

ARTICLE

## Rational Choice and Ideological Constraints in Public Policy Evaluation: An Analysis of Trust and Satisfaction in Latin America

### Elección racional y limitaciones ideológicas en la evaluación de políticas públicas: Un análisis de la confianza y la satisfacción en América Latina

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#### Abstract

This study investigates the complex interplay between rational choice and ideological constraints in evaluating public policy in Latin America. It examines trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction, using data from the Latinobarómetro survey from 2013 to 2023. The analysis employs Cumulative Link Mixed Models (CLMM) to explore how rational economic evaluations and deep-seated ideological beliefs influence these variables. The research reveals that institutional trust, governance perceptions, and ideological orientations significantly influence government trust. Economic satisfaction and employment status are crucial determinants of satisfaction with democracy, underscoring the significance of economic stability in shaping political attitudes. Ideological alignment with democratic values further enhances trust and satisfaction, demonstrating the impact of ideological constraints on political evaluations. The findings suggest that while rational factors such as economic performance play a crucial role, ideological beliefs and partisanship also profoundly shape public perceptions and policy evaluations. The study highlights the need for policymakers to consider both rational and ideological factors in designing and communicating policies that foster public trust and satisfaction in Latin America.

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**Keywords:**

Rational choice, ideological constraints, public policy, trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, economic satisfaction, Latin America

**Resumen**

Este estudio investiga la compleja interacción entre la elección racional y las limitaciones ideológicas en la evaluación de las políticas públicas en América Latina. Analiza la confianza en el gobierno, la satisfacción con la democracia y la satisfacción económica, utilizando datos de la encuesta Latinobarómetro de 2013 a 2023. El análisis emplea Modelos Mixtos de Vínculos Cumulativos (MMVC) para explorar cómo las evaluaciones económicas racionales y las creencias ideológicas arraigadas influyen en estas variables. La investigación revela que la confianza institucional, las percepciones de gobernabilidad y las orientaciones ideológicas influyen significativamente en la confianza en el gobierno. La satisfacción económica y la situación laboral son determinantes cruciales de la satisfacción con la democracia, lo que subraya la importancia de la estabilidad económica en la configuración de las actitudes políticas. La alineación ideológica con los valores democráticos también aumenta la confianza y la satisfacción, lo que demuestra el impacto de las limitaciones ideológicas en las evaluaciones políticas. Los resultados sugieren que, aunque los factores racionales, como los resultados económicos, desempeñan un papel crucial, las creencias ideológicas y el partidismo también influyen profundamente en las percepciones públicas y las evaluaciones de las políticas. El estudio subraya la necesidad de que los responsables políticos consideren tanto los factores racionales como los ideológicos a la hora de diseñar y comunicar políticas que fomenten la confianza y la satisfacción ciudadana en América Latina.

**Palabras clave:**

Elección racional, restricciones ideológicas, políticas públicas, confianza en el gobierno, satisfacción con la democracia, satisfacción económica, América Latina

## Introduction

“La vida no es la que uno vivió sino la que uno recuerda y como la recuerda para contarla”

— Gabriel García Márquez (2002), *Vivir para contarla*.

“Life is not what one lived but what one remembers and how one remembers it to tell it.”

— Gabriel García Márquez (2002), *Living to Tell the Tale*.

Gabriel García Márquez’s insight into the power of memory and perception provides a compelling entry point for this study, which investigates the complex layers of public policy evaluation in Latin American democracies. His assertion prompts us to examine not only the events themselves but also how societies remember and interpret them, shaping political narratives and public opinion in the process. This study seeks to unravel these narratives by analyzing how public perceptions of governance are constructed.

By examining the interplay between ideological and rational perspectives, this work aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction in a region characterized by vibrant cultural diversity and significant political transitions.

This investigation draws on data from the Latinobarómetro survey, spanning seven waves from 2013 to 2023 and encompassing more than 19,205 interviews across 16 countries. The Latinobarómetro’s methodology—characterized by extensive face-to-face interviews—provides an empirical foundation to explore the nuanced political, economic, and social contexts shaping policy evaluations in the region. This rich archive of public opinion offers a critical lens through which to examine the multifaceted and interlinked relationships between government conduct and public perception.

Through the synthesis of theoretical and empirical analysis, this study offers insights that enhance our understanding of how public opinion changes over time. At the core of this investigation lies the central question:

“To what extent have rational choices and ideological constraints shaped public policy evaluations—specifically trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction—across Latin American nations over the past decade?”

### **Trust, Democracy and Economy Satisfaction in Latin America**

The importance of examining trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction in Latin America cannot be overstated, given their profound implications for governance and public policy. These variables are pivotal in assessing the broader political climate and citizens' engagement with their governmental systems, which, in turn, influence the stability and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Trust in government is a cornerstone of democratic governance, as it reflects the public's confidence in their leaders and institutions to act effectively and fairly (Hetherington, 2005). In Latin America, where political instability and corruption have historically undermined trust, understanding the dynamics that shape this trust is crucial. It directly impacts citizens' compliance with laws and the success of public initiatives (Booth & Seligson, 2009). Similarly, satisfaction with democracy is a crucial indicator of a country's democratic health. It measures public contentment with the functioning of democracy and is linked to political participation and support for democratic norms (Norris, 2011). In regions like Latin America, where transitions to democracy have been both recent and fragile, gauging satisfaction provides insights into the consolidation of democratic regimes (Pérez-Liñán, 2007).

Economic satisfaction encapsulates the public's assessment of economic policies and their outcomes, serving as a critical measure of a government's visible actions. In many Latin American countries, economic instability often leads to considerable public discontent, influencing electoral outcomes and support for governmental reforms (Sachs, 1989). Tracking shifts in economic satisfaction is thus essential, as it gauges public reaction to economic policies and their broader implications for social stability and policy continuity.

The interrelation of these variables with selected independent variables—such as ideological, rational, economic perceptions, and policy salience predictors—will be analyzed through Conditional Mixed Multilevel Models (CMMLs) to uncover patterns and establish causal relationships that transcend the idiosyncrasies of individual countries. This approach provides a

more comprehensive understanding of the underpinnings of policy impact and public sentiment across the region.

### *Trust*

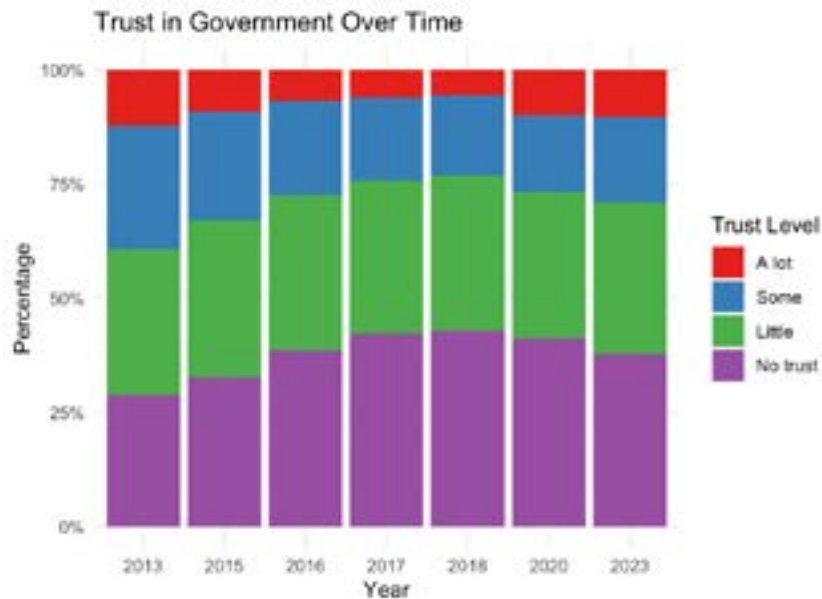
Trust in government is a crucial indicator of public confidence in the capacity and integrity of political institutions. It reflects citizens' belief that their government acts in the public interest, administers laws fairly, and effectively manages public resources (Levi & Stoker, 2000). This trust is essential for government legitimacy, as it underpins citizens' willingness to comply with laws and accept government decisions—even under adverse circumstances.

In political science, trust in government is commonly linked to the concept of political efficacy. Higher levels of trust can enhance citizens' perceived influence over political processes, thereby contributing to greater democratic engagement and stability (Hetherington, 2005). Conversely, a lack of trust can lead to political disengagement, increased skepticism toward public officials, and a heightened likelihood of civil unrest.

The importance of trust goes beyond abstract democratic principles: it has practical implications for policy implementation. Governments perceived as trustworthy are more likely to secure compliance with public measures—ranging from tax collection to public health campaigns. Trust acts as a facilitating mechanism in governance, lowering enforcement costs through voluntary compliance and enhancing overall administrative effectiveness (Tyler, 2006).

Analyzing changes in trust levels in Latin America, as tracked by Latinobarómetro data, provides insights into the dynamic relationship between government performance, public perception, and socio-economic conditions. These fluctuations not only react to political events but also capture long-standing systemic challenges.

Figure 1: Trends in trust levels towards government across Latin America from 2013 to 2023

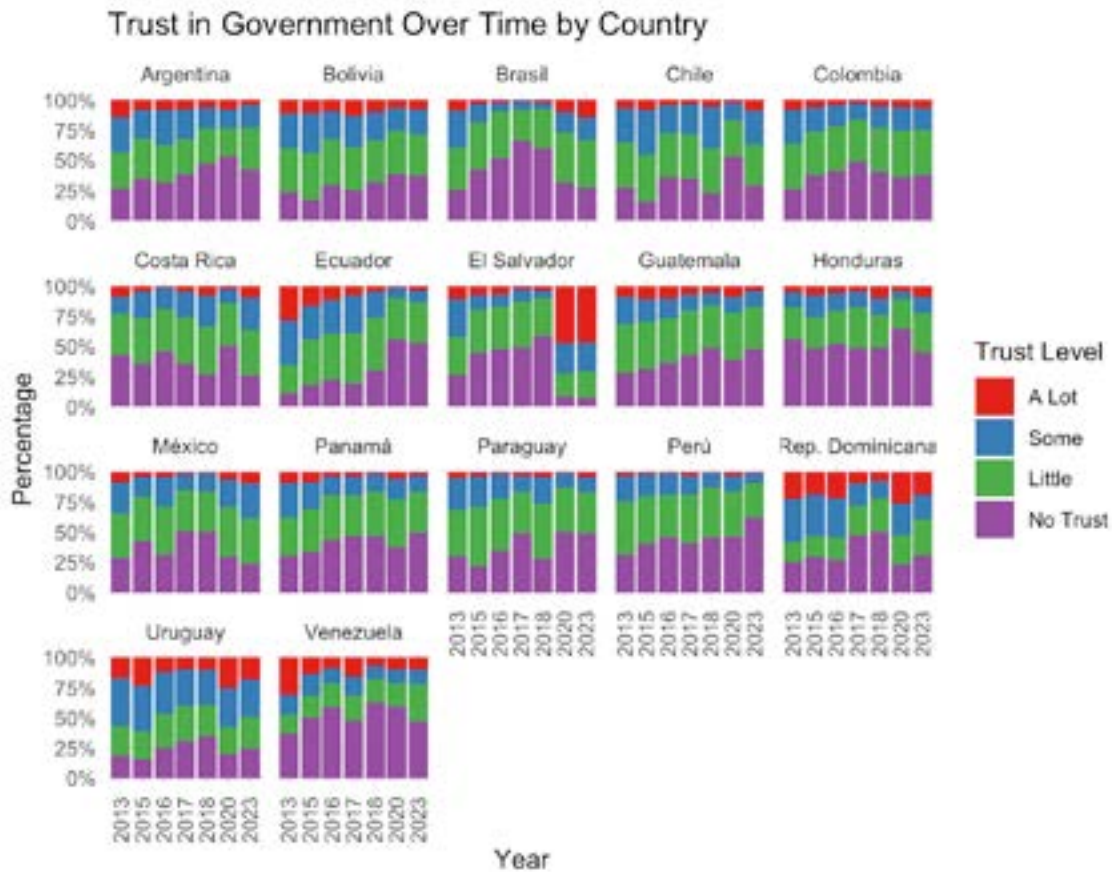


Source: Latinobarómetro.

Figure 1 shows a fluctuating but generally decreasing trend in the percentage of the population expressing high trust in government, paralleled by a rise in those expressing little or no trust. For example, in 2013, approximately 11.98% of respondents expressed high trust, compared to 10.09% in 2023—marking a modest but notable decline. The proportion of respondents indicating “No trust” rose more sharply—from 28.41% in 2013 to a peak of 42.05% in 2018, before declining slightly to 37.40% in 2023. These trends suggest growing disenchantment with governmental institutions, potentially due to economic mismanagement, unmet public expectations, and corruption scandals.

The case of El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele provides an illustrative exception to this regional pattern. Since taking office, Bukele has experienced a remarkable surge in public trust, likely reflecting approval of his assertive leadership style and policy agenda—despite international concerns over democratic backsliding. This deviation underscores the complexity of trust dynamics: charismatic leadership and decisive governance can bolster trust in the short term, even amid broader institutional erosion.

Figure 2: Trends in trust levels towards government by country in Latin America from 2013 to 2023



Source: Latinobarómetro.

As Figure 2 illustrates, persistent high trust in a charismatic leader, such as in El Salvador, can lead to the centralization of power, potentially circumventing democratic checks and balances and increasing the risk of authoritarian drift. McCoy and Somer (2019) warn of the dangers of pernicious polarization under such circumstances, which can deepen societal divisions and weaken democratic norms. Indeed, the Salvadoran case invites reflection on whether popular trust, absent institutional constraints, can paradoxically enable democratic backsliding.

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) stress that without strong institutions, democracies are vulnerable—even when political leaders enjoy widespread popularity. As such, analyzing trust in

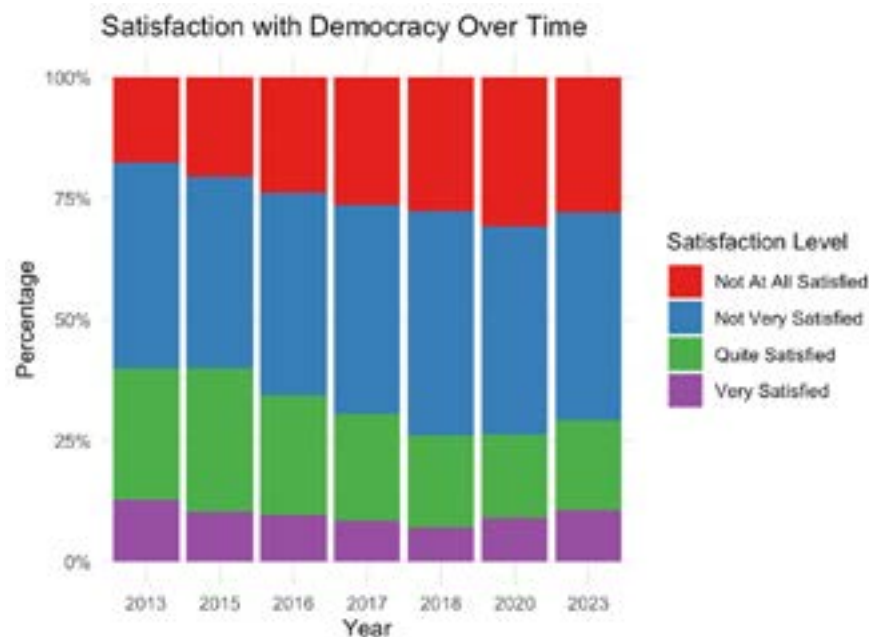
government is vital not only to assess public satisfaction, but also to understand how citizen perceptions influence democratic stability across Latin America. The evidence suggests that fostering trust requires more than charisma and short-term success; it demands transparency, institutional strength, and long-term accountability.

### *Satisfaction with Democracy*

Satisfaction with democracy is a critical gauge of how citizens perceive the effectiveness and integrity of their democratic institutions. This variable measures the public's contentment with the functioning of democracy in their country, reflecting views on political representation, governance quality, and adherence to democratic principles.

This study reveals considerable variability in democratic satisfaction across the region, with some countries showing more pronounced shifts in public sentiment than others. This variation can be attributed to factors such as political stability, economic conditions, and the perceived responsiveness of governments.

**Figure 3: Trends in Satisfaction with Democracy in Latin America from 2013 to 2023**



Source: Latinobarómetro.

The data indicate a concerning decline in satisfaction with democracy across Latin America, pointing to growing disillusionment with democratic processes. This downward trend may stem from perceived corruption, ineffective governance, and unfulfilled economic and social expectations. For example, the share of respondents who reported being “Very satisfied” with democracy decreased steadily over the decade—from 12.12% in 2013 to 10.29% in 2023—signaling an erosion of democratic confidence, as shown in Figure 3.

The percentage of respondents who were “Quite satisfied” also fluctuated, reflecting a population that, though not fully disenchanted, perceives notable deficiencies in how democracy is functioning. More significantly, the share of individuals who reported being “Not at all satisfied” rose from under 20% in earlier years to over 25% recently. This increase underscores a pivotal shift in public sentiment, likely driven by dissatisfaction with how democracies are addressing economic instability, social inequality, and corruption.

These patterns suggest a crisis in democratic satisfaction, warranting deeper inquiry within the broader context of policy evaluation. Dissatisfaction with democracy can have wide-ranging consequences, including lower political engagement, heightened polarization, and increased social unrest. Disillusioned citizens may eschew traditional democratic mechanisms in favor of alternative—and sometimes undemocratic—forms of political expression.

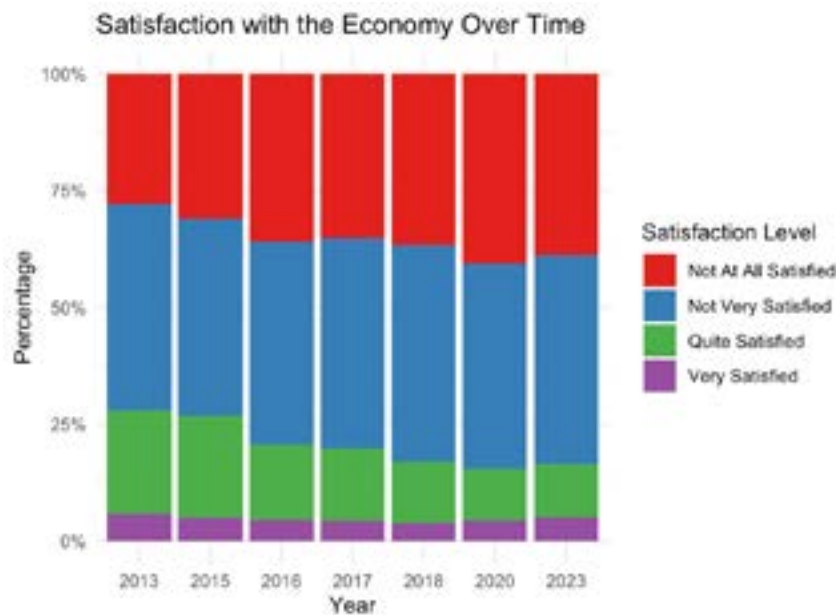
The disparities in satisfaction levels across countries highlight the importance of context-specific factors in shaping democratic attitudes. These include the efficacy of government responses, levels of political freedom, and transparency in political and electoral processes. Understanding these nuances is essential to identify the roots of discontent and formulate policies that genuinely reflect the democratic aspirations of the Latin American public.

### *Satisfaction with Economy*

Satisfaction with the economy is a vital metric that reflects the public’s perceptions of their country’s economic conditions and government economic policies. It measures how citizens evaluate the effectiveness of economic management across key areas such as inflation, unemployment, fiscal policy, and overall economic growth. This variable is particularly salient in Latin America, a region characterized by economic volatility and significant wealth disparities.

Over the past decade, Latinobarómetro data reveal a persistent decline in the proportion of respondents reporting high levels of satisfaction with the economy, as shown in Figure 4. This trend points to growing public frustration with economic policies and their tangible effects on both individual well-being and national prosperity.

**Figure 4: Trends in public satisfaction with the economy in Latin America from 2013 to 2023**



Source: Latinobarómetro.

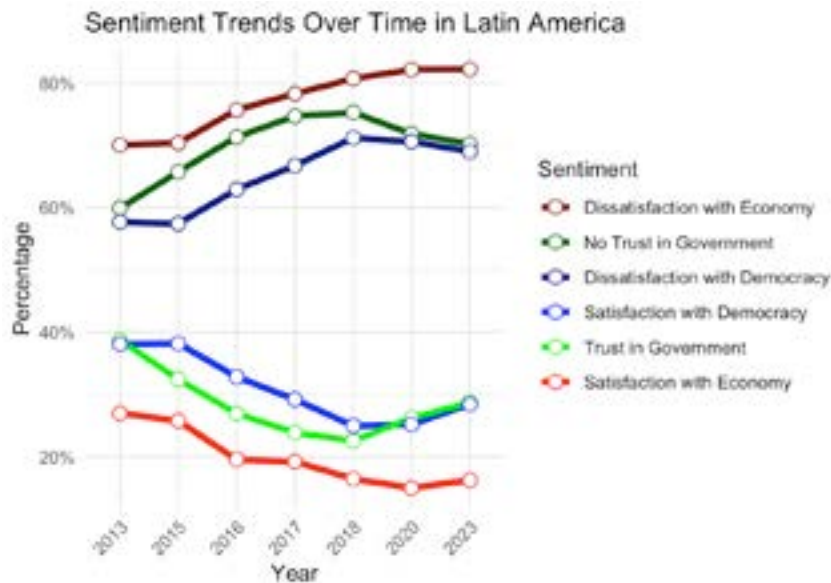
In 2013, approximately 5.56% of respondents expressed that they were “*Very satisfied*” with the state of the economy. By 2023, this figure had only modestly recovered to 4.94%, signaling enduring discontent. Meanwhile, the proportion of those who responded “*Not at all satisfied*” remains high, indicating a consistently negative perception of economic performance. This dissatisfaction is likely compounded by recurrent recessions, inflationary pressures, and persistently high unemployment, all of which undermine public confidence in the government’s economic stewardship.

Furthermore, disaggregated data by country reveal significant variation, reflecting the distinct economic trajectories and challenges faced by individual nations. For instance, countries that have undergone sharp economic downturns or prolonged crises during this period

tend to exhibit markedly higher levels of dissatisfaction. This context-specific analysis is essential to understanding how both national policies and global economic trends shape public sentiment in diverse settings.

### *Trends and Correlations among Trust, Democracy, and Economic Satisfaction*

**Figure 5: Levels of trust in government, democracy satisfaction and economy satisfaction in Latin America (2013-2023).**

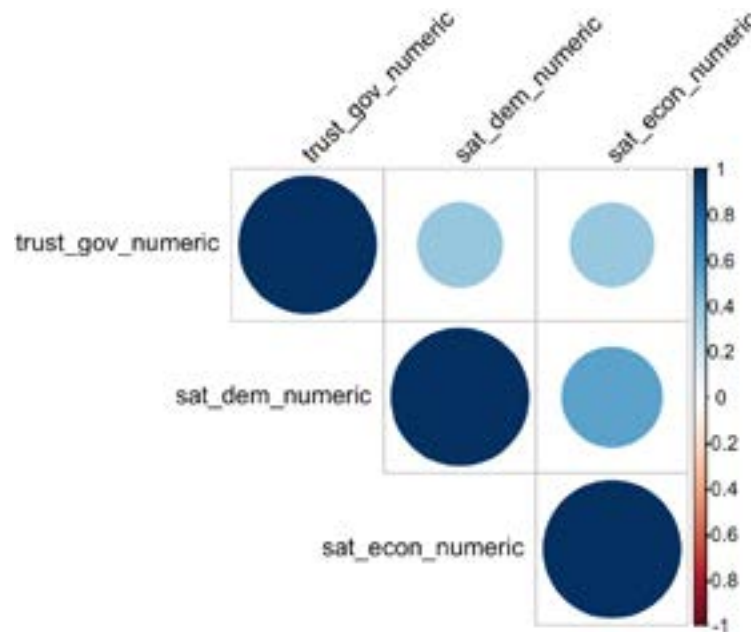


Source: Latinobarómetro.

Figure 5 illustrates the evolution of trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction in Latin America from 2013 to 2023. To enhance clarity, aggregated categories are used: for trust, “A lot” and “Some” are merged as *Trust*, while “Little” and “No trust” are combined as *No Trust*. Similarly, for satisfaction with democracy and the economy, “Very satisfied” and “Quite satisfied” are grouped as *Satisfaction*, while “Not very satisfied” and “Not at all satisfied” are merged as *Dissatisfaction*. This visualization highlights the parallel movements in satisfaction with democracy and the economy, indicating that economic and political perceptions tend to move in tandem among the population. In contrast, trust in government displays a more distinct trajectory, especially diverging after 2018, suggesting

the presence of unique influencing factors that might not align directly with those affecting the other two metrics.

**Figure 6: Correlation Matrix of Trust in Government, Satisfaction with Democracy, and Economic Satisfaction (2013-2023)**



Source: Latinobarómetro.

The correlation analysis summarized in Figure 6 offers key insights into the interrelationships between trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction. Trust in government exhibits a moderate positive correlation with satisfaction with democracy ( $r = 0.381$ ) and with the economy ( $r = 0.371$ ), suggesting that higher levels of trust tend to correspond with greater public contentment in these domains. The strongest association is observed between satisfaction with democracy and economic satisfaction ( $r = 0.530$ ), indicating a noteworthy alignment in public sentiment regarding these aspects.

This analysis is further supported by the results of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF): Trust in Government (1.23), Satisfaction with Democracy (1.47), and Satisfaction with the Economy (1.46). These values, well below the standard threshold of 5, confirm the absence of prob-

lematic multicollinearity. Thus, while these variables are interconnected, their associations do not undermine their distinctiveness or independence for regression analysis.

Therefore, it is appropriate to use these variables as independent predictors in separate models, which helps ensure the analytical integrity of investigations into the nuances of public sentiment in Latin America.

## Literature Review

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) provides a foundational framework for both political science and economics. It posits that individuals make decisions by systematically evaluating the costs and benefits of various alternatives to maximize their utility. This theory has profoundly influenced the study of political behavior, voting patterns, and policy decision-making.

Initially rooted in economics, Rational Choice Theory asserts that individuals act based on rational calculations to optimize their personal advantage (Downs, 1957). This approach views political behavior through market analogies, where political actors—similar to consumers and producers in an economic market—engage in strategic interactions to achieve desirable outcomes. For instance, voters are seen as consumers who select candidates or parties offering the most appealing policy packages, while politicians resemble entrepreneurs who craft policies to win electoral support.

Anthony Downs' seminal work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), laid the groundwork for applying economic principles to the study of politics. Downs conceptualizes the democratic process as a competitive market, wherein political parties act as firms seeking to maximize votes. His model suggests that parties may formulate policies not out of ideological commitments but to strategically attract the greatest number of voters.

However, Rational Choice Theory has faced criticism for its assumptions of perfect rationality and complete information. Critics argue that these assumptions are often unrealistic in the complex, information-scarce environments where political decisions are made. Green and Shapiro (1994), in their critique *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*, argue that the theory's predictive power diminishes when confronted with cognitive biases, emotional factors, and social norms. They advocate for a more nuanced understanding of decision-making that incorporates insights from psychology and sociology.

Despite these criticisms, Rational Choice Theory remains influential—particularly for its methodological contributions. It has introduced formal modeling techniques and quantitative analysis into political science, enabling the development of precise and testable hypotheses about political behavior. Its clarity and simplicity offer a structured approach to analyzing complex political phenomena.

Integrating Rational Choice Theory with other theoretical frameworks has enriched its explanatory depth. For example, incorporating insights from behavioral economics into RCT acknowledges that individuals often deviate from pure rationality due to cognitive biases and heuristics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). This integration fosters a broader understanding of political behavior that balances rational calculations with psychological influences.

In Latin America, Rational Choice Theory provides valuable insights into voter behavior and policy-making dynamics. The region's diverse and unstable political landscape—marked by oscillations between democratic and authoritarian regimes—offers fertile ground for observing how rational calculations drive political decisions. For example, electoral volatility in countries such as Brazil and Argentina can, in part, be explained by the strategic adaptations of voters and politicians to shifting economic and political incentives (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995).

Moreover, Rational Choice Theory helps explain the persistence of clientelism and patronage in the region. Voters in economically disadvantaged areas may rationally support candidates offering immediate material benefits, even at the expense of long-term governance quality. This behavior aligns with RCT's principle of utility maximization under individual constraints (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007).

The theory also sheds light on the strategic conduct of political elites. Leaders often engage in calculated actions—such as manipulating electoral rules or forming opportunistic coalitions—to preserve power (Geddes, 1994). These tactics align with RCT's core assumption: political actors are rational agents seeking to maximize utility, often defined as political survival and influence.

### *Exploring Ideological Constraints*

Ideological constraints significantly shape political behaviour and policy evaluation by influencing how individuals perceive and respond to political information and stimuli. Unlike Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which assumes that individuals act primarily out of self-interest to maximize utility, ideological constraints highlight the role of deeply held beliefs, values, and identities in guiding political behaviour.

Ideological constraints function as frameworks through which individuals interpret political realities. They often lead citizens to support policies and political actors that align with their core values, even when these choices contradict their immediate economic interests (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). As a result, political behaviour may appear irrational from a purely economic standpoint but remains coherent within an individual's ideological commitments.

A foundational concept in this field is ideological polarisation, which refers to the extent to which opinions on key issues are divided along ideological lines (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006). In highly polarised environments, individuals are more likely to interpret political information through a biased lens, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs. This dynamic often leads to ideological sorting, where individuals align with political parties or movements that mirror their ideological stance, thereby deepening political divisions (Levendusky, 2009).

In contexts marked by strong political identities and partisan loyalty, ideological constraints become even more salient. Research demonstrates that partisanship can heavily influence how individuals assess policy effectiveness and government performance. For instance, Bartels (2002) shows that individuals tend to perceive the economy more favourably when their preferred party controls government.

In Latin America, ideological constraints are deeply embedded in the region's historical, cultural, and social contexts. The political landscape has been shaped by enduring ideological battles—from Cold War-era struggles between leftist and right-wing forces to contemporary conflicts over neoliberalism and populism (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). These historical dynamics continue to inform ideological affiliations and shape how citizens evaluate political actors and policies.

The region's history, oscillating between authoritarian regimes and democratic governance, has left a lasting imprint on political alignments. During the Cold War, many Latin American

countries witnessed intense ideological conflicts, with leftist movements frequently opposing right-wing military governments. This polarisation persists today (Skidmore & Smith, 2005). For example, in Chile, the neoliberal reforms of the Pinochet regime starkly contrasted with the socialist agenda of Salvador Allende, creating a political divide that endures. Similarly, in Argentina, the legacy of Peronism continues to define its political discourse, as both supporters and critics remain divided over its ideological legacy (Levitsky, 2003).

Ideological constraints shape how individuals evaluate both policy content and governmental performance. For example, left-leaning individuals are more inclined to support policies promoting social welfare and economic redistribution, even when not personally beneficial. Conversely, right-leaning individuals often prefer free-market policies and reduced state intervention (Carlin, Singer, & Zechmeister, 2015). In Venezuela, the Bolivarian Revolution led by Hugo Chávez and continued by his successors has been consistently supported by those aligned with leftist ideologies, who view redistributive policies as central to social justice—even amid severe economic deterioration. In contrast, right-leaning parties and voters have consistently opposed these policies, framing them as economically disastrous regardless of specific outcomes (Corrales & Penfold, 2015).

Partisanship plays a critical role in shaping ideological constraints. Strong party identification often leads individuals to adopt the policy positions and ideological stances of their preferred parties. This phenomenon can result in biased evaluations of political and economic conditions, as individuals tend to view policies through the lens of partisan allegiance (Dalton, 2013).

The media also plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing these ideological constraints. Media outlets often cater to specific ideological audiences, creating echo chambers in which individuals are primarily exposed to information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in Latin America, where media ownership is frequently highly concentrated and politically aligned. Such media bias can deepen ideological divides and significantly influence how policies and political actions are perceived and evaluated (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

While Rational Choice Theory focuses on individuals' strategic, utility-maximizing behaviour, integrating ideological constraints provides a more comprehensive understanding of political behaviour. Ideological beliefs act as filters through which rational choices are interpreted, influencing how individuals assess costs and benefits in a political context (Fiorina,

Abrams, & Pope, 2005). This integrated approach helps explain why individuals may support policies that do not align with their immediate economic interests but instead resonate with their deeper ideological commitments.

### *Integration of Rational Choice and Ideological Constraints in Policy Evaluation*

Combining Rational Choice Theory with ideological constraints offers a more nuanced understanding of political behaviour, particularly in the realm of policy evaluation. This integrated approach recognises that decisions in the political arena are not solely driven by rational calculations aimed at maximising utility, but are also significantly influenced by deep-seated ideological beliefs. The idea that individuals balance rational self-interest with ideological commitments suggests that policy evaluations are inherently complex, involving a dynamic interplay between calculated benefits and value-driven motivations.

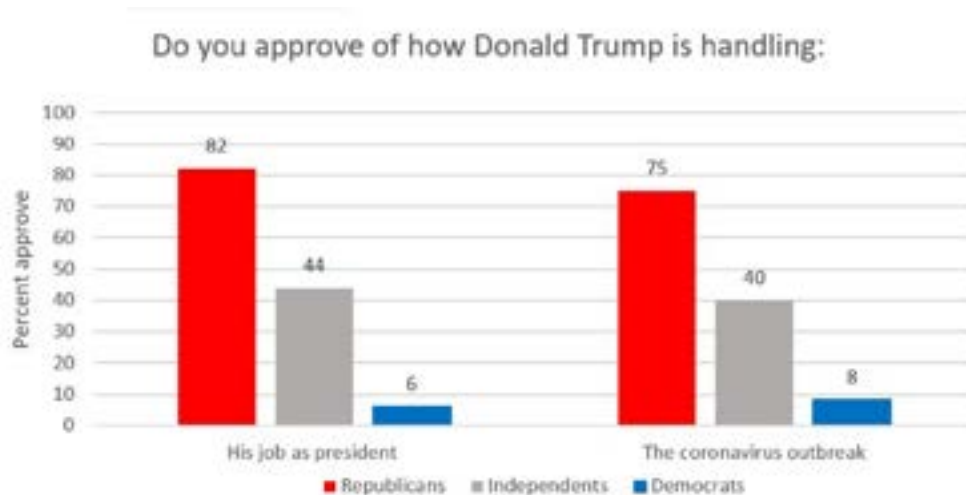
Theoretical contributions from scholars such as March and Olsen (1989) articulate this interaction through two logics: the “logic of appropriateness” and the “logic of consequence.” The logic of appropriateness reflects behaviour aligned with an individual’s identity and institutional norms, indicative of ideological influence. In contrast, the logic of consequence corresponds to Rational Choice Theory, focusing on expected outcomes and instrumental benefits.

Empirical evidence supports the profound impact of ideological orientations on policy perception. For example, environmentalists may favour costly sustainability measures as essential long-term investments, while proponents of free-market ideologies may oppose these same policies, viewing them as obstacles to economic growth—regardless of their environmental benefits (Kahneman & Knetsch, 1992). This type of policy divergence highlights the complex nature of political behaviour, where ideological predispositions critically shape perceptions of policy efficacy and desirability.

**Figure 7: Approval Ratings by Political Affiliation:  
President Donald Trump's Job and Coronavirus Response**

Questions: Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president?

[The coronavirus outbreak]



Source: AP-NORC Poll conducted May 14-18, 2020, with 1,056 adults.

Integrating Rational Choice Theory and ideological constraints becomes especially critical in environments marked by strong political polarization. Polarization tends to magnify ideological influences on policy evaluation, resulting in divergent interpretations of the same policy across different ideological spectrums. This phenomenon is starkly illustrated in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, where public approval of President Donald Trump's response varied dramatically along party lines, as depicted in Figure 7. Despite widespread criticism of the administration's handling of the crisis, approval ratings among Republicans remained significantly higher than among Democrats. This disparity underscores how ideological alignments can shape public perceptions independently of objective policy outcomes.

The OECD's paper on trust in public institutions provides a contemporary framework for understanding the dynamics of institutional trust in Latin America. Brezzi et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of government responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness, and fairness as key drivers of public trust. These findings align closely with the perspectives de-

veloped in this study, reinforcing the argument that both rational and ideological dimensions influence trust in governance, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The updated OECD framework offers empirical evidence that can enrich the analysis of trust in Latin American contexts, where state legitimacy is often contested.

The interplay between rational choice and ideological constraints holds significant implications for policymakers. It suggests that the success of public policy initiatives depends not only on their economic rationality, but also on their resonance with prevailing ideological beliefs among the citizenry. As such, effective policy communication must bridge ideological divides by articulating benefits that appeal across political identities and value systems. Ultimately, synthesizing Rational Choice Theory with ideological constraint theory offers a more comprehensive lens for evaluating political decision-making.

This dual-framework approach emphasizes both material evaluations and symbolic legitimacy, providing a nuanced understanding of how individuals respond to public policy. As political landscapes evolve and polarisation intensifies, recognising the combined influence of rational calculations and ideological commitments becomes increasingly essential for analysing political behaviour and crafting strategically effective and socially responsive public policy.

### *Public Opinion and Satisfaction with Public Policy*

Public opinion and satisfaction with public policy are critical areas of study in comparative politics, particularly in understanding how citizens perceive and evaluate governmental actions. This focus is essential for assessing the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governance, especially in regions like Latin America, where political and economic volatility can significantly influence public sentiment.

Public opinion serves as a fundamental measure of policy effectiveness and government performance, reflecting the extent to which citizens believe the state meets their needs and expectations. Studies have shown that public satisfaction with policy outcomes can significantly impact political stability, voter behaviour, and overall trust in government (Hetherington, 2005; Norris, 2011). Understanding public opinion is thus crucial for evaluating the success of democratic transitions and policy reforms in Latin America. Surveys such as the *Latinobarómetro* provide invaluable data on how citizens perceive their governments'

performance in areas like economic management, public service provision, and democratic governance (Latinobarómetro, 2023).

Several factors influence public satisfaction with government policies, including economic performance, perceived corruption, and the quality of public services. Economic stability and growth are often directly correlated with higher levels of public satisfaction, as they represent tangible indicators of governmental effectiveness (Sachs, 1989). Conversely, high levels of perceived corruption tend to erode trust and satisfaction, thereby undermining the legitimacy of political institutions (Morris & Klesner, 2010). Research indicates that citizens' evaluations of both their personal economic situations and broader national economic conditions strongly influence their satisfaction with government policies (Booth & Seligson, 2009). In Latin America, where economic fluctuations are common, public satisfaction often mirrors economic cycles—rising during periods of growth and falling during downturns (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011).

Perceived corruption is another key factor affecting public satisfaction. Elevated corruption levels can lead to widespread public disillusionment with political institutions, resulting in reduced trust and satisfaction (Morris & Klesner, 2010). In Latin America, corruption scandals have frequently provoked political crises, reinforcing the urgency of transparency and accountability in governance (Blake & Morris, 2009).

The quality of public services, including healthcare, education, and security, also plays a vital role in shaping public satisfaction. Accessible and equitable services tend to strengthen citizens' trust in institutions, while deficiencies in service delivery can provoke dissatisfaction and even political unrest (Grindle, 2010). In regions marked by significant social inequalities, equitable provision of public services is fundamental to maintaining public support and institutional legitimacy.

Methodologically, studying public opinion involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Large-scale surveys like the Latinobarómetro offer comprehensive cross-national datasets, while qualitative methods—including interviews and focus groups—provide in-depth insight into the motivations and reasoning behind specific attitudes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A mixed-methods approach ensures a more holistic understanding of public satisfaction and opinion.

Understanding public satisfaction and opinion has significant implications for policy development and governance. Policymakers can draw on insights from public opinion research to design and implement policies that are more responsive to citizens' needs and expectations. Moreover, maintaining high levels of satisfaction is essential to democratic consolidation, as it fosters civic engagement and political stability (Diamond & Morlino, 2005).

In conclusion, public opinion and satisfaction are essential elements in evaluating public policy outcomes in Latin America. By examining how economic performance, perceived corruption, and the quality of public services influence citizen sentiment, researchers can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic governance in the region. These insights can inform the development of more responsive, inclusive, and equitable public policy, ultimately contributing to the strengthening of democratic institutions.

### **Latin America as a Case Study**

Latin America is an exemplary context for examining the interplay between Rational Choice Theory and ideological constraints within political dynamics. Characterised by its varied political landscapes and intense political activity, the region showcases a broad spectrum of political polarisation and a history rich in both democratic and authoritarian practices. This diversity makes it an ideal setting for exploring the complex behaviours associated with political decision-making and public policy evaluation.

The political decisions and behaviours of voters in Latin America often go beyond pure economic rationality, being profoundly shaped by deep-seated ideological affiliations. For example, countries such as Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina have witnessed the rise and fall of prominent political figures propelled by ideological motivations that resonate with large segments of the population—even when such support runs counter to economic logic (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). These instances demonstrate the significant influence of rooted ideological beliefs on political landscapes, sometimes challenging the core assumptions of Rational Choice Theory.

Additionally, Latin America's historical backdrop of economic turbulence, enduring social inequalities, and pervasive corruption complicates public perceptions of governance and economic management. These conditions often lead to fluctuating levels of trust and confidence in governmental institutions, making the region especially conducive to studying how

ideological biases interact with rational evaluations of state performance (Booth & Seligson, 2009).

Issues of inequality and social justice are particularly salient in Latin America and are crucial for assessing the role of ideological constraints in policy evaluation. Policies targeting these deeply entrenched societal problems often receive strong public support—not merely for their economic benefits, but also because they align with the moral and ideological values widely held across the region (Murillo, Oliveros, & Vaishnav, 2011). This alignment underscores the role of ideology in shaping public policy preferences, often overriding purely economic considerations.

This case study of Latin America seeks to illuminate how ideological predispositions can not only influence but also reshape the structure of rational choice frameworks, highlighting the dynamic interplay between economic self-interest and ideological commitment. Such an exploration offers valuable insights into how public opinion and political behaviour are formed, deepening our understanding of the mechanisms driving politics in emerging democracies. By focusing analytically on this region, the study advances the broader discourse on comparative political behaviour in politically diverse and economically volatile contexts.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study proposes five hypotheses to explore the interaction between rational evaluations and ideological constraints in shaping public policy assessments across Latin America. These hypotheses synthesize key insights drawn from Rational Choice Theory and ideology-focused analyses, capturing the interplay of instrumental reasoning and identity-driven political orientations in contexts marked by volatility and contestation.

Priming theory (Miller & Krosnick, 2000) holds that national political and economic crises increase the salience of certain issues in public opinion, amplifying the effects of specific determinants of political attitudes. In Latin America—where democratic institutions often coexist with economic instability and fragmented party systems—it is expected that citizens' evaluations of trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction will be highly sensitive to both performance-based assessments and enduring ideological commitments.

This framework thus anticipates that negative perceptions of governance and adverse economic experiences, particularly those that are egocentric and retrospective, will strongly influence trust and satisfaction. At the same time, ideological orientations should mediate or moderate these effects—meaning that individuals whose political identities align with democratic values or the incumbent regime’s ideological position are more likely to evaluate political outcomes positively, even in unfavorable circumstances.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are advanced:

H1: Trust in Political Institutions and Trust in Government:

- Higher trust in political institutions—particularly Congress and the judiciary—will be positively associated with higher trust in government. This reflects the notion that confidence in foundational institutions underpins perceptions of state legitimacy and effectiveness (Mishler & Rose, 2001), especially where institutional credibility is fragile.

H2: Economic Satisfaction and Satisfaction with Democracy

- Greater economic satisfaction will be positively related to higher satisfaction with democracy. Citizens who view their own economic condition favorably are more likely to perceive democratic institutions as effective and legitimate, reinforcing regime approval (Anderson & Guillory, 1997).

H3: Perception of Governance and Trust in Government

- Positive perceptions of governance serving the general interest (as opposed to elite or private interests) will be positively related to trust in government. Conversely, perceptions of elite capture or exclusionary governance are expected to erode trust. This highlights the importance of fairness and inclusivity for fostering institutional legitimacy (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

H4: Employment Status and Satisfaction with Democracy

- Being employed is expected to be positively associated with satisfaction with democracy. Employment secures both economic stability and shapes perceived political efficacy and regime responsiveness, whereas unemployment may fuel alienation and discontent with democracy (Jensen & Svendsen, 2003).

H5: Ideological Orientation and Policy Evaluation

- Individuals whose ideological orientations align with democratic principles or the regime’s ideological stance are expected to evaluate democratic and economic outcomes more positively. Ideological congruence reinforces perceived legitimacy and can buffer negative assessments during adverse events (March & Olsen, 1989).

## Dataset Description

To investigate the hypotheses concerning trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction, this study draws on data from the Latinobarómetro survey.<sup>2</sup> Conducted by the non-profit Corporación Latinobarómetro, based in Santiago, Chile, this survey captures public opinion dynamics across Latin America, focusing on a range of demographic, political, and economic factors. Selected survey waves from 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2023 are utilised,<sup>3</sup> as they provide consistent variables across a ten-year period, allowing for an appropriate timeframe to account for social, demographic, and political changes.

Since its inception in 1995, the Latinobarómetro has served as a key source for capturing detailed regional insights. It assesses public perceptions of governance, ideological orientation, and institutional trust. Each round typically includes 1,200 respondents from the larger South American countries and Mexico, and 1,000 respondents from smaller Central American nations and the Dominican Republic. Participants are adults aged 18 and older, except in Brazil, where the eligible age is 16. The surveys maintain a 95% confidence level, with a margin of error between  $\pm 2.8\%$  and  $\pm 3.1\%$  per national sample, ensuring high standards of reliability and precision.

The countries included in this study are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Spain was excluded due to its limited participation and its location outside the region, and Nicaragua was excluded due to incomplete data from the 2020 survey, which was affected by regime pressures and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

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2 <http://www.latinobarometro.org/>

3 [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1A4ZVQYadhWtlwwUoMucl7-otfdGuyAgy?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1A4ZVQYadhWtlwwUoMucl7-otfdGuyAgy?usp=drive_link)  
Access to the data files used in this work.

4 Data for 2020 includes an online component for Argentina due to pandemic-related restrictions, surveyed between April 26 and May 16, 2021.

**Table 1: Data collection dates and number of respondents for each survey round**

Latinobarómetro Rounds	2013	2015	2016	2017	2018	2020	2023
Data Collection Dates	May 31 - June 30	Jan 15 - Feb 15	May 15 - June 15	June 22 - Aug 28	June 15 - Aug 2	Oct 26 - Dec 15, Apr 26 - May 16, 2021 (Argentina)	Feb 20 - Apr 18
Number of Respondents	20,204	20,250	20,204	20,200	20,204	20,204	19,205

### *Variables*

For the longitudinal analysis of the **Latinobarómetro** data, an initial process of **variable matching** was crucial to ensure that relevant variables were consistently present across all seven surveyrounds selected for this study.<sup>5</sup> This step was necessary to maintain the **integrity of the comparative analysis** over a decade, enabling an accurate assessment of trends and changes in public opinion across diverse political and economic contexts. The selected variables were chosen based on their **consistent availability** across all survey waves and their **relevance to the central research questions**.

### *Methods*

This study employs Cumulative Link Mixed Models (CLMMs) to analyze data derived from the Latinobarómetro survey. The choice of CLMMs is guided by the need to effectively handle the hierarchical and ordinal nature of the dataset. The responses to key survey questions are ordinal, ranging from very low to very high levels of trust or satisfaction. CLMMs are well-suited to such data, as they can model ordered response categories while accounting for the nested structure—specifically, responses nested within countries and across different survey rounds. This method also allows for the inclusion of random effects to address

5 <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cNH6ooXzaBIPyWoLKyhOjvayv0gU7Dvy?usp=sharing> Excel table with matching variables from 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2020.

variations across countries and over time, providing robust and generalizable conclusions regarding the factors that influence public opinion in Latin America.

The CLMM approach facilitates the control of both spatial and temporal variance, which is crucial in a region characterized by significant political and economic diversity. The models incorporate random effects for both countries and years, capturing unobserved heterogeneity that could influence observed outcomes. This structure aligns with the insights provided by Luke Keele (2007) on the dynamics of trust in government, allowing the models to account for both fixed and random effects for country and year—essential for understanding temporal variations in trust and satisfaction.

To test the research hypotheses concerning trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and economic satisfaction, the following general model is specified for each outcome variable:

Where:

$$Y_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \sum_{p=1}^n \beta_p X_{ijkp} + u_j + v_{k(j)} + \epsilon_{ijk}$$

- $Y_{ijk}$  is the dependent variable (TrustGov, SatDem, SatEcon) for individual  $i$ , in country  $j$ , during survey round  $k$ .
- $X_{ijkp}$  represents the predictor variables (Ideological, EconomicPerceptions, Rational, InstitutionalConfidence, Controls, PolicySaliency).
- $\beta_0$  is the intercept, and  $\beta_p$  are the coefficients for the predictor variables.
- $u_j$  and  $v_{k(j)}$  are the random effects for countries and survey rounds, respectively.
- $\epsilon_{ijk}$  is the error term.

Each of the outcome variables is modelled separately as follows:

**Trust in Government (TrustGov):**

$$\begin{aligned} \text{TrustGov}_{ijk} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Ideological}_{ijkp} + \beta_2 \text{EconomicPerceptions}_{ijkp} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Rational}_{ijkp} + \beta_4 \text{InstitutionalConfidence}_{ijkp} + \beta_5 \text{Controls}_{ijkp} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{PolicySaliency}_{ijkp} + u_j + v_{k(j)} + \epsilon_{ijkp} \end{aligned}$$

**Satisfaction with Democracy (SatDem):**

$$\begin{aligned} \text{SatDem} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Ideological}_{ijkp} + \beta_2 \text{EconomicPerceptions}_{ijkp} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Rational}_{ijkp} + \beta_4 \text{InstitutionalConfidence}_{ijkp} + \beta_5 \text{Controls}_{ijkp} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{PolicySalience}_{ijkp} + u_j + v_{k(j)} + \epsilon_{ijkp} \end{aligned}$$

**Economic Satisfaction (SatEcon):**

$$\begin{aligned} \text{SatEcon} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Ideological}_{ijkp} + \beta_2 \text{EconomicPerceptions}_{ijkp} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Rational}_{ijkp} + \beta_4 \text{InstitutionalConfidence}_{ijkp} + \beta_5 \text{Controls}_{ijkp} \\ & + \beta_6 \text{PolicySalience}_{ijkp} + u_j + v_{k(j)} + \epsilon_{ijkp} \end{aligned}$$

This study employs robust statistical models in many respects but is also subject to several limitations that merit consideration. First, the models do not incorporate interaction effects—between predictors. Such interactions could reveal complex interdependencies between variables—for example, how economic perceptions may differentially influence trust in government depending on ideological orientation. The absence of these effects simplifies analysis but may also overlook nuanced dynamics that could yield deeper insights into the data.

More significantly, regional variations—particularly distinctions between urban and rural areas—play an essential role in shaping public policy opinions across Latin America. These geographical disparities are critical, as they influence levels of trust and satisfaction with public services. Urban and rural areas differ markedly in terms of access to services, economic opportunities, and state presence, all of which contribute to divergent perceptions of governmental effectiveness and trustworthiness. For instance, a study in Ecuador employed a tax-based measure to assess subnational state capacity, validated with survey data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (Harbers, 2015). It found that citizens in municipalities with higher state capacity reported greater satisfaction with public services, underlining a clear correlation between perceived state effectiveness and public satisfaction. Notably, the models used in this study do not include variables that directly measure state capacity or policy implementation effectiveness—factors that are central to citizens’ lived experiences and, consequently, to their levels of trust and satisfaction.

The study’s focus on individual-level predictors, influenced by theoretical frameworks such as those proposed by Easton (1965)—who emphasized the role of personal attitudes in political systems—may result in the underrepresentation of broader systemic and institutional

variables. The exclusive use of data from the Latinobarómetro survey is justified by its extensive scope, consistent methodology, and rich set of relevant indicators across multiple Latin American countries and time periods. This dataset enables robust cross-national and longitudinal analysis unmatched by comparable sources. Nevertheless, relying on a single dataset may limit the generalisability and explanatory breadth of the findings.

## Results

In refining the predictive models for public policy evaluation, three separate models were developed, each focusing on trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and satisfaction with the economy. This process involved a systematic approach to identifying significant predictors, constructing comprehensive models, and subsequently refining these models for parsimony and robustness.

First, statistical tests were conducted to determine significant relationships between the independent variables and each of the three dependent variables. This included chi-squared or Fisher's exact tests for categorical variables and Pearson's correlation for continuous variables. Significant predictors were identified using a stringent p-value threshold ( $< 0.001$ ) to minimize the risk of Type I errors. Following this preliminary step, a comprehensive linear model was constructed, and stepwise regression was applied to refine the model—ensuring both parsimony and explanatory power.

Comparison of R-squared values, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) between the full and reduced models showed that the reduced models retained most of the explanatory power of the full models, thereby justifying their adoption.

Finally, the models were constructed using Cumulative Link Mixed Models (CLMMs) to appropriately handle the ordinal nature of the dependent variables and to account for the hierarchical structure of the data, with responses nested within countries and survey rounds.

### *Cumulative Link Mixed Model for Trust in Government*

The final model for trust in government was fitted using the Cumulative Link Mixed Model (CLMM) approach with the Laplace approximation. The model included several predictors,

such as approval of the president, political capital, trust in various institutions (Congress, judiciary, political parties, police), age groups, attitudes toward democracy, perception of national progress, family political orientation, past economic situation, and the main perceived issue of a lack of freedom of expression. Random effects were included for both the individual's identity (*idenpa*) and survey year (*año*) to account for the hierarchical structure of the data. The formula for the model is as follows:

$$\text{trust\_gov} \sim \text{aprob\_pre} + \text{pol\_capt} + \text{trust\_cgr} + \text{trust\_jud} + \text{trust\_part} + \text{trust\_pol} + \text{age\_group} + \text{att\_dem} + \text{prgs} + \text{fampart} + \text{econ\_pst} + \text{main\_issue\_Lack\_of\_freedom\_of\_expression} + (1|\text{idenpa}) + (1|\text{año})$$

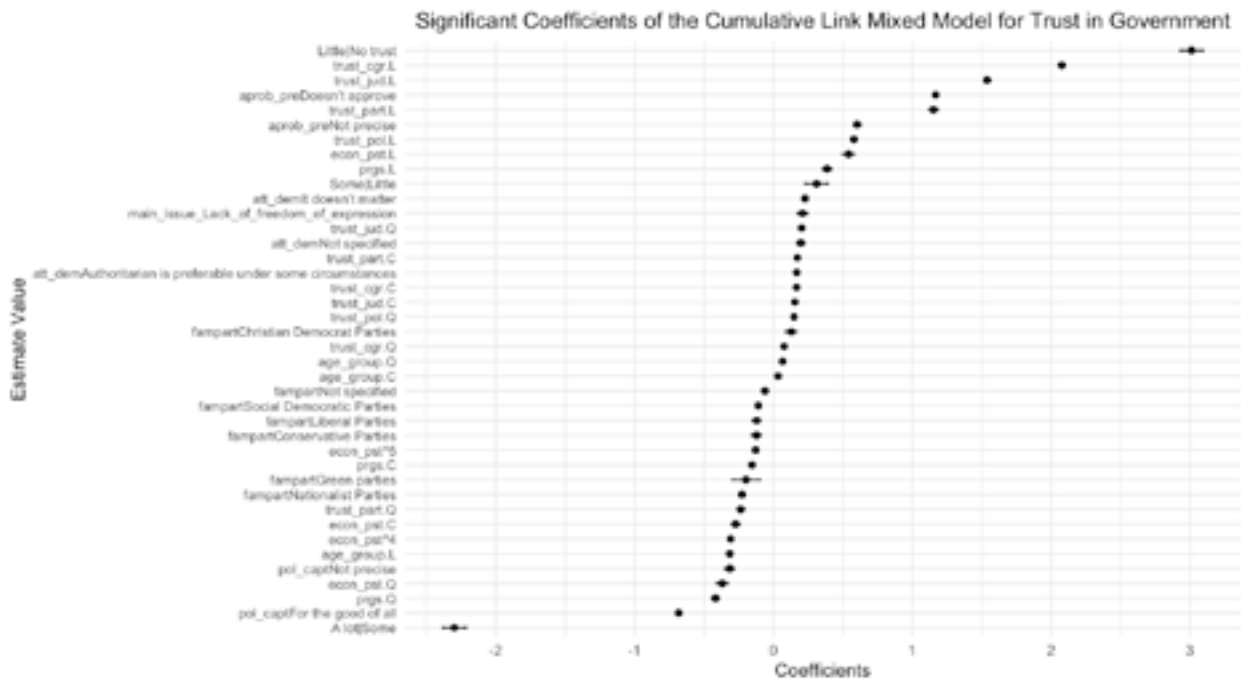
Table 2 summarises the model and highlights the estimated coefficients and their statistical significance. It also shows the fixed effects, which include variables like “approval of the president,” “political capital,” “trust in various institutions,” and more, along with their corresponding estimates, standard errors, z-values, and p-values.

**Table 2: Data collection dates and number of respondents for each survey round**

Summary of the CLMM Model for Trust in Government				
Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	z-value	p-value
A lot/Some	-2.2984410	0.0833867	-27.5636541	0.0000000
Some/Little	0.3098928	0.0829863	3.7342656	0.0001883
Little/No trust	3.0113113	0.0834205	36.0979955	0.0000000
aprob_preDoesn't approve	1.1678663	0.0150076	77.8183766	0.0000000
aprob_preNot precise	0.6019961	0.0263226	22.8699696	0.0000000
pol_captFor the good of all	-0.6831640	0.0165739	-41.2192705	0.0000000
pol_captNot precise	-0.3155147	0.0351942	-8.9649597	0.0000000
trust_cgr.L	2.0764892	0.0255915	81.1398172	0.0000000
trust_cgr.Q	0.0755952	0.0195979	3.8573145	0.0001146
trust_cgr.C	0.1659163	0.0136270	12.1755518	0.0000000
trust_jud.L	1.5384436	0.0231532	66.4462547	0.0000000
trust_jud.Q	0.2029339	0.0177606	11.4260706	0.0000000
trust_jud.C	0.1550168	0.0130209	11.9052630	0.0000000
trust_part.L	1.1521653	0.0321335	35.8555255	0.0000000
trust_part.Q	-0.2364008	0.0249681	-9.4681213	0.0000000
trust_part.C	0.1716674	0.0163833	10.4781835	0.0000000
trust_pol.L	0.5790419	0.0178475	32.4437821	0.0000000
trust_pol.Q	0.1483588	0.0145032	10.2293820	0.0000000
trust_pol.C	0.0158586	0.0115946	1.3677535	0.1713892
age_group.L	-0.3148217	0.0148234	-21.2381055	0.0000000
age_group.Q	0.0656822	0.0130664	5.0267940	0.0000005
age_group.C	0.0328850	0.0114074	2.8827696	0.0039420
att_demAuthoritarian is preferable under some circumstances	0.1669531	0.0179890	9.2808452	0.0000000
att_demIt doesn't matter	0.2272390	0.0158407	14.3452310	0.0000000
att_demNot specified	0.1970287	0.0273084	7.2149611	0.0000000
prgs.L	0.3858361	0.0333869	11.5564961	0.0000000
prgs.Q	-0.4175021	0.0264807	-15.7662947	0.0000000
prgs.C	-0.1537789	0.0155272	-9.9038555	0.0000000
fampartGreen parties	-0.1977098	0.1006671	-1.9639970	0.0495304
fampartCommunist parties	-0.0363464	0.0468925	-0.7751018	0.4382795
fampartSocial Democratic Parties	-0.1090978	0.0217148	-5.0241269	0.0000005
fampartLiberal Parties	-0.1217064	0.0283552	-4.2922035	0.0000177
fampartChristian Democrat Parties	0.1282940	0.0396422	3.2362980	0.0012109
fampartConservative Parties	-0.1228544	0.0345049	-3.5604864	0.0003702
fampartNationalist Parties	-0.2273140	0.0219575	-10.3524506	0.0000000
fampartNot specified	-0.0613319	0.0226632	-2.7062308	0.0068052
econ_pst.L	0.5412110	0.0438992	12.3285040	0.0000000
econ_pst.Q	-0.3688093	0.0398156	-9.2629244	0.0000000
econ_pst.C	-0.2733210	0.0295709	-9.2429066	0.0000000
econ_pst^4	-0.3085416	0.0192359	-16.0398977	0.0000000
econ_pst^5	-0.1288859	0.0130250	-9.8952655	0.0000000
main_issue_Lack_of_freedom_of_expression	0.2087097	0.0349854	5.9656173	0.0000000

Figure 8 visualises the significant coefficients of the model, plotting the estimated values, along with their confidence intervals. This visualisation aids in understanding the impact of each variable on trust in government.

**Figure 8: Significant Coefficients of the Cumulative Link Mixed Model for Trust in Government.**



Source: Latinobarómetro.

The random effects capture deviations from the overall intercept associated with each level of *idjenja* and *año*, indicating regional differences in trust in government as well as temporal trends. The calculated marginal and conditional R-squared values for the cumulative link mixed model are 0.627 and 0.635, respectively. These values suggest that the model exhibits strong explanatory power, with the fixed effects alone accounting for a substantial portion of the variance, and the addition of random effects offering a modest but meaningful improvement.

### *Cumulative Link Mixed Model for Satisfaction with Democracy*

The final model for satisfaction with democracy was fitted using the Cumulative Link Mixed Model (CLMM) approach with the Laplace approximation. The model included several predictors, such as political capital, economic perceptions (present, past, and future), fairness of distribution, attitudes toward democracy, approval of the president, support for democracy, perception of national progress, and trust in Congress. Random effects were included for both the individual's identity (*idenpa*) and survey year (*año*) to account for the hierarchical structure of the data. The formula for the model is as follows:

$$\text{sat\_dem} \sim \text{pol\_capt} + \text{econ\_prs} + \text{econ\_pst} + \text{fair\_dist} + \text{att\_dem} + \text{aprob\_pre} + \text{pro\_dem} + \text{econ\_ftr} + \text{prgs} + \text{trust\_cgr} + (1|\text{idenpa}) + (1|\text{año})$$

The summary of the model is presented in Table 2, which highlights the estimated coefficients and their statistical significance. This table reports the fixed effects—such as political capital, economic perceptions, fairness of distribution, attitudes toward democracy, approval of the president, support for democracy, perception of progress, and trust in Congress— together with their corresponding estimates, standard errors, z-values, and p-values.

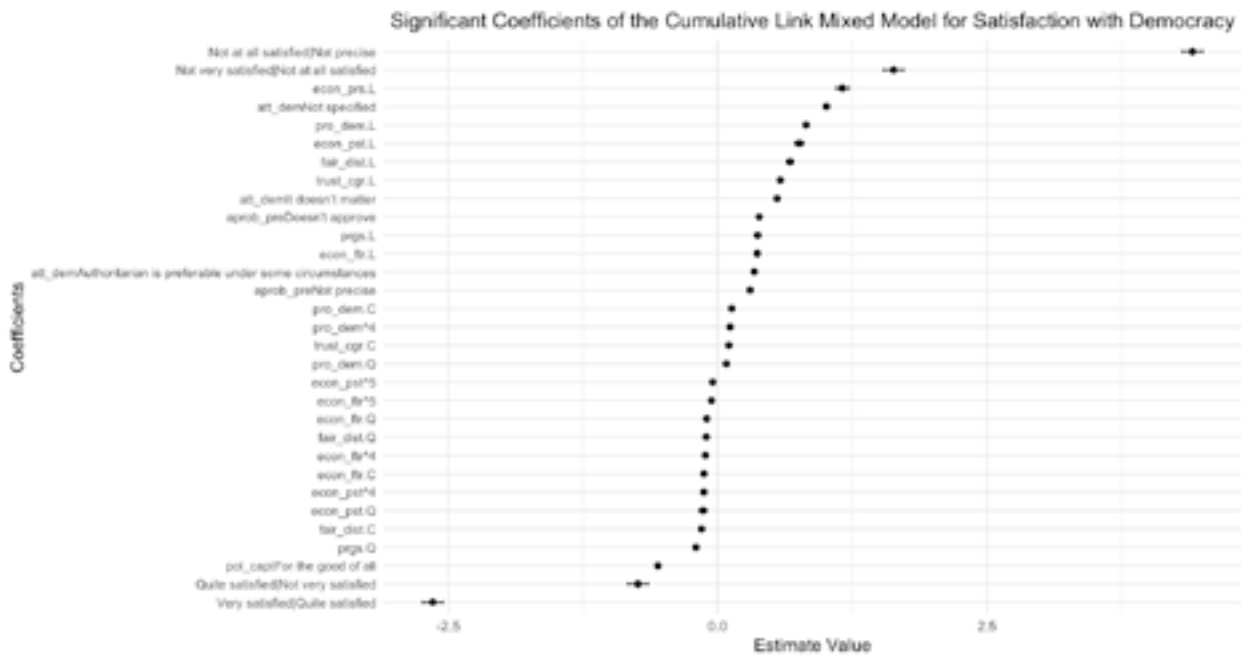
**Table 3: Significant Coefficients of the Cumulative Link Mixed Model for Satisfaction with Democracy.**

Summary of the CLMM Model for Satisfaction with Democracy				
Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	z-value	p-value
Very satisfied Quite satisfied	-2.6434381	0.0927820	-28.4908428	0.0000000
Quite satisfied Not very satisfied	-0.7407110	0.0924957	-8.0080607	0.0000000
Not very satisfied Not at all satisfied	1.6336402	0.0925745	17.6467662	0.0000000
Not at all satisfied Not precise	4.4080282	0.0936788	47.0546813	0.0000000
pol_capt For the good of all	-0.5548618	0.0147942	-37.5053234	0.0000000
pol_capt Not precise	-0.0473497	0.0304302	-1.5560116	0.1197053
econ_pres.L	1.1588858	0.0588300	19.6988868	0.0000000
econ_pres.Q	-0.0922338	0.0529258	-1.7427018	0.0813857
econ_pres.C	-0.0332559	0.0380682	-0.8735879	0.3823427
econ_pres^4	-0.0353712	0.0222088	-1.5926651	0.1112353
econ_pres^5	-0.0059512	0.0120318	-0.4946201	0.6208683
econ_pst.L	0.7576968	0.0385547	19.6524957	0.0000000
econ_pst.Q	-0.1366541	0.0347335	-3.9343615	0.0000834
econ_pst.C	0.0409261	0.0257288	1.5906720	0.1116834
econ_pst^4	-0.1278977	0.0164549	-7.7726412	0.0000000
econ_pst^5	-0.0442521	0.0111806	-3.9579446	0.0000756
fair_dist.L	0.6728680	0.0303401	22.1775486	0.0000000
fair_dist.Q	-0.1043669	0.0257584	-4.0517669	0.0000508
fair_dist.C	-0.1510720	0.0185044	-8.1641162	0.0000000
fair_dist^4	0.0093186	0.0109558	0.8505621	0.3950127
att_dem Authoritarian is preferable under some circumstances	0.3382505	0.0155890	21.6979957	0.0000000
att_dem It doesn't matter	0.5527087	0.0136714	40.4281582	0.0000000
att_dem Not specified	1.0090480	0.0235977	42.7604374	0.0000000
aprob_pre Doesn't approve	0.3859994	0.0131351	29.3867702	0.0000000
aprob_pre Not precise	0.3015501	0.0230704	13.0708527	0.0000000
pro_dem.L	0.8189233	0.0225288	36.3500288	0.0000000
pro_dem.Q	0.0827270	0.0196457	4.2109530	0.0000254
pro_dem.C	0.1317502	0.0197332	6.6765827	0.0000000
pro_dem^4	0.1154452	0.0155687	7.4152152	0.0000000
econ_ftr.L	0.3686280	0.0200988	18.3407567	0.0000000
econ_ftr.Q	-0.1007554	0.0180550	-5.5804831	0.0000000
econ_ftr.C	-0.1272081	0.0182878	-6.9558964	0.0000000
econ_ftr^4	-0.1128500	0.0167249	-6.7474291	0.0000000
econ_ftr^5	-0.0561947	0.0144118	-3.8992235	0.0000965
prgs.L	0.3723100	0.0277808	13.4017125	0.0000000
prgs.Q	-0.2023370	0.0222111	-9.1097109	0.0000000
prgs.C	-0.0036399	0.0128075	-0.2841994	0.7762576
trust_cgr.L	0.5807355	0.0183642	31.6232430	0.0000000
trust_cgr.Q	-0.0222703	0.0146823	-1.5168180	0.1293126
trust_cgr.C	0.1027527	0.0112844	9.1057318	0.0000000

Source: Latinobarómetro.

Figure 9 visualises the significant coefficients of the model, plotting the estimated values, along with their confidence intervals. This visualisation aids in understanding the impact of each variable on satisfaction with democracy.

**Figure 9: Significant Coefficients of the Cumulative Link Mixed Model for Satisfaction with Democracy.**



Source: Latinobarómetro.

The random effects indicate regional and temporal variations in satisfaction with democracy. For instance, the random effects for idenpa show that countries like Brazil (idenpa 76), Honduras (idenpa 340), and Panamá (idenpa 591) have positive deviations, suggesting higher satisfaction in these regions. In contrast, countries like Argentina (idenpa 32), Chile (idenpa 152), and Costa Rica (idenpa 188) exhibit negative deviations, indicating lower satisfaction. Temporal variations are also evident, with years like 2017 and 2018 showing higher satisfaction while years like 2013 and 2016 have lower satisfaction.

The proportional odds assumption was tested using a VGLM model. The summary of this model shows that the assumption holds as the coefficients are estimated and their significance is evaluated. The results from the likelihood ratio test indicate a significant difference between the null and final models.

The calculated marginal and conditional R-squared values for the satisfaction with democracy model are 0.301 and 0.327, respectively. This suggests that approximately 30.1% of the variance in satisfaction with democracy is explained by the fixed effects alone and 32.7% by both the fixed and random effects. These values indicate that the model has good explanatory power, with the fixed effects contributing significantly to the variance explained.

### *Cumulative Link Mixed Model for Satisfaction with Democracy*

The final model for satisfaction with the economy was fitted using the CLMM approach with the Laplace approximation. The model included several predictors such as political capital, economic perceptions (present and past), fairness in distribution, attitudes towards democracy, approval of the president, support for democracy, future economic perceptions, perception of progress, and trust in Congress. Random effects were included for the individual's identity (*idenpa*) and year (*año*) to account for the hierarchical structure of the data. The formula for the model is as follows:

$$\text{sat\_econ} \sim \text{pol\_capt} + \text{econ\_prs} + \text{econ\_pst} + \text{fair\_dist} + \text{att\_dem} + \text{aprob\_pre} + \text{pro} \\ \text{prgs} + \text{trust\_cgr} + (1|\text{idenpa}) + (1|\text{año})$$

Table 4 summarises the model, highlighting the estimated coefficients and their statistical significance. The table shows the fixed effects, which include variables like “political capital,” “economic perceptions,” “fairness in distribution,” “attitudes towards democracy,” and more, along with their corresponding estimates, standard errors, z-values, and p-values.

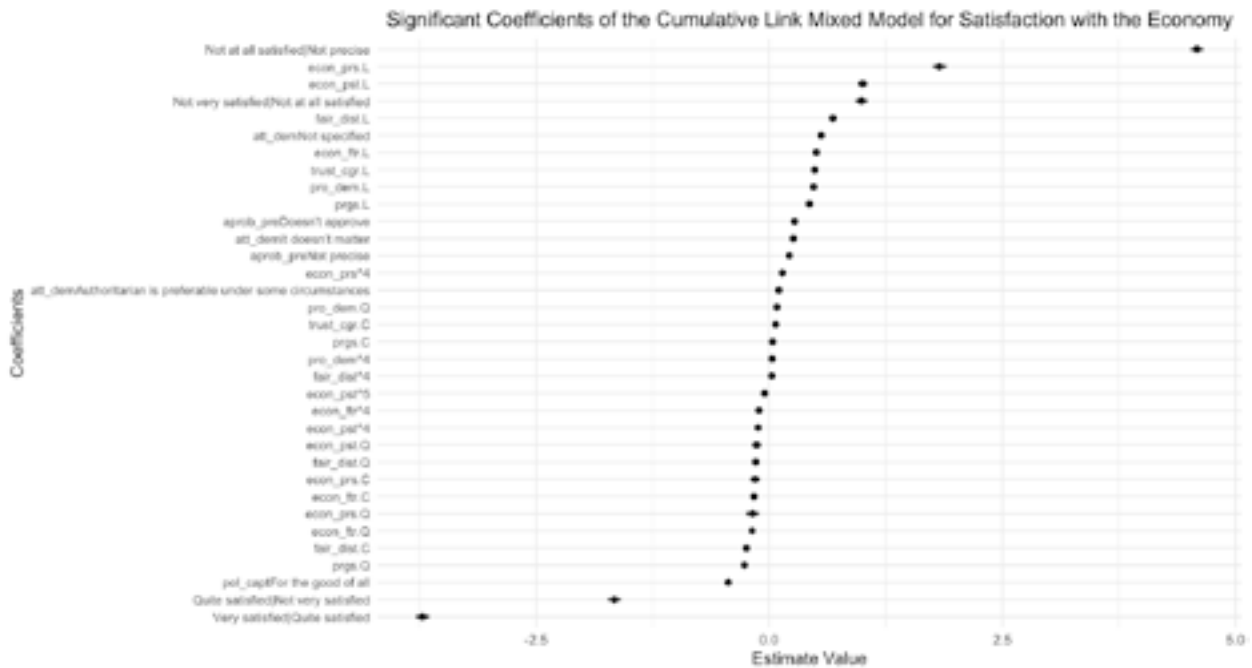
**Table 4: Significant Coefficients of the Cumulative Link Mixed Model for satisfaction with democracy.**

Summary of the CLMM Model for Satisfaction with the Economy				
Variable	Estimate	Standard Error	z-value	p-value
Very satisfied Quite satisfied	-3.7190731	0.0590658	-62.9648796	0.0000000
Quite satisfied Not very satisfied	-1.6605820	0.0579476	-28.6566199	0.0000000
Not very satisfied Not at all satisfied	0.9896491	0.0578163	17.1171204	0.0000000
Not at all satisfied Not precise	4.5870251	0.0601499	76.2599547	0.0000000
pol_capt For the good of all	-0.4382004	0.0151808	-28.8655283	0.0000000
pol_capt Not precise	0.0100400	0.0312937	0.3208315	0.7483381
econ_prs.L	1.8251376	0.0627989	29.0631944	0.0000000
econ_prs.Q	-0.1769900	0.0564355	-3.1361473	0.0017118
econ_prs.C	-0.1517055	0.0404101	-3.7541447	0.0001739
econ_prs^4	0.1404646	0.0234596	5.9875123	0.0000000
econ_prs^5	-0.0135958	0.0125406	-1.0841485	0.2782990
econ_pst.L	1.0032786	0.0401527	24.9865961	0.0000000
econ_pst.Q	-0.1341300	0.0361673	-3.7085949	0.0002084
econ_pst.C	0.0139079	0.0267283	0.5203421	0.6028252
econ_pst^4	-0.1170111	0.0170698	-6.8548425	0.0000000
econ_pst^5	-0.0481256	0.0115388	-4.1707774	0.0000304
fair_dist.L	0.6841703	0.0309562	22.1012254	0.0000000
fair_dist.Q	-0.1441308	0.0262766	-5.4851357	0.0000000
fair_dist.C	-0.2450673	0.0189284	-12.9470854	0.0000000
fair_dist^4	0.0286050	0.0112503	2.5425936	0.0110033
att_dem Authoritarian is preferable under some circumstances	0.1038085	0.0161194	6.4399755	0.0000000
att_dem It doesn't matter	0.2585449	0.0140831	18.3585165	0.0000000
att_dem Not specified	0.5564485	0.0239290	23.2541142	0.0000000
aprob_pre Doesn't approve	0.2729425	0.0134570	20.2826379	0.0000000
aprob_pre Not precise	0.2152046	0.0236783	9.0886906	0.0000000
pro_dem.L	0.4745791	0.0228376	20.7805882	0.0000000
pro_dem.Q	0.0818265	0.0200111	4.0890619	0.0000433
pro_dem.C	0.0158293	0.0205572	0.7700131	0.4412921
pro_dem^4	0.0329721	0.0163148	2.0209965	0.0432801
econ_ftr.L	0.5055506	0.0208444	24.2535135	0.0000000
econ_ftr.Q	-0.1823622	0.0186777	-9.7636470	0.0000000
econ_ftr.C	-0.1636025	0.0191524	-8.5421312	0.0000000
econ_ftr^4	-0.1082647	0.0176435	-6.1362457	0.0000000
econ_ftr^5	-0.0279080	0.0150840	-1.8501803	0.0642876
prgs.L	0.4312765	0.0283866	15.1929739	0.0000000
prgs.Q	-0.2655576	0.0227210	-11.6877464	0.0000000
prgs.C	0.0382884	0.0131788	2.9053052	0.0036690
trust_cgr.L	0.4865118	0.0185890	26.1719804	0.0000000
trust_cgr.Q	0.0284738	0.0148902	1.9122484	0.0558443
trust_cgr.C	0.0691049	0.0115427	5.9868832	0.0000000

Source: Latinobarómetro.

Figure 10 visualises the significant coefficients of the model, plotting the estimated values along with their confidence intervals. This visualisation aids in understanding the impact of each variable on satisfaction with the economy.

**Figure 10: Significant Coefficients of the Cumulative Link Mixed Model for Satisfaction with the Economy.**



Source: Latinobarómetro.

The conditional R-squared value of 0.349 and the marginal R-squared value of 0.341 suggest that the model explains a substantial portion of the variability in satisfaction with the economy. Including both fixed and random effects provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing economic satisfaction.

The model for trust in government included variables such as trust in Congress (`trust_cgr`) and trust in the judiciary (`trust_jud`). The coefficients for `trust_cgr` (Estimate = 2.07649,  $p < 0.001$ ) and `trust_jud` (Estimate = 1.53844,  $p < 0.001$ ) were positive and highly significant, supporting the hypothesis that higher levels of trust in political institutions are associated with greater trust in government. This finding aligns with Mishler and Rose (2001), who ar-

gue that trust in fundamental institutions enhances overall governmental trust. The results underscore the importance of institutional integrity and effectiveness in fostering public confidence in government.

In the model for satisfaction with democracy, economic satisfaction (*econ\_prs*) was included as a predictor. The coefficient for *econ\_prs* (Estimate = 1.158886,  $p < 0.001$ ) was positive and significant, indicating that higher economic satisfaction correlates with higher satisfaction with democracy. This supports the hypothesis that individuals' economic well-being significantly influences their evaluation of democratic governance. Consistent with Anderson and Guillory (1997), the findings suggest that economic prosperity and stability are key drivers of citizens' contentment with democratic processes.

The trust in government model also included perception of governance (*pol\_capt*). The coefficient for the perception that governance serves the good of all (Estimate = -0.68316,  $p < 0.001$ ) was negative and significant. This indicates that when governance is perceived as serving elite interests, trust in government declines. This finding supports the hypothesis that inclusive governance fosters trust, whereas perceptions of exclusivity erode it, in line with Rothstein and Teorell (2008). The negative coefficient reinforces the idea that fairness and inclusivity are central to maintaining public trust in institutions.

In the model for satisfaction with democracy, employment status (*econ\_pst*) was also a significant predictor. The coefficient for *econ\_pst* (Estimate = 0.757697,  $p < 0.001$ ) was positive and significant, indicating that employment improves satisfaction with democracy. This supports the view that employment provides economic stability and enhances perceptions of government responsiveness, consistent with Jensen and Svendsen (2003). Employed individuals are more likely to view democratic institutions positively, seeing them as effective and responsive to citizen needs.

The models also included ideological orientation (*att\_dem*) as a predictor. In the trust in government model, the coefficient for preference for democracy (Estimate = 0.338250,  $p < 0.001$ ) was positive and significant. This suggests that individuals with a strong commitment to democratic values are more likely to positively evaluate democratic and economic outcomes. This supports the view that ideological alignment with dominant political values enhances perceived legitimacy and reinforces positive policy evaluations, consistent with March and Olsen (1989).

Comparative analysis of the models shows strong support for all hypotheses. Trust in political institutions, economic satisfaction, perception of governance, employment status, and ideological orientation all emerged as significant predictors of trust in government, satisfaction with democracy, and satisfaction with the economy. Notably, the model for trust in government explained the highest proportion of variance among the three. The conditional  $R^2 = 0.635$  and marginal  $R^2 = 0.627$  confirm strong explanatory power, with fixed effects alone accounting for much of the variance and random effects adding a modest improvement. These high R-squared values emphasise the central role of institutional trust and other predictors in shaping public confidence in government.

In contrast, the satisfaction with democracy model yielded lower variance explained (conditional  $R^2 = 0.327$ , marginal  $R^2 = 0.301$ ). These results suggest that while predictors such as economic satisfaction and employment status are important, other explanatory factors likely shape democratic satisfaction—factors not fully captured in this model.

The satisfaction with the economy model showed conditional  $R^2 = 0.349$  and marginal  $R^2 = 0.341$ , indicating that the model explains a reasonable portion of the variability in economic satisfaction. Including both fixed and random effects allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the determinants. However, as with the democracy model, the lower  $R^2$  values compared to the trust model suggest that other unmeasured factors may also significantly influence economic satisfaction.

## Discussion

Rational factors, grounded in economic perceptions and direct personal experiences, shape public opinion. In the model for trust in government, variables such as approval of the president (*aprob\_pre*) and perception of governance (*pol\_capt*) emerged as significant predictors. The positive coefficient for presidential approval indicates that citizens who approve of the president are more likely to express trust in government. This finding aligns with Rational Choice Theory, which posits that individuals evaluate political actors based on perceived performance and the benefits delivered to their personal and collective well-being (Downs, 1957). Conversely, the negative coefficient for the perception that governance serves the interests of a few powerful groups underscores the critical role of perceived fairness and inclusivity. This supports the argument that citizens' trust is eroded when they view the government as catering to elites rather than serving the broader public (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

Similarly, in the model for satisfaction with democracy, economic satisfaction (*econ\_prs*) was a significant predictor. The positive relationship between economic satisfaction and democratic satisfaction highlights the importance of material well-being in shaping political attitudes. This result is consistent with Anderson and Guillory (1997), who argue that favourable economic conditions enhance citizens' evaluations of democratic governance. Employment status (*econ\_pst*) also proved significant, supporting the notion that financial security contributes to higher satisfaction with democratic institutions (Jensen & Svendsen, 2003).

Reflecting deeply held beliefs and values, ideological constraints also significantly influence public evaluations of political outcomes. The inclusion of ideological orientation (*att\_dem*) as a predictor demonstrates the impact of ideological alignment on evaluations of trust and satisfaction. The positive coefficient for the preference for democracy suggests that individuals committed to democratic ideals are more likely to express trust in government and satisfaction with the democratic process. This observation supports the literature on ideological constraints, which suggests that individuals' core values and worldviews structure their political perceptions and behaviours (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009).

Partisanship likewise plays a critical role in shaping political evaluations. The positive coefficients for institutional trust—particularly in Congress (*trust\_cgr*) and the judiciary (*trust\_jud*)—indicate that confidence in these institutions is associated with higher trust in government. This finding supports the argument that institutional trust serves as a proxy for broader political trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001), particularly in contexts where ideological alignment reinforces institutional legitimacy.

A comparative analysis of the models reveals that the included predictors explain trust in government more comprehensively than they do satisfaction with democracy or satisfaction with the economy. The conditional  $R^2$  value of 0.635 for the trust in government model indicates strong explanatory power. This result underscores the pivotal roles of institutional trust, governance perceptions, and ideological orientation in shaping public trust.

By contrast, the models for satisfaction with democracy ( $R^2 = 0.327$ ) and satisfaction with the economy ( $R^2 = 0.349$ ) exhibit lower explanatory power. While economic satisfaction and employment status are clearly influential, the more modest  $R^2$  values suggest that additional factors—beyond those captured in the current models—also shape public sentiment. These factors may include media influence, social inequality, and political stability, all of which merit further investigation.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that both rational-economic evaluations and ideological orientations significantly shape public policy assessments in Latin America. By analysing ten years of Latinobarómetro data across 16 countries, the findings confirm that perceptions of institutional performance and alignment with democratic values jointly influence public trust and satisfaction. This dual explanatory model contributes to the comparative politics literature by integrating instrumental and identity-based determinants of political attitudes, offering an empirically grounded framework for assessing public opinion in contexts marked by volatility, inequality, and democratic erosion.

Trust in government emerged as the most robustly explained dependent variable, with conditional and marginal R-squared values of 0.635 and 0.627, respectively. This result underscores the pivotal role of institutional trust—particularly in Congress and the judiciary—as a stabilising cognitive anchor in political evaluation. In many Latin American democracies, where executive overreach, corruption, and policy instability are pervasive, citizens appear to rely on broader perceptions of institutional fairness and legitimacy when assessing government performance. These findings reaffirm the importance of transparent, inclusive governance and procedural integrity as foundations for maintaining citizen trust, particularly in fragile political environments.

Satisfaction with democracy, by contrast, showed only moderate explanatory power, with conditional and marginal R-squared values of 0.327 and 0.301. While economic satisfaction and employment status remain important, they do not fully account for the observed decline in democratic satisfaction in recent years. The post-2018 divergence between satisfaction with democracy and trust in government suggests a potential shift in how citizens conceptualise legitimacy—favouring outcome-based evaluations of leadership over normative attachments to democratic procedures. This phenomenon is especially visible in countries like El Salvador, where concentrated executive power has earned popular support despite clear signs of institutional weakening. These patterns point to a growing risk of democratic detachment, with implications for regime resilience and democratization efforts in the region.

Satisfaction with the economy was also moderately explained, with conditional and marginal R-squared values of 0.349 and 0.341. Present economic perceptions and perceived fairness in distribution were key determinants, reinforcing the idea that both material outcomes and normative assessments of justice shape public evaluations. However, persistent economic

volatility in Latin America—marked by inflation surges, fiscal austerity, and abrupt policy reversals—may weaken the connection between macroeconomic data and individual satisfaction. In such environments, distributive fairness is not only about outcomes but also about perceived responsiveness and inclusion. The findings suggest that governments must address both structural inequality and the symbolic framing of economic policy in order to foster durable economic legitimacy.

The comparative analysis reveals that the predictors employed explain trust in government more consistently than they do satisfaction with democracy or the economy. This disparity suggests that institutional trust may rest on longer-term perceptions of procedural fairness, while satisfaction is more susceptible to short-term events, crises, and perceptions of immediate wellbeing. The relatively lower explanatory power of the satisfaction models reflects the multidimensional nature of these attitudes—intersecting with lived experience, identity, collective memory, and public narratives. Addressing these attitudes requires more than technical policy interventions; it calls for an integrated strategy that combines structural reform with symbolic and communicative efforts.

The findings yield several actionable insights for policymakers. First, reinforcing public trust requires not only transparency and institutional accountability, but also visible responsiveness to everyday concerns. Governments must demonstrate—both symbolically and substantively—that governance serves collective, not elite, interests. Second, economic policy should go beyond aggregate growth to prioritise redistribution and frame equity as a democratic imperative. Finally, because ideological alignment shapes citizen interpretation of performance, policy communication must be crafted to bridge ideological divides, connecting value-based narratives with evidence-informed governance. This dual emphasis on material outcomes and ideational legitimacy is crucial in a region marked by polarisation and institutional fragility.

In conclusion, this study advances the understanding of public policy evaluation in Latin America by showing that rational assessments and ideological commitments function as interdependent drivers of trust and satisfaction. By bridging economic indicators with belief systems and institutional perceptions, it offers a theoretically integrated and empirically validated framework for analysing political attitudes in transitional and contested democracies. The findings highlight that public opinion is simultaneously shaped by material conditions and the symbolic legitimacy of governance. Future research should expand this dual framework by examining the role of media ecosystems, subnational variation in state capacity, and

the temporal evolution of ideological commitments during successive crises. Such inquiries are essential to developing lasting strategies for strengthening democratic resilience and rebuilding citizen-state relations in Latin America's fragmented political landscape.

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