

World's "Coolest" Dictator?
The Politics of Fear and Freedom: Understanding Attitudes in El Salvador

By

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine the intersection of crime exposure, trust in government, and public support for authoritarian measures in El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele. President Bukele's populist governing style and heavy-handed domestic security policies have significantly reduced crime but at the cost of civil liberties, raising concerns about democratic backsliding. Using survey data from the 2023 LAPOP survey, this study explores how crime victimization and trust in President Bukele impact public willingness to support measures like military coups and the dissolution of democratic institutions. The findings of this study challenge conventional wisdom, revealing that public support for security over democratic values is neither uniform across government actions nor easily predictable. Trust in Bukele moderates this relationship, but the effects are not as impactful as initially anticipated. This research contributes to broader discussions on governance, democracy, and human rights by showing how domestic security threats and political trust shape public attitudes in developing democracies.

Introduction

“They say that Salvadorans are oppressed, that Salvadorans don’t want the emergency measures, that Salvadorans are afraid of the government. Let God tell the journalist to accompany us on this night of total freedom and total security, here in the safest country in the Western hemisphere.” – President Nayib Bukele.

With these bold words, President Nayib Bukele addressed the citizens of El Salvador and his harshest critics on the night of his reelection, celebrating what he claimed to be as an extraordinary success in transforming El Salvador from what was colloquially known as the “murder capital of the world” into one that is considered generally safe. Despite his popularity, Bukele’s approach to combat crime has sparked a global debate regarding civil liberties and security, raising questions about the resulting decline in democracy and human rights violations in El Salvador and beyond. As the country navigates these changes, understanding public opinion on these policies becomes critical for comprehending the future direction of governance and societal structure.

The willingness of an individual to forgo their civil rights for the sake of security is a pressing issue not just in El Salvador but globally. This phenomenon reflects broader trends where governments facing domestic security threats implement heavy-handed measures purportedly for public safety. These actions often spark a debate about enhancing domestic security at the expense of diminished civil liberties. The motivation behind this project is to improve our understanding of the conditions under which people are willing to sacrifice their existing liberties in exchange for higher levels of safety and lower crime rates. Understanding this is critical for evaluating the sustainability of democracy in highly volatile regions and assessing the potential for the rise of populist ideals or democratic backsliding.

Existing literature has explored the trade-offs between security and freedom, often focusing on developed countries or authoritarian regimes. While previous studies have examined the dynamics between security policies and constitutional rights in various contexts, such as those by Beber et al. (2014) and Bateson (2012), there is a gap in understanding how these dynamics play out in countries that have implemented such policies and have seen high levels of success employ populist strategies to justify the continued existence of the policy. These analyses often remain hypothetical or distant in societies where the threat to civil liberties is not immediate. In contrast, El Salvador provides a real and urgent example of these dynamics in action. The government's highly successful crackdown on crime and violence has led to significant changes in constitutional rights, forcing the public to confront the tangible consequences of sacrificing civil liberties for security (Renteria 2024). This project seeks to analyze how public attitudes have shifted in response to these measures, offering crucial insights into the real-world implications of security policies on human rights and voting behavior in El Salvador and similar contexts.

This study posits that exposure to crime and trust in the government and its officials are pivotal factors influencing individuals' willingness to forego civil liberties for enhanced security. It hypothesizes that higher exposure to crime increases support for heavy-handed security measures because individuals who frequently encounter crime are more likely to perceive such measures as necessary for their safety. Similarly, higher trust in government amplifies this effect, as those who trust the government are more inclined to believe that these measures are implemented with their best interests in mind and are likely to be

effective. Conversely, individuals with low trust in government are expected to be more resistant to sacrificing their rights, regardless of their exposure to crime, due to skepticism about the government's intentions or ability to manage security effectively. Utilizing data from the 2023 survey conducted by LAPOP and Vanderbilt University, this study aims to provide empirical evidence regarding the attitudes of Salvadoran residents toward these changes.

Through quantitative analysis, this study will employ statistical techniques to evaluate the significance and strength of these relationships, offering a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving public opinion. Specifically, this study will focus on several key variables. The outcome variables will include whether survey respondents believe a military coup would be justified in high-crime scenarios, approval of increased executive powers through the reduction of the legislatures' power, and the dissolving of the Supreme Court. Additionally, the study will examine the general approval of President Nayib Bukele's job performance. By linking crime exposure – such as personal victimization and perceived safety – to these outcome variables, the research will provide an understanding of how security concerns influence support for extreme political measures and overall presidential approval. This will offer insight into the interplay between crime, governance, and public opinion.

The study's findings reveal a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between crime exposure and trust in President Bukele in shaping public support for authoritarian measures in El Salvador. Specifically, higher levels of trust in the president do not uniformly amplify the willingness of crime victims to endorse extreme security policies,

such as justifying a military coup. While some evidence suggests that trust in President Bukele may increase the willingness to justify a military coup, this effect is not consistent across all measures. These results show that confidence in a politician alone does not fully explain the public endorsement of authoritarian measures and that the erosion of democratic norms is more context-dependent than previously understood.

The results indicate that crime victimization does not increase acceptance of authoritarian measures across the board. While not statistically significant, crime victimization is actually associated with decreased support for measures such as dissolving the Supreme Court or support for a military coup, indicating that those most affected by crime may be wary of increased destabilization. This suggests that the relationship between political attitudes and crime victimization is more complex than expected, with those who have experienced crime personally perhaps wanting stability rather than a potentially precarious future.

This thesis contributes to the broader discourse on governance, democracy, and human rights by providing empirical evidence from a country transitioning from a full democracy to one embracing authoritarian policies. It offers an understanding of how citizens in such contexts navigate the security-freedom dichotomy, with implications for policymakers and scholars alike. By focusing on the Salvadoran experience, this research enhances our understanding of other regions facing comparable challenges.

Thesis Overview

This thesis is structured with several sections to provide an analysis of the complex interplay between rights and security. The next section of the thesis, the literature review, examines the existing research on the balance between security and human rights through the lenses of democratic backsliding and populist rhetoric and the gaps in the current research, highlighting the unique contributions this thesis aims to make. Case selection will discuss the background and the justification for the use of El Salvador for this study. The theory highlights the central theoretical framework of this study and the hypotheses. The methods section details the research design, including the use of the 2023 LAPOP survey and the analytical methods employed to assess public attitudes. It will also include the mechanisms through which exposure to crime and trust in government are hypothesized to influence support for authoritarian measures, providing a comprehensive approach to understanding the factors that drive public endorsement of government overreach.

The findings section presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to explore the relationship between crime victimization, trust in President Bukele, and support for heavy-handed authoritarian measures. The findings section also includes an examination of how these factors influence public attitudes towards different government actions, including the justification for a military coup, dissolving the judiciary, and closing the legislature. This will be followed with a discussion section where the results will be interpreted in the context of the broader literature, exploring the implications for democratic resilience and governance. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the main

findings of the study and provide recommendations for future research in neighboring Latin American countries experiencing similar surges in populism.

Literature Review

This section will explore the existing body of research on democratic backsliding, the effects of populist rhetoric, and the trade-offs between security and individual freedoms. It will provide a foundation for understanding how extreme security measures implemented by the state, such as what was implemented by President Bukele in El Salvador, fit into the broader patterns of public opinion and governance. By reviewing other similar research, this literature review will contextualize the situation in El Salvador and show gaps in the current research that this thesis aims to address.

Understanding how exposure to violence influences public attitudes toward security measures is crucial for assessing support for policies that combat violence. Beber et al. (2014) found that Northerners in Sudan who experienced rioting by Southerners were more likely to support Southern independence but less likely to support citizenship for Southerners remaining in the North. This indicates that exposure to violence hardens negative intergroup attitudes and leads to support for extreme measures to avoid coexistence with outgroup members (Beber et al. 2014). These findings are relevant to El Salvador, where high levels of violence from gangs like MS-13 may similarly influence Salvadorans to support President Bukele's heavy-handed measures, such as the mass incarceration of gang members. However, while Beber et al. illustrate how violence shapes attitudes towards outgroup members, their study does not fully capture how this dynamic

operates in a context where the outgroup is criminalized within the population itself and where a populist leader leverages security concerns to consolidate power. This gap is critical for understanding how support for authoritarian measures is mobilized in democracies facing high levels of violence.

Hong and Kang (2014) examined the long-term effects of wartime violence on public attitudes toward the government, finding that trauma from violence can decrease trust in the government and shape political behavior across generations. This is pertinent to El Salvador, where prolonged gang violence may have created deep-seated trauma and social stigmas, leading to decreased support for the former ruling parties and increased support for Bukele's aggressive policies as a way to distance oneself from the violence and secure community safety. They further argue that there is a social stigma attached to survivors and their families, which creates strong pressure on post-war generations to show increased levels of support for the government as a way to avoid being associated with the victims of abuse (Hong and Kang 2014). Similarly, Bateson (2012) argues that crime victimization, rather than deterring political participation, can drive individuals to engage more in politics, particularly in support of leaders who promise safety and order. (Bateson 2012) Bateson's research suggests that the lived experiences of crime victims may lead them to prioritize security over civil liberties, viewing this trade-off as necessary for the safety of themselves and their community.

These studies primarily focus on the consequences of violence in either post-conflict societies or contexts where the state is not the primary actor driving insecurity. They do not fully address the dynamics in a setting like El Salvador, where the state itself

implements extreme security measures. This research seeks to fill that gap by exploring how these factors intersect in a context where the government's actions, rather than merely responding to violence, are instrumental in redefining the balance between civil liberties and security.

Populism has become a powerful force in contemporary politics, often characterized by the division of society into 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' (Bauer et al. 2024). Deckeyser and Roose (2022) explore how populist messaging taps into public emotions like fear and anger, making such rhetoric more persuasive when it aligns with existing fears of societal decline. (Deckeyser and Roose 2022) This framework explains how President Bukele's use of populist language, attributing El Salvador's gang violence to past political failures, resonates with a population frustrated by crime, giving the public someone to place their trust in to enact policies that will improve the security situation. Bukele's rhetoric simplifies complex issues, focusing public anger on previous political leaders, which in turn garners support for his authoritarian measures. While Deckeyser and Roose provide insight into the mechanisms of populist persuasion, their analysis does not fully address how such rhetoric interacts with extreme security measures in contexts like El Salvador, where the stakes involve both political survival and physical safety.

Bonner's (2019) concept of "punitive populism" further illustrates how leaders use tough-on-crime rhetoric to unify the public and justify severe security measures. Bukele's policies, which include militarized policing and expanded state control, align with this model as they target gang members as enemies, thereby solidifying his public support. Similarly, Chevigny (2003) discusses how fear of crime is manipulated in political

campaigns across the Americas, highlighting how this fear can erode democratic principles. However, existing studies on punitive populism and the politics of fear often focus on established democracies or on crime as a general issue without examining the unique conditions in El Salvador. Specifically, they overlook how much populism functions in a setting where gang violence is pervasive and how it affects public willingness to surrender civil liberties in exchange for security. This research addresses these gaps by exploring how Bukele's populism and authoritarian tactics, and the trust that the public places in his hands, uniquely shape political behavior in a country grappling with high levels of violence and instability.

Democratic backsliding, a process often characterized by the erosion of democratic values and institutions, involves the consolidation of power by executives that weakens institutional checks and balances (Democratic Backsliding 2024). This phenomenon is critical to understanding how leaders may exploit legal and constitutional powers to enhance their authority, often at the expense of democratic norms. Şaşmaz et al. (2022) offer insights into this process by examining how voter behavior in Türkiye reflects a willingness to support executive aggrandizement based on short-term political gains and perceived stability. Their findings on 'elastic support' illustrate how voters' strategic calculations can lead them to support constitutional changes that undermine democratic safeguards. This study underscores the role of short-term political gains in shaping public attitudes towards changes that potentially erode democratic principles, highlighting a crucial aspect of democratic backsliding—public willingness to compromise on democratic rights for perceived stability. However, Şaşmaz et al.'s focus on Türkiye's

electoral dynamics does not fully address how similar dynamics play out in contexts where populist leaders use internal security crises to justify extreme measures, nor does it explore the role of direct governance actions and their impact on civil liberties in such environments.

Similarly, Haggard and Kaufman (2021) explore how economic crises and political scandals contribute to democratic backsliding, using Brazil as a case study from 2014 to 2018. Their analysis demonstrates how economic instability, coupled with corruption scandals, can lead to support for populist leaders like Jair Bolsonaro, who use a tough 'law-and-order' stance to appeal to a polarized electorate. The study provides valuable insights into how economic and political crises can erode support for democratic norms and pave the way for authoritarian measures. However, Haggard and Kaufman's focus on Brazil's economic and political instability does not specifically address how high levels of violence and the successful implementation of severe security measures by populist leaders affect public support for constitutional rights. Their work highlights the broader relationship between crises and authoritarianism but falls short in examining the nuanced interplay of crime exposure, trust in government, and support for extreme security measures in the context of a successful populist crackdown on crime. This gap is crucial for understanding how specific governance actions, rather than broader economic or political crises, shape public attitudes toward democratic norms and civil liberties.

In summary, the existing body of research highlights the relationship between exposure to violence, public attitudes towards security measures, populist rhetoric, and democratic backsliding. These insights set the stage for the next section, which will delve

into a methodological examination of the relationship between exposure to crime and public support for extreme security measures in El Salvador.

Case Selection

In the last couple of years, El Salvador has experienced a historic decrease in the levels of crime and violence experienced in the country through a heavy-handed crackdown on gang violence. This shift has been directed by President Nayib Bukele, whose controversial yet incredibly effective and domestically popular reforms have brought significant changes to El Salvador's constitutional laws and human rights landscape. (See Figure 1) Following a surge in gang violence in 2022, President Bukele declared a state of emergency that suspended numerous constitutional rights, including the freedom of association, freedom of assembly, and freedom of privacy, and eliminated the right of police forces to require probable cause before arresting a suspect. (Avalos 2023) This "state of exception," which has now been renewed twenty-three times, has led to the mass incarceration of suspected gang members and a dramatic reduction in the country's homicide and crime rate (Renteria 2024).

El Salvador presents a compelling example to study the interaction between security and civil liberties due to the dramatic changes it has experienced in its domestic security situation. El Salvador has a storied history of gang violence and crime, primarily driven by two gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18 (Zaidi 2019). For decades, these gangs have controlled vast areas of the country, extorted local businesses, and created a cycle of gang violence that plagued communities across the country. Previous administrations, largely

controlled by the previously dominant Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), struggled to curb the crime and violence caused by the gangs. Nayib Bukele and his newly formed party, Nuevas Ideas (NI), rose to power in 2019, marking a departure from the traditional approaches brought on by ARENA and FMLN. Bukele’s administration began an iron-fisted anti-gang strategy characterized by the deployment of military forces in targeted operations, all fueled by a demand by the country’s electorate for unprecedented action to improve public safety.

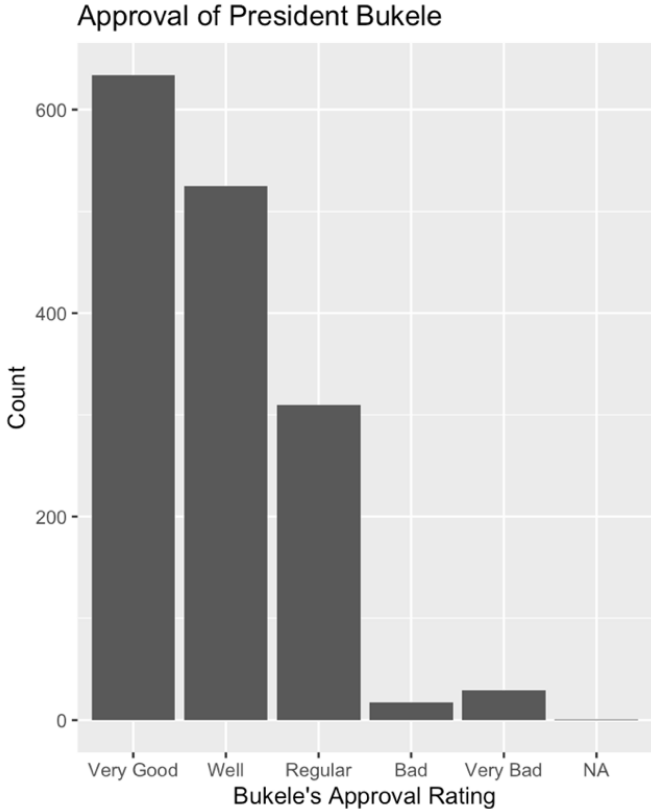


Figure 1: Approval of President Bukele

The effectiveness of President Bukele’s policies has sparked a debate between the tradeoff of rights for security and individual rights across Latin America and beyond. While critics from outside El Salvador argue that the suspension of rights represents a dangerous

precedent and creates a danger of the country slipping into an age of authoritarianism, those living in the country generally argue that there has been a huge improvement in their daily lives and quality of life (Freedman 2024). This creates an interesting situation where citizens must decide whether to prioritize their overall level of security or their constitutionally promised rights as individuals. Moreover, El Salvador's situation exemplifies the broader phenomenon of populist leaders adopting authoritarian measures to address pressing domestic issues.

The transformation that El Salvador experienced under President Bukele provides a strong case study through which to examine the durability of democratic institutions when impacted by authoritarianism. The country's history of political instability and the strong desire of the public for a dramatic change to the status quo sets the stage for how a country might tolerate or even endorse the destruction of democratic norms. Bukele's governance strategy, characterized by his direct communication with the public through social media and the framing of other ruling parties as corrupt and inept, highlights the vulnerabilities of democratic systems when faced with charismatic leadership and pressing domestic security concerns. Using El Salvador in this study allows for an exploration of the conditions under which democratic backsliding can occur, particularly in a context where the public's immediate needs are used to justify the concentration of power in the executive branch. By focusing on El Salvador, this study not only sheds light on the current state of democratic governance in the country but also contributes to a broader understanding of the global trend toward populism and authoritarianism in the face of security challenges.

Theory

The central theoretical framework of this study revolves around understanding the conditions under which individuals are willing to forgo their civil liberties in exchange for enhanced security. This willingness is influenced by several key factors, including exposure to crime and trust in government. The theory posits that these factors interact in ways that shape public attitudes toward security measures and civil rights, particularly in contexts where populist leaders use rhetoric on domestic security threats to justify authoritarian policies.

Certain civil liberties can often be seen as hindrances to law enforcement, as they often undermine the state's ability to pursue criminals and combat gang activity (Clendenning 1966). For example, the requirement for warrants to conduct searches or the need for probable cause before making arrests can prevent quick action from being taken against suspected criminals. In times of crisis, these safeguards may appear to impede the state's ability to efficiently provide a safe environment for civilians, leading individuals to view the suspension or limitation of such rights as necessary. The tension arises when the measures taken to enhance security, such as increased levels of surveillance or the restriction of freedoms, conflict with the foundational ideals of democracy. The perceived effectiveness of these security measures in preventing harm can lead individuals to view them as necessary, even if they infringe on rights that would typically be upheld in a democratic society (Clendenning 1966).

Exposure to crime is believed to significantly impact an individual's willingness to sacrifice their own civil liberties for security and support policies to combat perceived threats. Individuals who have experienced threats against them at a high level are more likely to support severe national security measures (Huddy 2005). This increased support for these measures is formed by the psychological need for safety and the belief that these measures are effective in reducing crime (Jarymowicz et al. 2006). When faced with immediate threats to their personal safety, individuals may prioritize security over abstract democratic principles and civil liberties. This is because democratic principles, such as the protection of civil liberties, often emphasize the rights of the individual versus the power of the state. In times of crisis, however, these principles can seem distant or less urgent compared to the immediate need for personal safety. The tension arises when the measures taken to ensure security, such as increased surveillance or restricted freedoms, conflict with the ideals of democracy (Cheek 2022). The supposed effectiveness of these security measures in preventing harm can lead individuals to view them as necessary, even if they infringe on rights that would typically be upheld in a democratic society (Jarymowicz et al. 2006).

While living in a high-crime environment may generate a general sense of insecurity, it is the direct experience of crime that profoundly impacts an individual's psyche, making the threat more personal and immediate (Norris et al. 1994). This direct exposure often leads to a heightened perception of vulnerability and a more urgent desire for safety, which can translate into stronger support for draconian security measures (Carreras 2013). In contrast, individuals who live in high-crime areas but have not been personally victimized

may still value civil liberties and democratic principles, as their experience with crime remains abstract rather than a direct impact. The difference lies in the emotional and psychological response triggered by direct victimization, which can intensify the perceived need for immediate and stringent government action (Carreras 2013). For those directly affected, the fear of repeated victimization overshadows concerns about potential government overreach, leading them to prioritize security over the preservation of their civil rights. This explains why direct exposure to crime, rather than merely living in a high-crime area, is a more powerful predictor of support for policies that may infringe upon civil liberties.

Trust in the government plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes toward security measures that infringe on civil liberties. Trust in the government is the belief that those in power will act in the best interest of the public, uphold the law, and manage public resources more effectively. Individuals with high levels of trust in their government are more likely to support policies that concentrate power in their hands, believing that the government will use this power more responsibly and effectively (Tyler et al. 2002). This trust creates a sense of comfort that the disadvantages that come with forgoing civil liberties are essential and will eventually benefit them and the rest of society. On the other hand, those who have low trust in the government are generally going to be more skeptical of such measures. They may view the expansion of government power with suspicion, fearing that it could lead to abuse and erosion of democratic norms (Rainie et al. 2019).

Additionally, some individuals may be weary of the state not because it risks becoming too authoritarian, but because they believe it has already been captured by particular

groups or interests, leading to policies that positively impacts those groups rather than the broader public (Tyler et al. 2002). Variations in trust in the state can stem from personal experiences, such as encounters with corruption or incompetency, which erodes confidence in the government's ability to act effectively. Moreover, historical legacies of authoritarianism or political instability can create an inescapable sense of mistrust that endures across generations (Alyukov 2023). These individuals are more likely to resist policies that they perceive as threats to their freedoms, regardless of the potential benefits in terms of security (See Table 1).

Table 1: Expected Interaction Effects between Trust in Government and Crime Exposure

Trust in Government	High Crime Exposure	Low Crime Exposure
High Trust	High support for authoritarian measures	Moderate support for authoritarian measures
Low Trust	Low support for authoritarian measures	Very low support for authoritarian measures

Table 1 suggests that trust in the government has a more significant effect on support for authoritarian measures than crime exposure because trust influences the legitimacy and effectiveness of such measures. Individuals with high trust in the government are more likely to believe that the authorities will implement authoritarian policies responsibly and justly, regardless of their personal exposure to crime. Conversely, those with low trust are skeptical of the government's intentions, leading to lower support for these measures even when they are directly affected by crime.

The rise of populist leaders who exploit security concerns to consolidate their power and undermine democratic institutions adds another layer to this story. Populist rhetoric

often frames the leader as the sole protector of the nation against internal and external threats, who exclaim that extraordinary measures that may infringe on civil liberties are necessary (Chevigny 2003). This rhetoric can resonate deeply with individuals who feel vulnerable to crime and who are trustful of the leader's intentions. The theory suggests that populist leaders can effectively mobilize public support for authoritarian measures by leveraging fear and trust. This creates a feedback loop where increased security measures and subsequent reductions in crime bolster the leader's popularity, further justifying the continuation or escalation of these measures (Chevigny 2003).

Several mechanisms can help explain how exposure to crime and trust in government influence public willingness to support security measures that limit civil liberties. One key mechanism is the heightened perception of fear that arises from direct exposure to crime. This fear can trigger an emotional response where the immediate need for safety takes precedence over the abstract principles of civil liberties and democracy. The urgency of personal security can lead individuals to support more authoritarian measures, perceiving them as necessary to reduce the perceived threat.

Another mechanism involves the belief in the effectiveness of iron-fisted security measures. Individuals who have experienced high levels of crime might develop a conviction that such measures are effective in preventing crime, therefore justifying the trade-off between safety and freedom. This belief in the effectiveness of stringent security policies makes them more likely to endorse government consolidation of power, even at the cost of civil liberties. Additionally, trust in government plays a critical role in legitimizing these measures. High levels of trust lead individuals to perceive government actions as

legitimate and that they are in the public's best interest, framing the loss of civil liberties as a necessary and justified response to threats. In this context, trust in the government acts as a filter that reassures the public that they will use their expanded powers responsibly. Together, these mechanisms demonstrate the connection between fear, efficacy beliefs, and trust in shaping public attitudes toward the balance between security and civil liberties in environments where high crime levels and populist rhetoric are widespread.

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, this study tests the following hypotheses:

1. **H1:** Higher exposure to crime increases individuals' willingness to support heavy-handed security measures at the expense of civil liberties.
2. **H2:** Higher trust in government officials amplifies individuals' willingness to support security measures that limit civil liberties.
3. **H3:** The effect of crime exposure on support for security measures is stronger among individuals with high trust in government officials compared to those with lower levels of trust.

In summary, the theoretical framework outlined in this study illustrates the interaction between crime exposure, trust in government, and public attitudes toward security and civil liberties. By including psychological theories of fear and threat with political theories of trust and legitimacy, this framework provides an understanding of how individuals might support restrictive security measures under certain conditions. The use of populist rhetoric further complicates this, as leaders exploiting security concerns can shift public perceptions of legitimacy and justify their expansion of power. The hypotheses

derived from this framework—concerning the impact of crime exposure and trust on support for authoritarian practices—will be tested in the upcoming sections of this study.

Methods

This study uses a quantitative approach to investigate Salvadoran citizens' attitudes toward the iron-fisted measures implemented under President Nayib Bukele's administration. I examine whether exposure to crime increases the likelihood of justifying democratic backsliding and executive overreach, specifically through support for military coups or the closure of legislative and judicial branches. The analysis utilizes logistic regression models on survey data, focusing on key outcome variables representing potential government overreach: justification for a coup d'état, closure of the legislative assembly, and dissolution of the Supreme Court. Crime exposure, measured by direct victimization, serves as the primary treatment variable, with further analysis exploring how these attitudes are influenced by the approval of President Bukele.

The outcome variables in this study—justification for a military coup, closure of the legislative assembly, and dissolution of the Supreme Court—were chosen to represent actions that could significantly undermine democratic norms and lead to authoritarian governance. These variables capture whether respondents believe such actions are justified under conditions of severe crisis, specifically high levels of crime. The choice of these outcomes allows for a more nuanced analysis of public support for potential democratic backsliding in the context of domestic security threats.

The primary independent variable, exposure to crime, is examined through respondents' self-reported crime victimization within the past 12 months. This variable captures the direct experience of crime, which is hypothesized to heighten the perceived need for security, potentially at the expense of civil liberties. This analysis controls for trust in the judicial system and the perceived safety of the respondents, as these factors are likely to influence both the perceived effectiveness of government actions and the willingness to support extreme measures. By including this, the models aim to isolate the impact of crime victimization on the support for government overreach.

To explore the moderating effect of presidential approval, interaction terms between crime victimization and trust in President Bukele are included in the models. These interaction terms are critical for testing the third hypothesis (H3), which suggests that the impact of crime exposure on support for authoritarian measures is more pronounced among those who trust the president. By examining these interactions, the study seeks to uncover whether high levels of trust in President Bukele increase the willingness to approve of actions that could erode democratic institutions. The results will provide an understanding of how crime and confidence in the government interact to shape public attitudes toward governance in a region experiencing significant security challenges.

To test the study's hypotheses regarding the interaction between crime exposure and trust in government, interaction terms are included in the regression models. Specifically, the interactions between crime victimization and trust in President Bukele are examined. This interaction is expected to reveal whether trust in the government moderates the relationship between crime-related experiences and support for

authoritarian measures. Including this interaction term is important for understanding the conditional effects, particularly how high trust in Bukele might amplify the public's willingness to accept government overreach for the sake of higher levels of security.

In addition to the primary variables, crime exposure and trust in President Bukele, the model includes several control variables to account for potential confounding factors. This includes age, education, gender, and income. Age is measured as a continuous variable, education as a categorical variable based on the highest degree level achieved, gender as a binary variable (male/female), and income as a continuous variable. These control variables help to ensure that the relationship between the primary variables and support for authoritarian measures are not driven by demographics.

One of the limitations of this study is related to endogeneity with the non-randomized assignment of the exposure to crime amongst the respondents to the survey. Since respondents were not randomly assigned, there might be other elements that influence their likelihood of being a victim of crime and their attitudes towards the strong-fisted authoritarian measures. For instance, those living in high-crime areas may have different economic backgrounds, political beliefs, and varying levels of trust in government officials than those living in safer areas. This could muddle the relationship between exposure to crime and support for authoritarian government action.

Findings

This section presents the findings from the statistical analyses conducted to explore the relationship between crime exposure, trust in President Bukele, and support for

authoritarian measures in El Salvador. Using logistic regression models, I examine how these factors both individually and interactively influence public attitudes toward government actions that could undermine democratic norms, such as justifying a coup d'état, closing the legislature, and dissolution of the Supreme Court. The results of this analysis provide insights into the relationship between personal experiences of crime, trust in government figures, and the willingness of the public to endorse measures that could erode constitutional safeguards in exchange for enhanced levels of security.

Table 2: Regression Results

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Justify Coup	Close Legislature	Dissolve Supreme Court
Intercept	-0.118 (0.149)	0.247* (0.141)	-0.075 (0.174)
Trust in President	-0.128** (0.063)	0.018 (0.062)	0.029 (0.070)
Victim of Crime	-0.092 (0.061)	0.056 (0.058)	-0.091 (0.065)
Demographics			
Age	-0.004 (0.035)	-0.020 (0.033)	-0.043 (0.036)
Education	0.004 (0.006)	0.003 (0.005)	0.014** (0.006)
Gender	0.001 (0.027)	-0.062** (0.025)	-0.003 (0.030)
Income	0.340 (1.712)	0.342 (1.586)	-2.285 (1.798)
Observations	702	751	693
R ²	0.012	0.072	0.116

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Across the three models, crime exposure has an inconsistent influence on support for authoritarian measures, indicating that there is a more complex relationship between

crime victimization and attitudes toward government actions than initially hypothesized. The direct experience of crime, as measured by crime victimization within the past 12 months, has various levels of influence across the different models (See Table 2). Though not statistically significant in any of the three models, crime victimization is associated with a decrease in support for dissolving the Supreme Court or support for a military coup, suggesting that those who have been directly affected by crime may be less inclined to support actions that could further destabilize the government. While not statistically significant, crime victimization does show an increase in support for the closure of the legislature, indicating that individuals may see the legislature as having a larger impact on the cause of crime. The results suggest that hypothesis 1 is not fully supported as the data show that crime victimization does not uniformly increase support for authoritarian measures, and in some cases, may even decrease support for what may be seen as potentially destabilizing actions.

Trust in President Bukele emerges as a significant predictor of support for authoritarian measures in only one of three models, the justification of a military coup d'état (See Table 2). In the model predicting support for a coup d'état, higher trust in the president is associated with a statistically significant decrease in the likelihood of supporting such a measure. This suggests that individuals who have higher levels of trust in President Bukele may view a military takeover as unnecessary if he continues to be in charge. In contrast, trust in the president has a positive but not statistically significant effect on the support for closing the legislature or dissolving the Supreme Court. The findings do not support Hypothesis 2 as it shows that while trust in Bukele does influence

attitudes toward authoritarian actions, it does not lead to the expected direction of increasing support for said measures.

Table 3: Regression Results

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Justify Coup	Close Legislature	Dissolve Supreme Court
Intercept	-0.118 (0.149)	0.247* (0.141)	-0.075 (0.174)
Trust in President	-0.128** (0.063)	0.018 (0.062)	0.029 (0.070)
Victim of Crime	-0.092 (0.061)	0.056 (0.058)	-0.091 (0.065)
Interaction: Crime * Trust	0.018* (0.011)	-0.003 (0.010)	-0.008 (0.012)
Demographics			
Age	-0.004 (0.035)	-0.020 (0.033)	-0.043 (0.036)
Education	0.004 (0.006)	0.003 (0.005)	0.014** (0.006)
Gender	0.001 (0.027)	-0.062** (0.025)	-0.003 (0.030)
Income	0.340 (1.712)	0.342 (1.586)	-2.285 (1.798)
Observations	702	751	693
R ²	0.012	0.072	0.116

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The interaction between crime victimization and trust in the president further explores the relationship between personal victimization of crime and support for authoritarian measures. (See Table 3) The results indicate that the effect of crime victimization on support for heavy-handed government actions relies upon high levels of trust in President Bukele. Specifically, the interaction term for crime victimization and trust in the president shows a statistically significant positive effect in the model predicting

support for a military coup. This suggests that for individuals who have been victims of crime, higher trust in the president significantly increases their likelihood of supporting a military takeover. However, these results are limited to one measure, indicating that the interaction between crime victimization and trust in the President may not be as robust as initially expected. While these results partially align with hypothesis 3, the lack of statistically significant findings suggests that the relationship between crime victimization, trust in President Bukele, and support for authoritarian measures is not as strong as hypothesized.

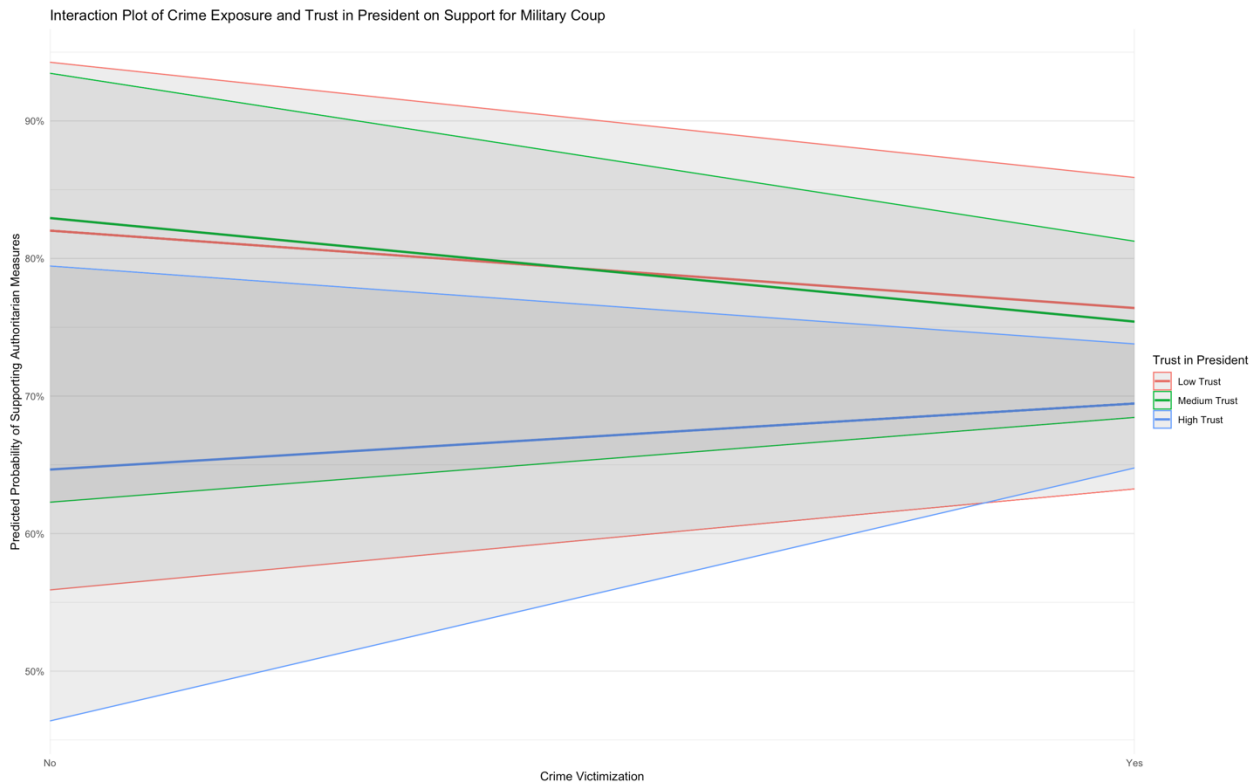


Figure 2: Interaction Plot of Crime Exposure and Trust in President on Support for Military Coup

To further explore the interaction between crime exposure and trust in the president, an interaction plot was created to visualize how these factors jointly influence support for authoritarian measures (See Figure 2). The plot reveals that the relationship between crime

exposure and support for these policies changes across different levels of trust for President Bukele. For individuals with high trust in the president, increasing crime exposure corresponds with a higher likelihood of supporting authoritarian policies. Conversely, for those with low or medium trust in the president, greater crime exposure tends to decrease levels of support for those measures. It is important to note, though, that the confidence intervals mostly overlap, indicating a significant level of uncertainty. We cannot say with complete confidence that the effects of crime victimization differ remarkably across various levels of trust in President Bukele. This suggests that while personal experiences of crime are critical, their impact on public attitudes towards authoritarian measures may not be as sharply determined by political trust as hypothesized.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed an unexpected pattern between crime victimization, trust in populist figures, and support for heavy-handed authoritarian actions. Contrary to the original hypotheses, the findings did not show a reliable connection across all models tested. While support for President Bukele and direct crime victimization was found to significantly impact support for a coup d'état, interestingly, these factors do not uniformly predict support for authoritarian measures in other contexts. This suggests that the relationship between crime victimization, political trust, and support for authoritarian actions may be more context-specific and influenced by other elements not captured in this study.

This study aimed to test three hypotheses related to the interaction between crime exposure, trust in President Bukele, and support for authoritarian measures that result in democratic backsliding and a loss of civil liberties in El Salvador. The findings offered limited support across hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 proposed that higher exposure to crime would increase individuals' willingness to support heavy-handed security measures, even at the expense of civil liberties and democratic norms. However, the results did not confirm the hypothesis, showing that crime victimization does influence public attitudes towards authoritarian government actions, though not uniformly across the three government actions tested, and none of it being significant statistically.

Hypothesis 2, which suggested that higher trust in government officials would amplify individuals' willingness to support security measures that limit civil liberties and contribute to democratic backsliding, was only partially supported by the findings. Trust in President Bukele was identified as a significant factor, but only in its influence on decreasing support for a military coup, indicating that those with higher trust in the president were less inclined to endorse such extreme measures, possibly due to their belief that President Bukele held enough power to run the country adequately.

Hypothesis 3 suggests that the effect of crime exposure on support for security measures would be more pronounced among individuals with high trust in government officials than those with lower levels of trust. The results, shown with the interaction plot (Figure 2), show that high levels of trust in President Bukele impact the connection between crime exposure and support for authoritarian measures such as staging a coup. Individuals with high levels of trust in the president are more likely to endorse authoritarian measures

when they have been victimized by crime. In contrast, those with lower levels of trust in the president do not show the same inclination. This highlights the role trust in political figures plays in enhancing the influence of crime victimization on public opinion, especially in environments where security is a significant political concern. The results suggest that high levels of trust in the president might amplify the endorsement of certain authoritarian measures among those who have experienced crime victimization, but this pattern is not consistent across all models tested.

Conclusion

The results of this study provide limited support for the hypotheses, suggesting that the relationship between crime victimization, trust in a populist figure, and support for heavy-handed authoritarian actions is not as significant as anticipated. This result is unexpected considering the extensive literature suggesting that these dynamics should be more noticeable in countries like El Salvador, where heavy-handed security measures and populist rhetoric meant to address crime and criminals dominate politics. The findings of this study go directly against the existing theory that exposure to violence hardens negative intergroup attitudes and increases levels of support for extreme measures as a way to avoid coexisting with the outgroup (Beber et al. 2014). This suggests that the connection between crime victimization, political trust, and support for authoritarianism may be more context dependent. Future research should examine these factors but with a more in-depth survey where respondents are asked specifically about the state of exception and their attitudes towards losing each individual right. Similar research should also be conducted

in other countries in Latin America that have experienced a similar increase in populist rhetoric and heightened attention on their domestic security situation.

While this study focuses on El Salvador, the findings suggest that governments from other countries facing similar issues could deal with significant challenges if they heavily rely on populist, authoritarian policies to combat domestic security issues. The results show that support for these heavy-handed measures is not uniform. Policymakers should, therefore, consider attempting to address the root causes of crime while upholding democratic values, as this may be a more effective approach for maintaining public trust and security.

In summary, this thesis contributes to the ongoing debate about the balance between domestic security threats and civil liberties. Examining the case of El Salvador under President Bukele shows the complex nature of public opinion when faced with populist figures and authoritarian measures. The findings reveal that public support for security over democratic values is neither uniform across government actions nor easily predictable. As other countries in Central America and beyond deal with similar challenges, the insights from this study provide important considerations for policymakers. Ultimately, understanding these dynamics is critical for preserving democratic values while addressing rampant crime and violence in vulnerable regions.

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