

TOLERANCE FOR POSTPONING ELECTIONS IN CRISIS CONDITIONS

Tolerancia a Posponer Elecciones en Tiempos de Crisis
Tolerância para Adiar Eleições em Tempos de Crise

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Abstract

Election postponements occur around the world for a variety of reasons, but they became especially widespread during the Covid-19 pandemic. Little is known how the public perceives and reacts to such democratic delays. To shed light on this topic, we included a question module in the 2021 AmericasBarometer about tolerance for alterations to democracy during periods of crisis. The data reveal that tolerance for election postponements is quite high. Further, through a wording experiment, we find that the public is more willing to accept such a delay during a health emergency vis-à-vis an alternative condition (widespread violence). We contextualize these findings by comparing them with attitudes about a more extreme anti-democratic disruption: a coup d'état by security forces. Coups are significantly less popular than election postponements, especially during a health emergency. The results improve our understanding of public appetite for authoritarianism during periods of crisis.

Palabras clave:
*aplazamiento
de elecciones;
democracia;
encuestas;
Covid-19;
América Latina*

Resumen

Los aplazamientos de elecciones ocurren en todo el mundo por diferentes motivos. Sin embargo, estos se generalizaron particularmente durante la pandemia de Covid-19. Poco se conoce sobre cómo el público percibe y reacciona ante tales retrasos democráticos. Para dar una idea más clara sobre este tema, se incluyó un módulo de preguntas en el Barómetro de las Américas 2021 sobre la tolerancia a las alteraciones de la democracia durante periodos de crisis. Los datos revelan que la tolerancia a los aplazamientos de las elecciones es bastante alta. Además, a través de un experimento de redacción, se encuentra que el público está más dispuesto a aceptar retrasos electorales durante una emergencia de salud que durante una condición alternativa (violencia generalizada). El artículo contextualiza estos hallazgos comparándolos con actitudes sobre una ruptura antidemocrática más extrema: un golpe de estado por parte de las fuerzas del orden. Los golpes de Estado son significativamente menos populares que los aplazamientos de elecciones, especialmente durante una emergencia sanitaria. Los resultados incrementan nuestra comprensión sobre la demanda pública por autoritarismo durante periodos de crisis.

Palavra s-chave:
*adiamento
de eleições;
democracia;
pesquisas de
opinião pública;
Covid-19;
América Latina*

Resumo

Os adiamentos de eleições ocorrem em todo o mundo por diferentes razões. No entanto, estes se tornaram difundidos especialmente durante a pandemia de Covid-19. Pouco se sabe sobre como o público percebe e reage a esses atrasos democráticos. Para esclarecer essa questão, um módulo de perguntas foi incluído no Barômetro das Américas 2021 sobre tolerância a alterações à democracia durante periodos de crise. Os dados revelam que a tolerância para adiamentos de eleições é bastante alta. Além disso, por meio de um experimento de redação, descobrimos que o público está mais disposto a aceitar atrasos eleitorais durante uma emergência de saúde do que durante uma condição alternativa (violência generalizada). O artigo contextualiza essas descobertas comparando-as com atitudes sobre uma ruptura antidemocrática mais extrema: um golpe de Estado. Os golpes de Estado são significativamente menos populares do que adiamentos de eleições, especialmente durante uma emergência de saúde. Os resultados melhoram nossa compreensão da demanda pública por autoritarismo em periodos de crise.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic intersected with a decade-long global trend toward authoritarianism (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2020), under which democratic faultlines have appeared or widened across the Americas. In 2019, instability challenged the region: congress was dissolved in Peru, and violent clashes took place between protestors and security forces in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and elsewhere. As the pandemic unfolded in 2020 and into 2021, backsliding continued to close the space available for political discourse and competition with, for example, politically-motivated arrests by Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela and President Daniel Ortega's administration in Nicaragua.

Adding to democratic stall in the region, the pandemic motivated the postponement of some local and national elections.¹ While public health and safety concerns may make it reasonable to reschedule some elections during a pandemic, the act nonetheless places stress on a democracy by removing its core guarantee: the right for citizens to participate in a public contest between political candidates (Dahl, 1971). Further, election delays can be an autocratic tool for incumbent officeholders to extend their term or gain electoral advantage. For example, Moraski and Reisinger (2007) describe how Russian President Vladimir Putin strategically used changes in the timing of gubernatorial elections to influence election results and ultimately undermine their credibility as institutions. In short, while justifiable in theory, the postponement of elections can place democracy at risk (James & Alihodzic, 2020).

Public appetite for postponing elections can factor into leaders' decisions regarding when and for how long to delay elections in times of threat. For example, following 9/11, then-Mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani reportedly raised the idea of postponing city elections, but backtracked after encountering resistance.² In general, public opinion shapes the policy space in which politicians maneuver (Shapiro, 2011). Public support can embolden leaders and facilitate "executive aggrandizement" – legal maneuvers to centralize and extend power (Bermeo, 2016). Consequently, it is important to consider this question: how did the Covid-19 pandemic influence the public's tolerance for postponing elections?

We answer this question via original survey data from 13 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean. The data permit us to evaluate public tolerance toward a hypothetical election postponement by the executive due to a health emergency like the Covid-19 pandemic – on its own and in comparison to another type of crisis, widespread violence. For broader perspective, we also compare these views on the acceptability of pausing democratic processes (delaying elections) against views on more extreme democratic disruptions: coups d'état by security forces.

We find high degrees of tolerance for postponing elections under conditions of a major health emergency. Appetite for this type of pause is consistently higher than it is for a scenario involving a high degree of violence. Tolerance for delaying democracy via postponing elections also is higher than tolerance for disrupting democracy via a coup, no matter the circumstance. As a point of comparison, health emergencies do not consistently boost tolerance for democratic disruptions (coups) compared to other crises, as they do for democratic delays (postponements).

1. See a list of postponed elections due to Covid-19 from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance here: <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>

2. <https://www.businessinsider.com/rudy-giuliani-george-pataki-cancel-elections-stay-mayor-after-911-2020-2>

This study makes three main contributions. First, to our knowledge, we are the first to provide region-wide estimates of support for election postponements, which is an important yet understudied political phenomenon. Second, the findings address the ongoing debate about the relationship between Covid-19 and democracy. The results suggest that the pandemic raises support for pauses on democratic processes more so than other large scale problems like widespread violence. Finally, the results provide evidence that democratic attitudes play a stabilizing role in times of crisis. Although most people are quite preoccupied with Covid-19, and they are willing to embrace disruptions to normal election schedules, they do not turn to regime change to solve the crisis. In the conclusion, we return to a discussion of the study's implications and suggest avenues for further research.

MOTIVATION

At least 80 countries around the world have postponed elections due to the Covid-19 pandemic.³ Postponements have occurred in various countries through the Americas, though the extent to which the delays were directly related to the virus varies by country. For example, general elections in the Dominican Republic were scheduled for May 17, 2020 but were delayed because of coronavirus until July 5, 2020, at which point they proceeded smoothly. Likewise, in Brazil, municipal elections were pushed back by a month and a half, from October 4, 2020 to November 15, 2020, after some proposed delaying them until the general elections of 2022.⁴ A different case is Bolivia's general elections, which were scheduled for May 3 but delayed twice and finally held on October 18, 2020. The Bolivian postponements were ostensibly due to Covid-19, but they took place amidst the backdrop of a power struggle following a controversial annulment of election results in 2019. Additionally, presidential elections and a constitutional referendum in Haiti were indefinitely postponed due to a combination of Covid-19, outbreaks of violence in the streets, and difficulties in the electoral council. In contrast, elections were held on schedule in other countries in the Americas, including in Ecuador and the United States.

While the pandemic brought about changes to electoral cycles in many countries, interrupted elections are nothing new to the world's developing democracies. The National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset

3. <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections>

4. "Prefeitos defendem adiamento de eleições e votação única." Estadão. 24 March 2020. <https://exame.com/brasil/prefeitos-defendem-adiamento-de-eleicoes-e-votacao-unica-a-cada-cinco-anos/>

identifies 144 states that have experienced a “suspended election” between 1945 and 2015 (Hyde & Marinov, 2012).

Election postponements are controversial. As the Covid-19 pandemic unfurled, supporters of election delays argued that they were necessary to help stop the spread of the virus⁵ and to ensure free and fair elections with widespread participation.⁶ In contrast, critics claimed that election delays are an illegitimate power grab⁷ and raised concerns about the effects of such delays on institutional legitimacy.⁸

At the heart of this debate lies a tension between managing the crisis and maintaining the stability of the electoral system. James and Alihodzic (2020) provide an overview of normative justifications for postponing elections during emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and conflict, arguing that such crises compromise “opportunities for deliberation, contestation, participation, and election management quality.” Limited ability or willingness to travel and engage in in-person activity poses risks to various aspects of elections, including campaigning, nominations and primaries, registration, observer training, voting, security, and vote counting, especially in countries with limited internet and telephone access. Analyses of participation in municipal elections in France and Spain show a strong inverse relationship between Covid-19 outbreaks and voter turnout (Fernández-Navia, 2021; Noury *et al.*, 2021).

However, election postponements represent a departure from normal democratic procedure and hold the potential to compromise or destabilize democracy (James & Alihodzic, 2020). Such postponements can diminish institutional certainty by altering the expectation of transfer of power. That can shake faith in the democratic process, especially in new democracies and hybrid regimes (Landman

5. Experts testified in front of Brazil's Congress advocating for election delays, with one remarking that holding elections in October would be “inconceivable”. See: Garcia, Gustavo. “Eleições 2020: senadores debatem eventual adiamento com presidente do TSE e especialistas.” *Globo*, 22 June 2020. <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2020/noticia/2020/06/22/eleicoes-2020-senadores-debtem-eventual-adiamento-com-presidente-do-tse-e-especialistas.ghtml>

6. President of Chile Sebastián Piñera said that his government's decision to delay 2021 elections until health indicators improved helps “achieve high citizen participation.” See: “Presidente Piñera promulgó postergación de elecciones para el 15 y 16 de mayo” *CNN Chile*. 6 April 2021. https://www.cnnchile.com/pais/pinera-promulga-postergacion-elecciones_20210406/

7. Former Bolivian President Evo Morales spoke out against the second election delay, claiming it was meant to extend the interim's government hold on power. See: “Evo Morales advierte sobre otra posible postergación de las elecciones presidenciales.” *Télam Consur*. 23 July, 2020. <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202007/493440-evo-morales-bolivia-postergacion-elecciones-presidenciales.html>

8. United States President Donald Trump proposed delaying the 2020 elections, which drew condemnation from his own party, with Republican Senator Chuck Grassley stating, “we still are a country based on the rule of law and we want to follow the law until ... the Constitution is changed.” See Wu, Nicholas and Christal Hayes. “McConnell, other top Republicans say Election Day isn't moving after Trump floated delay.” *USA Today*. 30 July 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/07/30/mcconnell-gop-say-election-day-not-moving-after-trump-floated-delay/5545609002/>

& Splendore, 2020). In Ethiopia, for example, postponement of elections in 2020 exacerbated and intensified existing political strife, which ultimately triggered an armed conflict (Matlosa, 2021).

Though they are common, especially in the context of the pandemic, election postponements are not well understood by political science. For the most part, scholarly discussion on election postponements considers their legal or normative justifications (James & Alihodzic, 2020; Morley, 2017) or their macro-level effects on political institutions (Landman & Splendore, 2020; Matlosa, 2021).⁹ We extend scholarship on election postponement by providing insight into this question: Are citizens willing to accept election postponements in times of emergency, and in what circumstances? The answer to this question is important because the survival of democracy depends on public support of the system (Claassen, 2020). If elites move to delay elections, the public could lose faith in the electoral process. Related, it is important to understand public opinion on this topic because policy makers are influenced by popular sentiment (Shapiro, 2011). That is, in theory, the decision to delay elections (or not) is conditional on the extent to which executives anticipate public approval (or resistance).

Our study also extends work on the political effects of Covid-19, which has focused a good deal of attention on trust in government and support for incumbent regimes and less on attitudes toward elections. We add perspective to a debate in extant research on whether the pandemic has positive or negative consequences for democratic attitudes. Some studies have found a link between the onset of the pandemic (and accompanying lockdown measures) and support for incumbents, trust in democratic political institutions, and satisfaction with democracy (Devine *et al.*, 2020; De Vries *et al.*, 2021; Bol *et al.*, 2021; Esaiasson, 2021; Jennings, 2020; Schraff, 2020). Others, though, suggest that the crisis increased national favoritism, desire for strong leadership, and willingness to give up freedom (Amat *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, some have argued that the pandemic has accelerated democratic backsliding where democratic institutions were already beginning to deteriorate (Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020). Within Latin America, several studies find that presidents received a boost in popularity at the beginning of the pandemic, though the effects quickly faded (Klobovs, 2020; Sosa-Villagarcia & Hurtado Lozada, 2021; Lupu & Zechmeister, 2021).

Why, in theory, would attitudes towards elections shift under the specter of the pandemic? Three strands of argument provide complementary but distinct reasons why the public's tolerance for election postponement would be comparatively elevated when confronting a public health crisis. First, conditions of threat and crisis

9. An exception is Lupu and Zechmeister (2021), who estimate support for an election postponement, but it is not their main focus and analysis is limited to one country (Haiti).

move the public in authoritarian directions (e.g., among many, Sales, 1973; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009). To the extent that the pandemic nudges opinion away from liberal perspectives, the public may become more tolerant of deviations from normal democratic processes. Second, the rally 'round the flag framework holds that support for incumbents increases in the face of external shocks (Mueller, 1970). If a similar logic holds under the pandemic (see, e.g., Lupu & Zechmeister, 2021; Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021), individuals may accept postponing elections to keep the executive in place. Third, individuals consider risks to their safety in deciding whether or not to participate in elections (Ley, 2018; Trelles and Carreras, 2012). While perceptions of risk due to the Covid-19 pandemic vary by personal and political factors (e.g., Aruguete *et al.*, 2021; Bell-Martin & Díaz Domínguez, 2021; Calvo & Ventura, 2021; Sobral *et al.*, 2020), overall levels of concern about contracting the disease were elevated as cases surged around the world. AmericasBarometer data show, for example, that in 2021 across the Latin America and Caribbean region, worry about the Covid-19 pandemic was widespread: on average across the region, 65.7% of individuals reported being “very worried” about someone in the household contracting the virus. Because of the communicable nature of the virus, voters could feel personally vulnerable at the polls, raising tolerance for alterations to elections even more than other types of national crisis.¹⁰

Support for postponing elections is, at least temporarily, an endorsement of the status quo. Some scholars have reported evidence that the pandemic motivates an embrace of status quo and/or mainstream politics (Bisbee and Honig 2022). Conversely, the three factors identified above – authoritarianism, rally 'round the flag, and personal risk – could generate momentum for drastic *changes* to the status quo. That is, in times of crisis and/or widespread discontent, we might expect support for coups (Seligson & Carrión, 2002; Seligson & Booth, 2009) or the entry of populist politicians (Hawkins, Read, & Pauwels, 2017). If voters are eager to replace incumbent leaders, we would expect low levels of tolerance for postponements, since elections are one channel through which a new leader could emerge.

To evaluate how the public considers election postponement under a pandemic, we gather original comparative data from 13 countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region. We first provide baseline estimates of tolerance for executive-issued election postponements during a health emergency like Covid-19, which, to our knowledge, is the first set of region-wide data on attitudes toward election delays. We then contextualize these estimates by viewing them through two lenses.

10. Testing these micro-logics is outside the scope of this research note; therefore, we caution against the potential for an ecological fallacy in which aggregate patterns do not map on to micro-level mechanisms. As we note in the conclusion, a next step in this research agenda is to use the publicly available AmericasBarometer data to study individual-level opinion dynamics on these topics.

First, to test our hypothesis about elevated tolerance for postponements under public health crises, we compare attitudes toward postponing elections during a health emergency to views on the acceptability of postponements during another type of crisis which could plausibly impact elections: widespread violence.

Second, we compare attitudes about postponing elections to tolerance for a complete disruption of democracy in the form of a coup d'etat. We note an important facet of this comparison is that the former question asks about granting the executive leeway with respect to the administration of elections, while the latter asks about a scenario in which the executive is deposed. We consider these two scenarios as deviations from democracy, as any democratic system relies on regularly held elections and, accordingly, the expectation that the public will have the chance to choose new leadership. However, if opinion shifts in an undemocratic way that favors deep democratic disruptions carried out by the executive, rather than against the executive, our analysis will fail to detect that turn. Thus, we acknowledge that this comparison is only one way, among theoretical others, to assess whether tolerance for election postponements simply constitutes an endorsement of the status quo or signals an embrace of authoritarianism in response to the crisis.

DATA

To investigate opinion toward election postponement, we designed original questions and a question-wording experiment, and included these instruments in the 2021 round of LAPOP's AmericasBarometer survey. The AmericasBarometer is a biennial survey of democratic attitudes across the Americas continent. Interviews for this round took place entirely over mobile phones in 20 Latin American and Caribbean countries.¹¹ Data were collected between January and August 2021.

Our analysis is centered on two wording experiments related to support for democratic disruptions.¹² The first asks whether it is justifiable for the president to postpone elections under one of two randomly assigned conditions: when "there is a public health emergency like the coronavirus", or when "there is a lot of violence". The second experiment mirrors the first but provides perspective on a more unequivocally undemocratic action: military coups. Respondents are asked whether it would be justified for the "military of this country to take by a

11. Web surveys were also conducted in the U.S. and Canada but are not analyzed in this study as they do not include the relevant questions. Technical information for the 2021 AmericasBarometer can be found here: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2021/AB2021-Technical-Report-v1.0-FINAL-eng-120921.pdf>

12. Questionnaires are available here: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.php>

coup d'état (military coup)" under one of two randomly assigned conditions: when "there is a public health emergency like the coronavirus" or "there is a lot of corruption". In each experiment, there are only two possible responses: yes or no.

It is important to acknowledge that the baseline condition (violence or corruption) differs across the two modules. LAPOP was unable to alter the coup question due to objectives and constraints unrelated to this study, and we did not consider postponing elections due to corruption to be a plausible situation (whereas some countries have postponed elections due to violence). However, we consider the two situations to be roughly comparable conditions of crisis. Between 2006 and 2019, the AmericasBarometer asked whether coups are justified both in the case of widespread corruption and high crime. Across all years and countries, there was a correlation of 0.66 between the two measures. Moreover, the incongruity of the baselines should not affect the comparison between levels of support for postponing elections due to a health emergency and level of support for coups due to a health emergency. However, the difference should be kept in mind when comparing treatment effects across the two experiments.

The first experiment, on postponements, was conducted in 13 countries: Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina. The second, on coups, was included in the same countries except Costa Rica.¹³

While the target number of complete interviews for the AmericasBarometer was 3,000 in each country, the questionnaire featured a split sample, so each of these experiments was conducted with around 1,500 respondents. That is, around 1,500 individuals were asked one question about tolerance for election postponements and the same 1,500 were also asked about tolerance for coups. Among these 1,500, half were randomly given the health emergency treatment and the other half the baseline condition (violence or corruption). Randomization for each experiment was independent from the other.

The experiments were placed near the beginning of a questionnaire broadly related to democratic attitudes and related topics.¹⁴ The survey also featured

13. The full wording is as follows. For postponement (experimental condition in bold): JCCOV1/2. "Do you believe that when there is a **public health emergency like the coronavirus** / **a lot of violence** it is justifiable for the president of the country to postpone elections? (1) Yes, it is justified. (2) No, it is not justified." For coups (experimental condition in bold): JC13/COVID. "Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion, would a military coup be justified when **there is a lot of corruption** / **there is a public health emergency like the coronavirus**. (1) It would be justified. (2) No, it would not be justified." We note that the coup question is customized in the case of Panama to refer to the Fuerza Pública de Panamá.

14. The general structure of the questionnaire is as follows: 10 eligibility and demographic questions; one generic current events question; five questions about COVID-19; one question about

five to seven questions related to general attitudes about the pandemic. We use one item from that module, the extent to which the respondent is worried about someone in their household contracting the coronavirus, to contextualize results from the experiments; see our report on this in the prior section.

All analyses presented here use the survey weights included in the dataset, which, according to the technical information report, adjust for differences in the sample size for each country as well as imbalances in demographic distributions between the samples and national population benchmarks. The region-wide response rate (defined as the AAPOR code RR3) for the 2021 AmericasBarometer was 4.0%. Within-country response rates varied widely; among the countries we analyze, the lowest was 1.0% (Argentina, Bolivia) and the highest was 22.5% (Brazil).

RESULTS

We first examine tolerance for an executive decision to delay democracy. Specifically, Table 1 shows the results of questions about postponement of elections. The table displays the percentage of the population that believes postponing elections would be justified when there is a lot of violence or during a public health emergency like the coronavirus. The overall (regional) averages are shown in the first row, followed by the within-country results, organized by size of the treatment effect (i.e., the difference between the two conditions).

The results show that public opinion is largely sympathetic to election postponement. Region-wide, 59.2% of people say that it is justified when there is a public health emergency. Substantial portions of the public appear willing to justify election delays across all 13 countries, ranging from 44.3% in Colombia to 81.7% in Jamaica. In only three cases does a majority disapprove of election postponements (Colombia, at 44.3% approving; Costa Rica, 47.5%; and Argentina, 49.0%).

Next, in order to establish a reference point for these numbers, we display tolerance for postponement under conditions of violence in the same table. Overall, willingness to justify postponement is nearly 14 percentage points lower during violence compared to a public health emergency ($p = 0.000$). In only five of 13 countries do a majority support postponing elections due to violence, and levels of support range from as low as 29.1% (Uruguay) to a maximum of 67.2% (Jamaica). Further, tolerance for postponement is higher in the health emergency across all countries. The treatment effect is significant at a conventional $p \leq 0.05$

interpersonal trust; the coup experiment; the postponement experiment; 40 questions about support for democracy, trust in institutions, natural disasters, corruption, attitudes toward China and the US, and the courts; 20 more demographic and sampling questions.

threshold within all countries except Peru (difference of 3.5 percentage points, $p = 0.26$). Uruguayans are the most discerning between the two conditions; tolerance for postponements during health emergencies is nearly double than what it is under the violence treatment (51.3% versus 29.1%). The results clearly support the conclusion that public tolerance for democratic delays is comparatively elevated during a pandemic.

Table 1. Election Postponement Experiment Results

Study	Health Emergency Treatment (SE)	Violence Treatment (SE)	Difference (SE)	t-stat (p-value)	n
Overall	59.25% (0.61)	45.43% (0.62)	13.81 (0.87)	15.49 (0.000)	18,794
Uruguay	51.33% (2.22)	29.06% (2.06)	22.26 (3.03)	7.34 (0.000)	1406
Argentina	49.04% (2.41)	30.38% (2.12)	18.65 (3.21)	5.81 (0.000)	1407
Brazil	52.15% (2.64)	35.50% (2.53)	16.65 (3.66)	4.55 (0.000)	1487
Chile	69.49% (1.98)	53.30% (2.30)	16.19 (2.98)	5.43 (0.000)	1415
Panama	54.33% (2.06)	38.81% (2.05)	15.52 (2.91)	5.34 (0.000)	1609
Dominican Republic	65.60% (2.15)	50.40% (2.35)	15.20 (3.19)	4.77 (0.000)	1420
Costa Rica	47.53% (2.19)	32.75% (2.04)	14.78 (2.99)	4.94 (0.000)	1384
Jamaica	81.70% (1.65)	67.22% (1.95)	14.48 (2.55)	5.68 (0.000)	1489
Paraguay	59.01% (2.25)	48.30% (2.26)	10.71 (3.20)	3.35 (0.001)	1389
Bolivia	69.95% (2.00)	59.51% (2.16)	10.44 (2.94)	3.55 (0.000)	1425

Study	Health Emergency Treatment (SE)	Violence Treatment (SE)	Difference (SE)	t-stat (p-value)	n
Ecuador	70.50% (1.95)	60.11% (2.05)	10.39 (2.83)	3.67 (0.000)	1491
Colombia	44.31% (2.39)	36.46% (2.37)	7.84 (3.36)	2.33 (0.020)	1388
Peru	52.69% (2.21)	49.15% (2.27)	3.54 (3.17)	1.12 (0.264)	1484

Source: AmericasBarometer 2021.

As a second point of comparison for these results, we consider responses to questions about tolerance of a coup d'etat by security forces, under different conditions. Table 2 shows average tolerance for coups during periods of widespread corruption and during health emergencies, both region-wide and within each country under study. Comparing the results in Tables 1 and 2, there is consistently less appetite for coups compared to election postponements. In only one country (Peru) is there at least one condition in which a majority of the population is willing to report that a coup can be justified (compared to 10 of 13 countries in the postponement). Under the health emergency condition, average tolerance for a coup is almost 30 percentage points lower than tolerance for election postponements (59.2% to 30.0%).

Next, looking within Table 2, we see that tolerance for coups is consistently lower during health emergencies compared to widespread corruption. The average difference across the region is around 10 percentage points, while within-country treatment effects range from 2 to 13 percentage points (Jamaica and Peru, respectively). In nine of 12 countries, the treatment effect is significant. Thus, when comparing the results from Table 1 and 2, we see that the health emergency condition *raises* willingness to justify election postponements, but it *decreases* willingness to justify coups (compared to baseline conditions).

Table 2. Coup Experiment Results

Study	Health Emergency Treatment (SE)	Corruption Treatment (SE)	Difference (SE)	t-stat (p-value)	n
Overall	30.03% (0.61)	39.89% (0.54)	-9.86 (0.82)	-11.99 (0.000)	20,547
Peru	39.14% (2.12)	52.46% (2.34)	-13.32 (3.16)	-4.22 (0.000)	1469
Bolivia	32.53% (2.10)	45.81% (2.28)	-13.28 (3.10)	-4.29 (0.000)	1361
Colombia	25.16% (2.20)	38.23% (2.39)	-13.07 (3.26)	-4.01 (0.000)	1363
Panama	31.38% (2.01)	42.22% (2.09)	-10.84 (2.90)	-3.74 (0.000)	1538
Brazil	28.12% (2.43)	38.15% (2.72)	-10.04 (3.65)	-2.75 (0.006)	1437
Dominican Republic	24.19% (2.09)	34.12% (2.29)	-9.93 (3.10)	-3.20 (0.001)	1376
Chile	24.17% (1.84)	33.67% (2.16)	-9.49 (2.84)	-3.35 (0.001)	1408
Paraguay	36.61% (2.31)	45.06% (2.30)	-8.44 (3.26)	-2.59 (0.010)	1329
Uruguay	12.44% (1.55)	20.39% (1.96)	-7.95 (2.50)	-3.18 (0.001)	1407
Argentina	23.71% (2.06)	29.58% (2.20)	-5.87 (3.01)	-1.95 (0.051)	1398
Ecuador	38.96% (2.14)	43.98% (2.15)	-5.02 (3.03)	-1.66 (0.098)	1419
Jamaica	43.78% (2.16)	46.33% (2.25)	-2.55 (3.12)	-0.82 (0.414)	1305
Costa Rica					

Note: Coup questions were not asked in Costa Rica.

Source: AmericasBarometer 2021.

DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has placed enormous strain on governments and publics across the Americas, at a time in which the quality and stability of democracy is already in peril. We investigate the potential for the pandemic to shake commitment to the most fundamental aspect of democracy: alternation of power by way of regularly held elections. We do so by considering the extent to which the pandemic may have increased tolerance for an executive decision to postpone elections, a move that may be justified even by public health officials but which places democracy at risk (James & Alihodzic, 2020). We juxtapose those beliefs with an attitude that is more unequivocally undemocratic: tolerance for removing the executive by non-electoral means. We find that public health emergencies are effective in increasing the public's willingness to permit the president to delay elections, but not effective in changing public opinion regarding the justifiability of a military takeover of the state (in fact, the evidence suggests that they *lessen* public appetite for coups). Tolerance for election postponements is much higher than tolerance for security force coups, though a sizeable minority (around 30-40%) accept the latter too.

These findings could tell one of a few stories about the under-studied phenomenon of citizen support for election postponements. One interpretation is that the public is willing to tolerate short-term alterations to democracy during an emergency situation, but they do not want to upend democracy altogether. In other words, the pandemic may have expanded tolerance for democratic irregularities (e.g., permitting the president to postpone elections), but had no consequences, or perhaps even diminished, support for extreme movements away from democracy (e.g. coups). An alternative interpretation is that the results show that the public resists *any type* of political change of any type during these types of emergency situations. Perhaps citizens fear that political alterations (in the form of elections or wholesale regime change) could destabilize their country, leading them to embrace the status quo until the crisis is resolved. One final possibility is that the public views election postponements as a *pro*-democracy decision, which could be the case if the pandemic is seen as a threat to electoral fairness. If, for example, voters do not turn out on election day for fear of contracting the virus (as Noury *et al.* 2021 find), then the health of democracy will suffer. Citizens may believe that, during a pandemic, delaying elections protects the integrity of the vote, while under alternative conditions like rampant violence, holding elections does not pose a direct, additional risk to the population.

Future research is needed to fully understand how citizens process election postponements. The Covid-19 pandemic made these commonplace, but they are not new, and will not end once the pandemic is over. Next steps in this research agenda ought to include individual-level analyses to identify who is most likely to

tolerate these postponements – e.g., is it those who are most affected by or most concerned about Covid-19 and are those with elevated tolerance for postponements more or less committed to other democratic processes? We acknowledge that our country-level focus cannot answer these individual-level questions, but the AmericasBarometer dataset is publicly available for the pursuit of these questions¹⁵. Another next step is to extend the analysis to data from different regions and time periods. That will help researchers understand how tolerance for alterations to democracy varies across countries and, as well, ebbs and flows during health emergencies and other types of crises. With respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, on the one hand, it is possible that the public will come to live with the virus and desire a return to normal democratic routines, in which case the gap between tolerance for postponements under health emergencies and under violence will shrink. On the other hand, if the virus continues to spread, it is possible that people will grow even more concerned, perhaps bolstering support for democratic delays or even more overt authoritarian maneuvers like military coups. Ultimately, it will also be instructive to consider whether public opinion dynamics produced under the specter of the Covid-19 pandemic on public opinion are fleeting or, instead, take hold and reshape more lasting attitudes toward political systems and democratic processes in the Americas, and beyond.

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