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COVID-19 has hit Latin America particularly hard, both in terms of contagions and deaths as well as economic effects from the pandemic-associated fallout. Though the region is home to just eight percent of the world's population, it has suffered more than 30 percent of global COVID deaths. Latin America also experienced in 2020/21 the most severe economic crisis of any region, with a seven percent GDP contraction, compared to a global contraction of 3.3 percent.

The pandemic hit the region at a time of rising dissatisfaction with representative politics, frustration that had spilled on to the streets in massive protests across the region starting late 2019.

Governments implemented containment measures of varying degrees, established states of health emergency, and assembled economic rescue packages to address the fallout. Protests died out, at least initially, and in some cases, for example Peru and Argentina, public approval of government during early lockdowns measures was extremely high.

Almost two years into the pandemic, it is possible to make some systematic assessments of the varying effects of COVID-19 on the political systems in Latin America; how they have exacerbated or allayed existing trends in politics and policy. This rich set of original research addresses some of these dimensions, specifically, on representation and governance, and on communication and political behavior.

Three of the articles address government or party strategies. In “Governing a Pandemic: Assessing the Role of Collaboration on Latin American Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis”, Jennifer Cyr, Matías Bianchi, Lucas González and Antonella Perini find, drawing on an original cross-country dataset and case studies of Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina, that national governments that were more collaborative -ie



deliberately reaching across organizational, sectoral, and jurisdictional boundaries- were more successful in reducing death rates.

In “Believe in me: Parties’ Strategies During a Pandemic, Evidence from Ecuador”, Raul Aldaz, Sebastian Vallejo, Diana Davila Gordillo, and Angelica Abad analyze how parties sought to attract voters during the 2021 general elections in Ecuador, one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19 and with a highly competitive electoral field. By following 858 virtual events and over 1.5 million tweets from candidates, the authors examined the prominence of COVID-19 in the campaign frames, as well as whether they sought to appeal via symbolic or programmatic content. They found that COVID-19 was not central in the campaign frames, although used to symbolically message about the capabilities of parties and candidates.

In “The Pandemic and the Crisis of Democracy in Brazil”, Leonardo Avritzer and Lucio Rennó examine the case of Brazil, focusing on how regime legitimacy, authoritarian attitudes, and support for Jair Bolsonaro -a populist, authoritarian leader- interact with and are affected by the pandemic. Drawing on public opinion data between 2018 and 2020, the authors argue that while mistrust of democratic institutions and dissatisfaction with democracy are structural components of Brazilian mass politics, this period also saw a decline in support for military intervention and an improvement in the evaluation of Congress. The authors conclude therefore that the pandemic has not to date contributed to the deepening of a democratic crisis among the Brazilian public.

Four of the articles address citizen attitudes and behavior. In “A Tale of Two Pandemics:

Economic Inequality and Support for Containment Measures in Peru”, Miguel Carreras, Sofia Vera, and Giancarlo Visconti examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic across income groups in Peru, a country also very hard hit, with one of the strictest initial lockdowns in the region yet a weak policy infrastructure for delivering financial assistance to the 80 percent of Peruvians working in the informal sector. The authors designed and implemented a nationally representative telephone survey in May 2020, and found that economically vulnerable sectors were more likely to oppose the quarantine and to defy the lockdown and go to work. As they state, this highlights the need to take into account housing and economic conditions when designing containment policies.

In “Response to COVID-19 Containment Measures in Brazil and Mexico”, Claire Dunn and Isabel Laterzo examine two countries where presidents did not take swift action to stop the spread of COVID-19 -Brazil and Mexico- leaving the burden to sub-national leaders. The authors examine the effects of the varied sub-national approaches as well as conflicting messages from elites, on on-the-ground compliance. Drawing on data collected by the University of Miami Observatory for the Containment of COVID-19 in the Americas, and examining the first 45 days after the first reported COVID-19 case in each country, the authors argue that variation in compliance is influenced by support for national and subnational elites, and the nature of the state-level policy response. In Brazil, support for the president was associated with lower compliance. In Mexico, this effect was not present.

In “Stigmatized campaign practices and the gendered dynamics of electoral viability”, Malu Gatto and Mariana Borges Martins da Silva examine citizen attitudes on gender and electoral viability in the case of Brazil. They ask: what happens when a traditional source of political capital -ie. face-to-face campaign activities- becomes a health hazard? In the context of the pandemic, these activities, a non-stigmatized practice during normal times, posed risks to voters and society at large. Using data from a national survey experiment conducted in Brazil prior to the November 2020 municipal elections (N = 2,025), the authors find that voters evaluate candidates who engage in face-to-face activities as less electorally viable and report lower intent to support them. However, voters punish women candidates who conduct street campaigns more harshly than men, leading women to lose the advantage they have over men when both employ non-stigmatized campaign practices.

Finally, in “Sources of Government Approval During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Threat or Electoral Predispositions”, Adrián Pignataro examines public approval of the government in Costa Rica during the COVID-19 pandemic, at the beginning of the pandemic, in April, with a rally-around-the-flag event, and four months later, in August 2020. The author tests two hypotheses: first, that people living in areas of higher threat, measured as confirmed COVID-19 contagions, are more likely to approve of the government’s performance during the rally, and second, that past electoral support of the president increases the likelihood of approval, during and after the rally. Results indicate that COVID-19 contagions, as a measure of the threat, are not associated with approval, while past voting patterns are. Positive assessments of the economy and the relief measures also predict higher support for the government.

Taken together, these articles -with the rich original data they have gathered- highlight the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has both shifted and reinforced existing political trends in the region.