policy stances, religious beliefs, or cultural values, citizens and political elites around the world seem to be growing increasingly distant from each

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other. There is widespread consensus that polarization has become one of the defining traits of contemporary political dynamics (McCoy and Somer 2019a; Iyengar et al. 2019; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Fiorina 2017).

The academic literature has shown, from different perspectives, the effects polarization can have on political systems. Some scholars have pointed to the potentially positive effects polarization can have on democratic systems by helping to strengthen political parties and institutionalize party systems (McCoy and Somer 2019b), enhancing representation and improving accountability (Singer 2016; Bornschieer 2019), or acting as an agent of popular mobilization and inclusion (Stavrakakis 2018). Most recent research, however, has highlighted the important negative effects polarization can have on democratic governance. It undermines the public's ability to serve as a democratic check (Svolik 2019), impedes the effectiveness of the legislative process (Hughes and Carlson 2015), and can contribute to gridlock and government dysfunction (Jones 2001). Scholars have argued that high levels of polarization threaten the democratic process itself by impeding policymaking and eroding trust and tolerance (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015), and that it can lead to democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019a; Haggard and Kaufman 2021).<sup>1</sup>

While there is consensus that processes of polarization are taking place around the world and that they have important implications for political systems, it is not yet clear how much polarization has changed in recent decades. Although there is a large body of literature on the measurement of polarization, most of it has focused on the United States as a case study. There is scant measurement of polarization in other contexts (exceptions include Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2019; McCoy and Somer 2019b). Scholars measuring polarization have seldom focused on Latin America, even though the region has been a fertile ground for important and interesting polarization processes (see the introductory article to this special issue).<sup>2</sup>

The main puzzle this article seeks to address is whether mass-level ideological polarization processes are actually taking place in Latin America. There are debates in the literature regarding the strength of this type of polarization in the region. While the V-DEM project reports high—and sometimes “toxic”—levels of polarization being found in many Latin American societies (Boese et al. 2022), other scholars have downplayed concerns about the magnitude of these processes. In her article “Latin America: Not as Polarized as You Think,” Victoria Murillo notes that polarization has been the historical norm in the region and that today, “elites seem to be using polarizing strategies to attract electoral support rather than in response to what’s going on in the minds of voters” (Murillo 2022, 4). In this sense, she implies not only that the current levels of polarization in many Latin American polities are not exceptionally high, but also that it is not the masses that are polarized for themselves, but it is the political elites who are driving polarization in the region.

As noted in the introduction to this special issue, there are different types of polarization and different levels at which it occurs. In terms of types, polarization can be classified into two categories: ideological and affective polarization. Ideological polarization refers to the increasing spatial distance between parties or citizens along a left-right continuum based on their ideological views or policy preferences (Downs 1957; Dalton

2008; Roberts 2022). Affective polarization refers to the adoption of positions by rival sociopolitical camps based on feelings or sentiments rather than ideological preferences (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; McCoy and Somer 2019a). In terms of levels, polarization can occur at the elite level or at the mass level. Elite-level polarization refers to ideological or affective polarization among political leaders or parties, while mass-level polarization refers to polarization at the level of citizens.

A body of research has examined whether elites can influence mass-level polarization. Smith and Boas (2023) find that when right-wing parties rally against same-sex marriage, abortion, and “gender ideology,” they not only win conservative votes, but also change the salience of these issues in the electorate, promoting increasing polarization. Similarly, Moraes and Béjar (2023) argue that new parties may strategically use polarizing discourses to secure an electoral niche in the highly volatile party systems commonly found in Latin America.

This article has one main objective: to provide a cross-national, region-wide assessment of changes in ideological polarization of citizens in Latin America from 2006 to 2019. For this sake, we propose a novel indicator for measuring polarization using survey data that not only takes into account the assumption of bimodality that polarization entails (see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008, 557), but also takes into account asymmetric polarization as defined by Hacker and Pierson (2015). Using this indicator, we measure the degrees and changes in ideological polarization in 19 Latin American countries, using data coming from the AmericasBarometer surveys. Our results allow us to identify key patterns of polarization taking place in the region.

As already mentioned, this article focuses on the analysis of mass-level ideological polarization trends in the Latin American region during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, using public opinion data. The article does not take into account other types of polarization that may well be occurring concurrently with ideological polarization. Because our primary interest is ideological polarization at the mass (citizen) level, we therefore do not measure, discuss, or analyze in detail any kind of polarization at the elite level, or affective polarization in any sense. We recognize that populations can and often do polarize along other dimensions: attitudes towards religion and sexuality (Smith and Boas 2023), ethnicity (Bradley and Chauchard 2022), nationalism/nativism vs. cosmopolitanism (Roberts 2022; Ostiguy 2017), or even in terms of pro vs. anti-establishment identities (Meléndez 2022; Zanotti 2019). Our decision to focus on ideological positions has to do with the many advantages that survey research has in allowing cross-national comparative analyses, and with the fact that, despite differences across countries, ideological dispositions along the classic left-right continuum still have a meaningful impact on political orientations for many Latin Americans (Seligson 2007).

## 1. THE MEANING OF LEFT-RIGHT IDEOLOGY

As stated, the principal objective of this article is to analyze mass-level political polarization in Latin America in ideological terms. An essential initial step in assessing

ideological polarization involves defining the concept of ideology within the framework of the left–right political spectrum. In the following paragraphs we provide a brief discussion of the definition of ideology we base our arguments and analyses on.

Although there is evidence suggesting that left–right ideology is context-dependent and means different things in different countries (Seligson 2007; Zechmeister 2015), much recent research on the topic—especially in scholarship focusing on Latin American politics—has drawn on the ideas of Norberto Bobbio (1996). The central element of Bobbio’s distinction between left and right is their respective attitudes toward egalitarianism. According to Bobbio, the “irreducible, inescapable core of the (left–right) dichotomy” lies in the different attitudes towards the ideal of equality: The left is characterized by a push toward greater equality that extends beyond purely economic factors such as wealth and income to include social and political spheres. In contrast, the right tends to accept or justify social inequality as either a natural condition or a necessity for social order. In this sense, while the left tends to see inequality as a problem to be solved, the right tends to accept it as a natural part of society.

Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) followed Bobbio to define left and right in order to guide the incipient studies of the latter ideological stance in Latin America. For them, the right is the political force that considers social inequalities as natural or as the legitimate product of market operations, while the left considers inequalities as illegitimate and seeks to ameliorate them through state intervention. Levitsky and Roberts (2011) coincide that the left refers to “political actors who seek, as a *central programmatic objective*, to reduce social and economic inequalities” (Levitsky and Roberts 2011, 5; emphasis in original). While historically the left in Latin America has focused on class differences, these authors argue that “many contemporary Left parties have broadened this focus to include inequalities rooted in gender, race, or ethnicity” (Levitsky and Roberts 2011, 5).

While most—if not all—definitions of left–right ideology stress the importance of the divergent stances toward equality in economic terms (and thus highlight the discussions on the role of the state in mitigating economic inequalities), it is becoming increasingly common to find scholars acknowledging additional dimensions, particularly belonging to sociocultural aspects (see for example Ostiguy 2017; Bornschieer 2010; Feldman and Johnston 2014). Scholars such as Kitschelt (1994) and Mudde (2007) have provided insightful analyses on the impact of cultural issues, including immigration, law enforcement, and moral values, on ideological alignment. Jost, Federico, and Napier (2009) have contributed to this discourse by advocating for a multidimensional understanding of left–right ideology, which encapsulates the conventional socioeconomic axis and a rising sociocultural axis. In his study of the relationship between populism and polarization, Roberts (2022) claims that the economic and cultural axes are both analytically distinct and spatially orthogonal and describes the cultural axis as having “a cosmopolitan/universalist upper pole and a lower pole where ethnic, religious and/or nationalist particularisms are located” (Roberts 2022, 686). This expanded analytical framework offers a more comprehensive reflection of the complexities inherent

in contemporary ideological identities. As will be seen in the next sections, we have taken into account the multidimensionality of left-right ideology when selecting the variables we use to test the consistency of left-right ideological self-placement in the Latin American region.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. IDEOLOGICAL RESTRUCTURING IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY LATIN AMERICA

Polarization necessarily involves a shift in ideological preferences, whether at the level of parties or at the level of citizens (masses). A typical polarization process occurs when there is a centrifugal movement from the center (or “middle”) of a distribution toward the extremes, driving groups or individuals increasingly distant from each other (Dalton 2008; Pew Research Center 2014; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008). Most of the scholarly attention focusing on Latin America has been devoted to analyzing ideological shifts at the elite level, primarily because of the “left turn” in the region’s politics that began at the turn of the century. Ideological shifts were clearly taking place at the elite level: as Levitsky and Roberts note: “By 2009, nearly two-thirds of Latin Americans lived under some form of left-leaning national government . . . never before had so many countries in the region entrusted the affairs of state to leaders associated with the political Left” (Levitsky and Roberts 2011, 1).

But have there been important changes in the ideological self-identification of Latin American citizens? Roberts (2014) argues that the electoral arena in Latin America has been restructured along the left-right ideological axis in the twenty-first century. According to him, “electoral competition in the postadjustment period associated with the ‘left turn’ helped to realign (or restructure) many party systems programmatically, often on the basis of new partisan alternatives” (Roberts 2013, 1428). If the electoral arena has indeed been restructured in this way, do we also see it in public opinion?

Several analysts have argued that there has been no significant ideological restructuring at the citizen level in Latin America. Arnold and Samuels (2011), in analyzing whether the ideological shifts found at the elite level during the “left turn” in Latin America were reflected in similar shifts in mass public opinion, found no significant mass shift to the left in the majority of Latin American countries. Based on data from the Latinobarómetro surveys between 1996 and 2008, these authors note the lack of attitudinal change among Latin American citizens during this period. The lack of evidence of ideological change among Latin American voters led them to describe the left turn as a “relatively shallow electoral phenomenon rather than a major realignment of citizens’ ideological beliefs” (Arnold and Samuels 2011, 32).

Using data from the AmericasBarometer surveys, Mitchell Seligson (2007) found that the average ideological “self-placement” of Latin American citizens on a left-right scale (1–10) in 2006 was 5.77, or slightly right-biased (the arithmetic midpoint of the scale is 5.5). He also notes a slight “shift to the left” happening between 2004 and 2006. Seligson observes that the trend is region-wide, “but the magnitude of the shift is small and the center of gravity remains somewhat to the right” (Seligson 2007, 84).

Along the same line as Arnold and Samuels (2011), other authors have argued against a polarization or left-right restructuring of politics at the mass level in Latin America. Examining electoral support for the left in the period of the “left turn,” Murillo, Oliveros, and Vaishnav (2010) conclude that it was primarily a function of retrospective economic voting rather than an ideological shift of the population. Their findings build on “recent public opinion evidence, which does not find any region-wide move to the left. Even in countries that did witness a leftward shift, there is no evidence of a dramatic ideological realignment” (Murillo, Oliveros, and Vaishnav 2010, 106).

We update the analysis of Arnold and Samuels (2011), Seligson (2007), and Murillo et al. (2010), which examined Latin American public opinion up to 2008 (in the best case). We use data from AmericasBarometer surveys starting in 2006 and continuing through 2019.<sup>4</sup> Our results are interesting in three ways: first, we find that the average regional ideological self-placement is 5.36 in 2016/17 and 5.39 in 2018/19. This shows that there has been a region-wide shift to the left since 2006; in Seligson’s terms, the ideological center of gravity of Latin Americans is now somewhat to the left. Second, we find that since 2010 there has been a sharp and continuous increase in the percentage of citizens who identify with the left, as well as a moderate increase in those who identify with the right. Third, there has been a very significant decline in the number of people who did not respond to the question on ideological self-placement. All these findings lead us to believe that between 2010 and 2019 there has been an important ideological restructuring of the Latin American public, which could also be accompanied by an increase in the levels of ideological polarization.

### 3. POLARIZATION: THEORY AND METRICS

Although polarization is an important phenomenon in the social sciences, there is no consensus on how to conceptualize and assess it. According to Kubin and Sikorski, polarization is “not clearly defined, nor consistently measured” (2021, 188). In this section, we present our concept of polarization, show that existing measures do not fit it, and propose a new measure of our own.

Fiorina et al. offer a straightforward definition of polarization as a “movement from the center toward the extremes” where the middle should “lose to *both* extremes” (2008, 557; emphasis in original). This definition has several implications. First, polarization is a phenomenon that occurs in variables that have at least three values: two opposing extremes and a center. In the case of left-right ideological scales, this means an “extreme left” group, a “moderate” group, and an “extreme right” group.

Second, Fiorina et al. (2008) suggest that polarization is bimodal in nature, a function not only of the total size of the extreme groups combined, but also of how similar their sizes are. Likewise, Bramson et al. refer to bimodality when considering “size parity” as a possible understanding of polarization: groups are “more polarized in this sense if the different clusters of beliefs are held by equal numbers of people” (2017, 127). Thus, a polarization index should be higher when the two extreme groups are of equal size. A good measure of ideological polarization would have a minimum value of

zero if one or both extreme groups contained no individuals—there is no polarization without the presence of individuals in *both* extreme groups. In the case of ideological polarization, the maximum value, or a score of 100, should be obtained when exactly 50% of the individuals belong to the “extreme left” and 50% belong to the “extreme right.”

Fiorina et al. also seem to argue that polarization can only grow if both extreme groups grow at the same time. This last position, however, is not unanimous in the literature. Esteban and Ray (1994) conceptualize polarization as a function of how many people feel antagonized by how many other people. By this definition, polarization increases when one extreme group grows while the other extreme group remains constant, and a large increase in one group can more than offset a small decrease in the other. Similarly, Hacker and Pierson argue that polarization in America is growing asymmetrically, driven by a one-sided and sharp “retreat from moderation on the right of the spectrum” (2015, 59). We agree with Esteban and Ray’s theoretical argument and Hacker and Pierson’s empirical findings, and thus we believe that an ideal metric should be sensitive to asymmetrical increases in polarization.

What metrics have been proposed in the literature and how do they conform to these ideal attributes? Some have measured polarization using statistically inspired concepts such as variance and standard deviation (Dalton 2008; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2008; Taylor and Herman 1971) or excess kurtosis (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). To give an example of how similar these metrics are to statistical concepts, Dalton’s (2008) polarization index, often used to measure the ideological polarization of parties, is the standard deviation linearly transformed to produce a number between 0 and 10. Similarly, Taylor and Herman’s (1971) use variance weighted by the number of seats to measure ideological disagreement in a party system.

Standard deviations and variance measure how spread out a distribution is, while excess kurtosis measures how much the tails of a distribution deviate from what one would expect from a normally distributed variable. While these metrics are appropriate for these tasks, they lack a substantive understanding of which parts of a distribution matter most (Koudenburg, Kiers, and Kashima 2021, 2–3). As shown in Appendix 6, these metrics produce positive levels of polarization even when everyone is a moderate or when an entire half of the ideological distribution is empty, ignoring Fiorina’s advice that polarization requires the presence of both extremes. A similar problem is found in Taylor and Herman’s (1971) ordinal disagreement metric.

Abramowitz and Saunders (2008, 544) suggest assessing levels of polarization based on the sum of the percentages of people at the poles of the scale. (i.e., the “extremes”). In their work, they sum the percentages of people who consistently hold “liberal” and “conservative” positions. This approach to measuring polarization has been criticized because it does not take into account the assumption of bimodality that polarization entails. For example, suppose that all individuals in an ideological distribution self-identify as “far left”; according to Abramowitz and Saunders’ metric, this would imply maximum polarization, which is inconsistent with Fiorina et al. (2008).



One could also conceive of a metric of ideological polarization based on the size of the smallest of the two extreme groups, although we found no such example in the literature. While this metric would be fully compatible with Fiorina's bimodality assumption, it would fail Hacker and Pierson's (2015) requirement to be sensitive to asymmetric polarization. After all, the  $\text{Min}(x,y)$  function is not sensitive to variations in the largest of  $x$  and  $y$ .

Moving to metrics based on welfare concepts, Esteban and Ray (1994) proposed measuring polarization as the sum of all antagonisms or total alienation. Their polarization metric requires a multilevel categorical variable with ordinal properties, such as income group (their example), left-right ideology, or a political opinion. Individuals within the same group are considered to feel at peace with other individuals in the same group but feel alienated from all individuals in other groups. This feeling of alienation is more intense toward individuals who are further away on the variable of interest. Their measure of polarization is the sum of all the alienation that every individual feels toward every other individual.

Recently, Koudenburg, Kiers, and Kashima (2021) noticed that the Esteban-Ray index assumed cardinal properties in the variable of interest. It assumed that an individual who self-identified as having an ideology of 4 (center-left) on a scale of 1 to 10 would feel equally alienated by an individual with an ideology of 2 and by another individual with an ideology of 6. They decided to empirically estimate the degree of alienation that groups feel toward each other by analyzing how experts rate opinion distributions as more or less polarized.

Like standard deviation and excess kurtosis, these welfare-based measures are not entirely compatible with the idea that there can be no polarization without both extremes. If the entire population consists of moderates and extreme leftists, these metrics will measure some positive polarization. In addition, Koudenburg, Kiers, and Kashima's (2021) estimate of alienation is difficult to replicate because it relies on expert surveys to calculate alienation weights.

Based on the shortcomings of existing polarization metrics, we decided to define a new polarization index. It should be noted, however, that our empirical results in this article do not depend on our specific polarization index. In fact, we have measured polarization in Latin America using other metrics: standard deviation, Esteban and Ray's Effective Antagonism (1994), Abramowitz and Saunders' sum of extremes (2008), Taylor and Herman's (1971) ordinal disagreement and variance metrics. The results for the Latin American region using these metrics are presented in Appendix 4.

#### 4. DEFINITION: POLARIZATION INDEX

The Ideological Polarization Index (IPI) we propose is defined as:

$$IPI(L, R) = 2\sqrt{L}\sqrt{R}$$

Where  $L \in [0, 1]$  is the proportion of individuals who self-identify as having an extreme left ideology, and  $R \in [0, 1]$  is the proportion of individuals who self-identify as having an extreme right ideology. The function can also be expressed in a way that includes moderates:



$$IPI = 2\sqrt{1 - R - M}\sqrt{1 - L - M}$$

Where  $M \in [0, 1]$  is the proportion of individuals who self-identify as moderates and is equal to  $M = 1 - L - R$ . Surveys vary on how they collect ideology from interviewers, and so a transformation is required to fit existing data into this three-category variable. In the Data and Measurement section, we explain how we operationalize our measure using AmericasBarometer data.

Proposition A below confirms that our polarization index is compatible with the theoretical requirements mentioned above. In addition to being straightforward to compute and interpret, it respects bimodality, asymmetric polarization, and has a well-defined range. It is also quasi-sensitive to bimodal distance.

**Proposition A.** The Ideological Polarization Index IPI defined above is compatible with the following theoretical requirements:<sup>5</sup>

1. IPI is sensitive to asymmetrical polarization.
2. IPI is bimodal: It increases as the extremes get more balanced, for any level of  $M$ .
3. IPI conforms to the assumption that there is no polarization without both extremes.
4. IPI has a well-defined range, from 0 to 1.

Our index measures polarization as a number between 0 and 1. In most of this article, we present it as a score, ranging from 0 to 100.

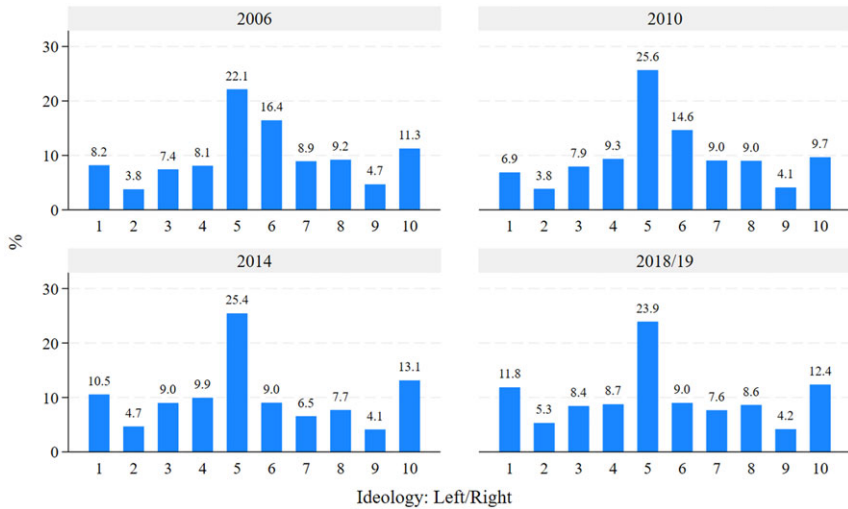
## 5. DATA AND MEASUREMENT

Our aim is to compare the degrees of ideological polarization between countries in Latin America and their changes within countries over the last two decades. We use data from the AmericasBarometer surveys, conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). The AmericasBarometers are nationally representative surveys that have been conducted every two years since the early 2000s in most North, Central, and South American countries, as well as in a significant number of countries in the Caribbean region.<sup>6</sup>

To measure ideological polarization within countries, one must start from assessing ideological self-placement of individuals. We use the item of the AmericasBarometer surveys that asks about respondents' self-placement on the left-right ideological scale. The AmericasBarometer surveys have included the following question for tapping ideological self-placement since the early 2000s:

On this card there is a 1–10 scale that goes from left to right. The number one means left and 10 means right. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those on the left and those on the right. In other words, some people sympathize more with the left and others with the right. According to the meaning that the terms “left” and “right” have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?

Figure 1. Changes in Ideological Distributions in Latin America: 2006–2019.



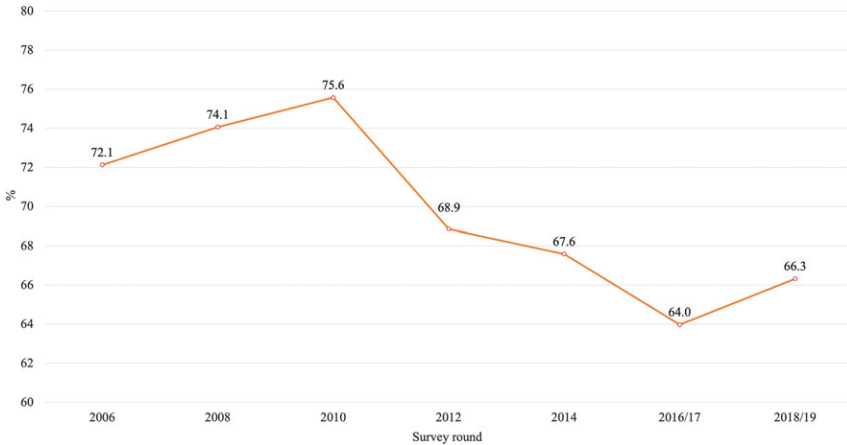
As mentioned in previous sections, our polarization index requires separating respondents into three groups: the “extreme left,” the “moderates,” and the “extreme right.” We consider an individual to have an extreme ideological position if he places himself in one of the two positions located at the ends of each tail of the original ideological scale. Accordingly, we construct a new three-category variable for ideological self-placement, in which responses of “1” and “2” are considered “extreme left,” scores of “9” and “10” are considered “extreme right,” and everything in between (individuals with scores ranging between “3” and “8”) are considered “moderates.”

## 6. RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the average distribution of ideological self-identification for the 19 Latin American countries analyzed in this article, using the original survey question presented earlier, in four survey rounds: 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018/19.<sup>7, 8</sup> As can be seen in the figure, while the first three rounds presented (2006, 2010, and 2014) show a normal, bell-shaped distribution in terms of ideological identity, in 2018/19 the distribution flattens out, with an increase in the poles (scores of “1,” “2,” “9,” and “10”). This ideological shift, which approximates a “three-thirds” (left-center-right) spatial mapping, may already indicate an increase in polarization taking place during this period.

A closer look at the evolution of the three different groups (“extreme left,” “extreme right,” and “moderates”) provides a clearer picture of the ideological restructuring taking place in the region as a whole. The “moderates” show a very

Figure 2. Percentages of “Moderates”—Pooled Latin American Data.



significant decline—of almost 12 percentage points—between 2010 and 2017 (Figure 2). More importantly, there has been a sharp and continuous increase in the percentage of citizens identifying with the “extreme left” over the same period, as well as a modest increase in those identifying with the “extreme right” (Figure 3). The region had more people identifying with the extreme right until 2014; in recent years, the extreme left has caught up, surpassing the right for the first time in our analysis period in 2016/17. In Fiorina et al.’s (2008) terms, polarization appears to be taking place during this period, as the center loses to both extremes.

There is one additional fact that further confirms the ideological restructuring evidenced in the previous graphs. As Figure 4 shows, during the same period that witnessed important changes in the percentages of “moderates,” “extreme leftists,” and “extreme rightists” (between 2010 and 2017), there was a very significant decrease in the nonresponse rate to the survey question on ideological self-placement. The usual percentages found for people who either did not answer the question or answered “don’t know” were around 20% from 2006 to 2010. Since 2010, there has been a gradual decrease in the number of people who did not self-identify with any of the points on the ideological scale, reaching a minimum of less than half of what was found in 2010 by 2019.

All of the above evidence indicates that a process of ideological reconfiguration took place at the mass level in Latin America between 2010 and 2019. Polarization involves ideological shifts, but not all ideological shifts lead to polarization. Does the ideological restructuring found at the mass level imply increasing polarization in Latin American populations? Have Latin American citizens become more distant from each other along ideological lines?

We use the index presented earlier to calculate the degrees of polarization in 19 Latin American countries where AmericasBarometer surveys have been conducted.

Figure 3. Percentages of “Extreme Leftists” and “Extreme Rightists”—Pooled Latin American Data.

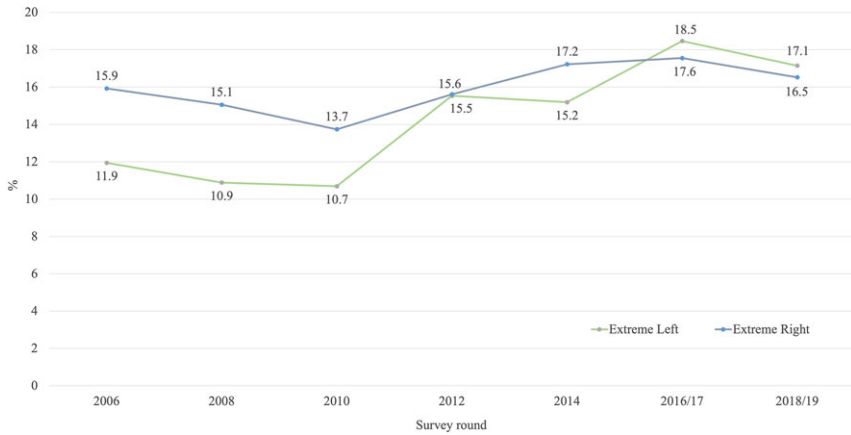
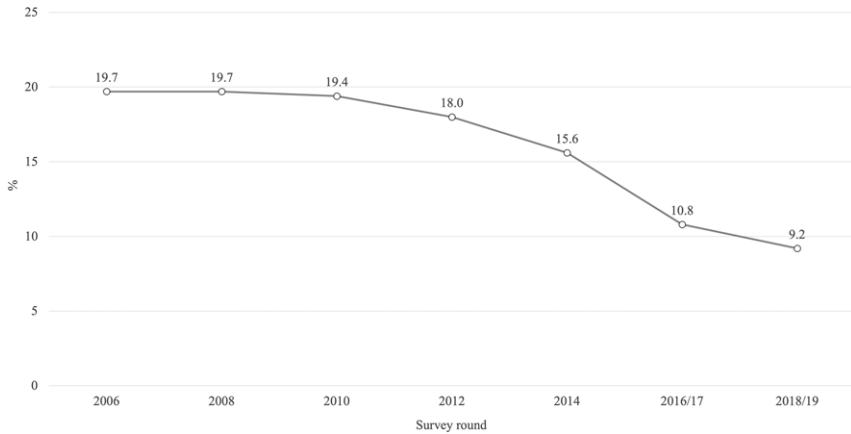


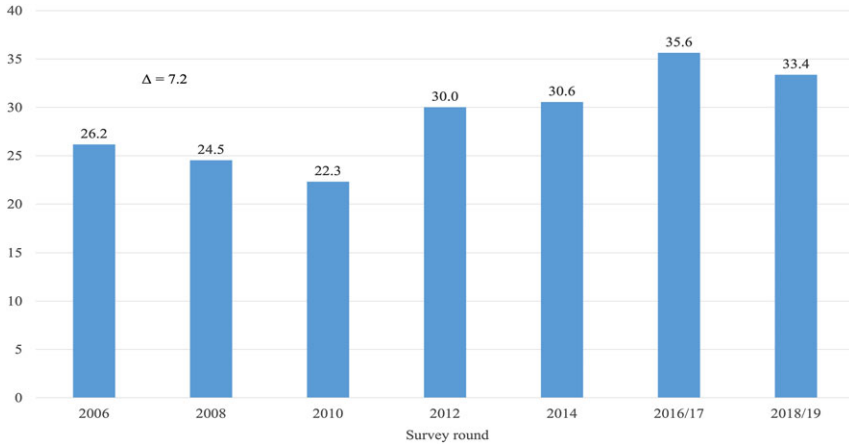
Figure 4. Nonresponse in Ideological Self-Placement—Pooled Latin American Data.



We first look at the trend for the region as a whole, pooling data from all the countries included in the analysis, and then present the results for each country.

As Figure 5 shows, there has been a region-wide increase in mass-level ideological polarization in Latin America during the second decade of the twenty-first century. The evolution of polarization between 2006 and 2018/19 appears to be divided into two phases. During the first years, a slight decline in polarization is evidenced, going from a score of 26.2 in 2006 to 22.3 in 2010. But then the upward trend is clear: from

Figure 5. Polarization Scores—Pooled Latin American Data.



2010 to 2016/17, the polarization score increases by about 60%, reaching a peak score of 35.6 in 2016/17. The increase that takes place between 2010 and 2016/2017 coincides with the steady decline in the share of self-described “moderates,” which falls by more than 10 percentage points over this period (Figure 2 above). The most recent measure appears to show a slight decrease in ideological polarization compared to the peak in 2016/2017, but this is likely due to the absence of data from Haiti and Venezuela, two of the most polarized countries in the region.

Next, we analyze the change in polarization scores on a country-by-country basis. Table 1 presents these results. Two “deltas” are calculated for each country. The first delta (“ $\Delta 1$ ”) indicates the change in polarization between the first and last measurement in each country. The second delta (“ $\Delta 2$ ”) conveys the contrast between the polarization score in 2010 (when the lowest score was found for the region as a whole) and the polarization score in the last measurement. Although we base most of the analyses in this paper on the first delta, we believe that in some cases “ $\Delta 2$ ” may be more informative than “ $\Delta 1$ .”

As can be seen, there is great variation in the  $\Delta 1$ 's. Countries such as Guatemala, Panama and Haiti show considerable changes, with deltas of 20 points or more. Some countries, such as Mexico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Chile, have remained stable in terms of ideological polarization according to the “ $\Delta 1$ ” measure of change. What is particularly relevant in Table 1 is that all but three of the countries analyzed (El Salvador, Chile, and Venezuela—more on these cases later) show an increase in ideological polarization between the first and last measurement points. In terms of “ $\Delta 2$ ,” only one country shows a negative change in polarization: Mexico. It seems clear that, albeit to varying degrees, ideological polarization has taken place in the vast majority of Latin American countries.

Table 1. Polarization Scores for Nineteen Latin American Countries, 2006–2018/19

Country	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016/ 2017	2018/ 2019	$\Delta$ 1	$\Delta$ 2
Mexico	24.1	21.7	24.7	25.4	34.0	29.4	24.1	0.1	−0.6
Guatemala	13.1	25.5	19.2	24.6	27.2	36.3	37.4	24.3	18.2
El Salvador	38.6	40.1	28.4	42.9	39.0	34.4	34.2	−4.4	5.8
Honduras	30.1	20.9	18.4	33.7	37.4	46.2	47.4	17.3	29.0
Nicaragua	28.3	49.2	41.7	52.3	50.8	52.4	45.3	17.0	3.6
Costa Rica	26.2	31.0	27.5	23.2	27.1	27.6	27.7	1.5	0.2
Panama	17.6	12.9	19.8	36.7	29.1	37.5	37.6	20.0	17.8
Colombia	27.7	25.7	25.4	27.1	30.8	29.8	31.5	3.8	6.1
Ecuador	23.6	25.8	22.2	26.9	28.1	30.9	25.3	1.7	3.1
Bolivia	18.4	18.6	12.6	18.0	14.9	25.4	28.2	9.7	15.6
Peru	17.4	18.3	14.6	14.9	15.2	25.6	26.7	9.3	12.1
Paraguay		18.6	15.9	36.1	37.9	41.1	38.5	19.9	22.6
Chile	23.2	18.6	21.1	20.6	23.0	22.9	22.2	−0.9	1.1
Uruguay	25.7	28.2	25.2	26.8	28.9	24.1	31.4	5.7	6.2
Brazil	21.4	17.4	22.0	30.7	27.2	34.0	36.5	15.1	14.5
Venezuela	44.6	25.7	23.3	37.8	39.9	40.9		−3.7	17.6
Argentina		10.3	10.1	14.4	16.7	19.9	21.3	11.0	11.2
Dom. Rep.	40.8	39.4	41.1	52.4	44.9	57.2	52.0	11.2	10.9
Haiti	24.1	18.1	10.7	25.8	28.4	61.6		37.4	50.9
<b>Region (avg.)</b>	<b>26.2</b>	<b>24.5</b>	<b>22.3</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>30.5</b>	<b>35.6</b>	<b>33.4</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>11.1</b>

## 7. DISCUSSION: TRENDS IN IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN LATIN AMERICA

The results so far show that in Latin America as a whole, ideological polarization declined from 2006 to 2010, increased steadily from 2010 to 2016/17, and then declined somewhat from 2016/17 to 2018. This section shows that a similar trend can be found in most countries in the region and almost all countries in South America. Moreover, polarization has increased in all but three countries over the period. More than an interesting curiosity, we believe that these common trends can be linked to other processes in the region, motivating further research.

In 13 of the 19 countries studied (68%), ideological polarization at the mass level evolved in a V-shape, characterized by (1) an initial decrease until 2008 or 2010, when

it reached a minimum, and (2) a constant or almost constant increase thereafter, reaching a peak in one of the last two survey waves. The countries that followed this pattern are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. In Colombia, polarization fell from 27.7 in 2006 to 25.4 in 2010, and then increased almost steadily until 2019, when it peaked at 31.5. In Brazil, the valley of polarization was reached in 2008, when Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was still a very popular president, and then increased in an irregular manner until 2019. In Haiti, the changes in ideological polarization have been particularly dramatic: a decline from 24.1 in 2006 to 10.7 in 2010, one of the lowest scores in the region, followed by a rapid increase, reaching a maximum of 61.6 in 2017, one year before the beginning of a major economic and political crisis. This V-shaped trend is particularly prevalent in South America, where all countries except Chile follow it.

The correlated movement of ideological polarization levels in most countries in Latin America, and especially in South America, suggests a potential common cause. Perhaps the V-shaped trend is related to the left wave, the global economic crisis of 2008–9, the commodity boom, the diffusion of norms across borders, or increasing fragmentation in Latin American multi-party systems. These causes could have a non-linear effect; left-wing presidencies seem to have caused an initial decrease in polarization, but later an increase. They may also interact in complex ways. In any case, it is left to future research to establish these relationships, as it is beyond the scope of this article.

Another common trend we observe is that ideological polarization at the mass level increased almost everywhere in Latin America from the beginning to the end of the period studied. Of the 19 countries, 16 experienced an increase in polarization, and 9 experienced a double-digit increase. This finding contrasts with the literature, in which older studies found no change in mass-level polarization (Arnold and Samuels 2011; Murillo et al. 2010; Seligson 2007), while more recent studies found only a slight increase (Murillo 2022). Table 2 classifies the countries studied according to whether they show a V-shaped evolution of ideological polarization and whether they experienced an increase in their level of polarization from 2006 to 2019. As can be seen, most countries (12 out of 19) fall into the upper left quadrant: V-shaped evolution and an increase in polarization, the same pattern experienced by Latin America as a region.

## 8. DOES IDEOLOGICAL SELF-PLACEMENT (AND POLARIZATION) MATTER IN LATIN AMERICA?

It has been argued that in Latin America “policy preferences play a secondary role to issues of partisan identity or feelings of my team versus yours” (Murillo 2022). Therefore, we felt it necessary to examine whether the policy preferences of Latin American leftists and rightists are consistent with theoretical predictions.

Following Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), we examine the relationship between political interest, self-reported ideology, and actual policy preferences to see



Table 2. Trends in Mass-Level Polarization in Latin America

		Was polarization higher by the end of the 2006–2019 period than it was at the start?	
		Yes	No
V-shaped evolution of polarization?	Yes	ARG, BOL, BRA, COL, ECU, DOM, HTI, HND, PAN, PRY, PER, URY.	VEN
	No	GTM, MEX, NIC, CRI	CHL, SLV

whether voters’ policy preferences are consistent with their ideology. In the AmericasBarometer data, political interest is measured by variable *pol1*, with four categories: “a lot,” “some,” “little,” “none.” We will focus on comparing the opinions of extreme right and left wingers, not moderates. Table 3 shows that polarized individuals—whether on the left or the right—are much more likely than moderates to show “a lot” of interest in politics. About 16% of far-left and far-right individuals say they are very interested in politics, compared with only 9.3% of moderates.

As noted earlier in this article, the literature sees egalitarianism as the core issue separating left and right ideologies. Left ideology supports public policies that improve economic equality, while right ideology views these inequalities as natural and not a priority for public efforts. In addition, sociocultural aspects have been added as a second dimension to the ideological dichotomy, with the left usually seen as cosmopolitan, while the right is tied to traditional values and regionalism. To test the alignment of the Latin American left and right in terms of their ideologies, we selected two variables from LAPOP: *ROS4* and *D5*, which capture support for policies that reduce inequality and support for the right of homosexuals to run for office, respectively. In addition to capturing important political predictions, *ROS4* and *D5* have the best sample coverage among the ideologically relevant variables, having been included in more than 100 country-wave surveys.

Table 4 shows the percentage of people in each group who strongly support policies to reduce inequality (response 7 to *ROS4*). It shows that among those who are very or somewhat interested in politics, left wingers are more supportive of these policies than right-wingers, which is consistent with ideological theory. However, among those who are not interested in politics, opinions are the opposite of what the theory expects. Considering all individuals at the ideological extremes, regardless of political interest, leftists are only slightly more supportive of redistributive policies than rightists.

Next, we examine ideological consistency using *D5*, a variable that measures “support for the right of homosexuals to run for office” on a scale of 1 to 10. Table 5 shows the percentage of people who support this right (answers 6 to 10 on *D5*) by ideology and political interest.

Table 3. Political Interest by Polarized Groups

Political interest (pol1)	Ideological self-identification		
	Extreme Left (EL)	Moderates (M)	Extreme Right (ER)
A lot	15.9%	9.3%	16.1%
Some	19.7%	23.1%	21.1%
Little	30.2%	35.7%	32.9%
None	34.2%	31.9%	30.0%

Table 4. Percentages of Individuals Who Strongly Support Redistribution, by Ideology and Political Interest

Political Interest	Ideology		
	Extreme Left (EL)	Extreme Right (ER)	Difference (EL-ER)
A lot	63.2%	52.8%	10.3%***
Some	51.1%	47.1%	4.0%***
Little	45.4%	46.1%	-0.7%
None	44.8%	48.4%	-3.6%***
Total	49.1%	48.1%	1.0% <sup>+</sup>

Significance levels: \*\*\* 0.1%, \*\* 1%, \* 5%, + 10%.

Table 5. Percentages of Individuals Who Support Homosexuals' Right to Run for Office, by Ideology and Political Interest

Political Interest	Ideology		
	Extreme Left (EL)	Extreme Right (ER)	Difference (EL-ER)
A lot	54.0%	39.4%	14.6%***
Some	44.7%	38.5%	6.2%***
Little	36.0%	36.0%	0.0%
None	33.2%	33.8%	-0.6%
Total	39.7%	36.5%	3.2%***

Significance levels: \*\*\* 0.1%, \*\* 1%, \* 5%, + 10%.

The survey shows that, for the most part, people surveyed by LAPOP have preferences that are consistent with what the theory suggests. Among those who are interested in politics, most left wingers support the right of homosexuals to run for office, while only a minority of right-wingers do. As before, however, this ideological consistency diminishes and disappears as political interest declines. Overall, left wingers are 3.2% more likely than right-wingers to support this right, a difference that is statistically significant.<sup>9</sup>

What we take from these results is that some of the polarization we see in Latin America is consistent with theoretical predictions about ideological preferences, and some is not. Ideological self-placement seems to be well aligned with theory among the most politically engaged, but not so much among other groups.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This article presents extant empirical evidence on changes in mass-level ideological restructuring and ideological polarization in Latin America, using a well-defined and robust indicator. The analyses provide degrees and dynamics for the region as a whole and for individual countries. The presented numbers and patterns should be of value to researchers interested in studying polarization in the region. The material provided can be utilized for future research to examine the causes and effects of ideological polarization in specific cases.

The article's main conclusions have to do with the identification of an important process of ideological restructuring at the mass level, accompanied by processes of ideological polarization, during the second decade of the twenty-first century. This phenomenon was not observed during the first decade, which instead witnessed significant ideological shifts at the elite level, particularly during the so-called "left turn" in Latin American politics. The changes in the trend lines of the "extreme left," "extreme right," and "moderates" groups reveal that at the beginning of the time series, the extreme right accounted for most of the polarization. However, later on, the extreme left tended to rise, resulting in roughly equal contributions to net polarization by the end of the time series. This shift occurred after the period of Latin America's "left turn" (Levitsky and Roberts, 2011). It may indicate a delayed effect of the ideological shifts at the elite level on the changes at the mass level. Given the aggregate trend lines, most of the countries that show increased polarization over time are presumably doing so because of the growth of the radical left, but there may be some where polarization is being driven by the right (such as Brazil in 2019). A potential next step for this research would be to disaggregate the data and examine the evolution of national-level scores for changes in both the radical left and right. This would provide a better understanding of cross-national variation in the patterns associated with growing polarization.

The article has also demonstrated that polarization in Latin America is not exclusively an elite phenomenon (as some authors have argued), as it clearly exists at the mass level in many of the countries included in our analyses. This finding is important because scholars have contended that ideological self-identification in Latin

America is either low or meaningless, and that many people do not understand or identify with the different ideological positions. One question that remains open for further research is the nature of the relationship between elite-level polarization and mass-level polarization. It is unclear whether this relationship is top-down, bottom-up, or whether the two types vary independently.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2024.13>

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## NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of the positive and negative effects polarization can have on democratic systems, see the section “The Complex Relationship Between Polarization and Democracy” in the introduction to this special issue (Sarsfield, Moncagatta, and Roberts 2024).

2. For examples focusing on Latin America see Moraes 2015; Moraes and Béjar 2023; Singer 2016.

3. In the main text of the article, we have selected the two variables we believe are the best proxies for capturing both the “economic” and the “cultural” axes when assessing the consistency of left-right ideological identifications in Latin America. In Appendix 3 we test ideological consistency using several other variables.

4. Unfortunately, the 2018/19 wave of the AmericasBarometer is the last wave to include the ideological self-placement question, so we cannot provide a more up-to-date analysis.

5. For the complete proof of Proposition A see Appendix 1.

6. We thank the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available.

7. Following the advice of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), we adjusted the data to give each country equal weight in the construction of these graphs. That is, we do not weight each country in proportion to its population, but consider each country as a specific unit of analysis in its own right (Castorena 2021). The resulting graphs are therefore an average of the averages of all countries in the different waves.

8. For applying the non-integer survey weights that the AmericasBarometers include in their data, we followed the method of using the integer part of each sampling weight proposed by Heeringa, West, and Berglund (2010, 121–22).

9. In Appendix 3, we present a summary of similar tests using dozens of other AmericasBarometer variables that capture ideologically relevant political dimensions. In most, but not all cases, the left and right appear to align with theoretical predictions. The appendix also provides more details on the methodology used in these tests.

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