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COVID-19, democratic governance and the 'barely middle class' in Latin America

Self-ascribed social class and views of the state in a time of pandemic

by Emanuele Sapienza[1]

COVID-19 broke out at a time when Latin America was already experiencing significant social unrest, fueled to a large extent by growing dissatisfaction with the state of politics and the social contract more broadly. Given this context, how has the pandemic impacted citizens' views of the public sphere and opinions about democratic governance? This brief presents the results of a survey commissioned by UNDP in 10 Latin American countries in September 2020. Self-ascribed social class is used as a lens to explore differences in the perception and evaluation of state performance in the face of COVID-19 with a focus on 'middle-class' perspectives. Some considerations are then offered on the steps required to enhance long-term democratic resilience in the region.

The role of the middle class in the political economy of democracy has been an object of intense contention over the years. Some see this social group as a natural champion of democracy. Nancy Birdsall, for instance, writes that the "[m]iddle class is not just an engine of growth. It can also be a powerful force for the rule of law and good governance—at least, once it reaches a critical mass".[2] Others regard the impact of the middle class on political dynamics as much more ambiguous. For example, in the opinion of David Motadel, "[m]iddle classes are not *a priori* engines of political liberalization. They can readily become the promoters of repressive authoritarianism if they fear for the loss of influence and wealth".[3]

Starting approximately from the aftermath of the 2007 financial crisis, Latin America has been experiencing widespread citizen frustration over the terms of the social contract accompanied by decreasing satisfaction with the functioning of politics and a weakening of support for democracy as a form of government.[4] In order to understand how the COVID-19 crisis may be interacting and potentially exacerbating these preexisting fragilities, in September 2020, the UNDP Regional Hub for Latin America and the Caribbean commissioned an opinion survey covering a representative sample of 12,000 respondents across 10 countries: Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru.[5]

A question on self-ascribed social class was included in the survey instrument[6] with a view to exploring class-specific dynamics, including whether there may be a distinct middle-class perspective on the impact of COVID-19, the quality of national responses and what the pandemic may mean for the future of the country.[7] Below is an overview of key findings.

One, none or many?

Previous analysis carried out by UNDP using Latinobarometro perception data up to 2018[8] shows a great variety of perspectives across different segments of the middle class in Latin America.
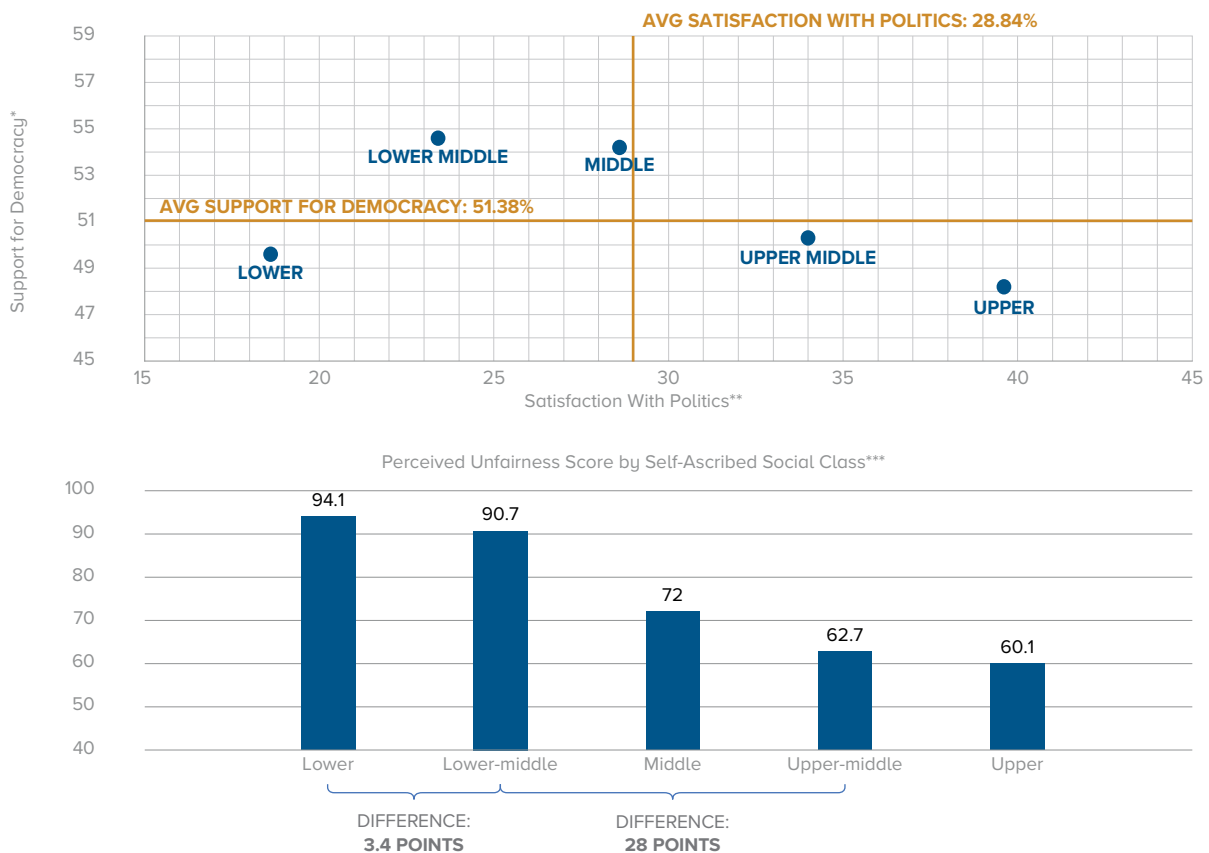
People who self-identify as 'lower-middle' or 'middle' class tend to express a significantly lower level of satisfaction with the functioning of politics in their country than those who describe themselves as belonging to the 'upper-middle' class. Nonetheless, in contrast to the 'upper-middle' class, the 'lower-middle' and 'middle' class groups are characterized by higher-than-average support for democracy as a form of government.

On the other hand, when it comes to economic views, people in the 'lower-middle' class tend to give a much more negative assessment of the fairness of income distribution in their country than people in either the 'middle' or 'upper-middle' class. In fact, the level of dissatisfaction with income distribution found in the 'lower-middle' class group is very close to that of people who self-identify as 'lower class' (Figure 1).

In other words, people who self-identify as 'lower-middle' class stand out (even in comparison with other segments of the middle class) as a group that is characterized by an especially strong level of commitment to democracy as a form of government, but also by an especially intense dissatisfaction with the social and economic outcomes produced by the actual functioning of democratic institutions in their countries, at least over the last decade or so.[9]

Figure 1: Different perspectives across middle-class segments

AVG SATISFACTION WITH POLITICS: 28.84%

Support for Democracy*

AVG SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY: 51.38%

LOWER MIDDLE · MIDDLE · LOWER · UPPER MIDDLE · UPPER

Satisfaction With Politics**

Perceived Unfairness Score by Self-Ascribed Social Class***

Lower	Lower-middle	Middle	Upper-middle	Upper
94.1	90.7	72	62.7	60.1

DIFFERENCE: **3.4 POINTS**   DIFFERENCE: **28 POINTS**

* Percentage of people who selected option a) in response to the question "With which of the following statements are you most in agreement? a) Democracy is preferable to all other forms of government; b) Under certain circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable; c) For people like me, democratic and undemocratic regimes are no different" (Latinobarometro 2018)
** Percentage of people who responded "satisfied" or "very satisfied" to the question: "In general, would you say you are very satisfied, rather satisfied, not very satisfied, not satisfied at all with the functioning of democracy in (COUNTRY)?" (Latinobarometro 2018)
*** Based on the question: "How fair do you think is the distribution of income in (COUNTRY)? Would you say it is: very fair, fair, unfair, very unfair?" A "Perceived unfairness score" is calculated using the following formula: % "very unfair" responses x 1.5 + % "unfair" responses - % "fair" responses - % "very fair" responses x 1.5.

*Source: Author's calculation based on Latinobarometro.*

Some of these divergences of perspectives appear to be transpiring in the evaluation of national responses to COVID-19, as 'upper-middle' class respondents are found to give systematically more positive assessments of the measures taken by national authorities than respondents in the 'lower-middle' and 'middle' class groups. It should be noted, however, that the perception gap across segments of the middle class changes significantly depending on the specific aspect of the response under consideration.

When asked to evaluate the health aspects of responses, 44.5 percent of people who self-identify as 'lower-middle' class express the view that the government was effective in protecting the health of citizens against 47 percent of those who describe themselves as 'middle' class and 51 percent of those who situate themselves in the 'upper-middle'

class. With respect to the economic aspects of responses, while 37 percent of the 'lower-middle' class and 37.4 percent of the 'middle' class believe that adequate measures were taken to protect the income of households, in the 'upper-middle' class this view is held by 42.6 percent of respondents.

The survey results also confirm an especially heightened sensitivity to issues of fairness among respondents who describe themselves as 'lower-middle class'. People in this group are the most likely to believe that the national response was informed primarily by the interests of a privileged few as opposed to those of the majority of citizens and, in fact, the 'lower-middle' class is the only group in which this opinion is found among an absolute majority of respondents (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Perceived fairness of national responses to COVID-19
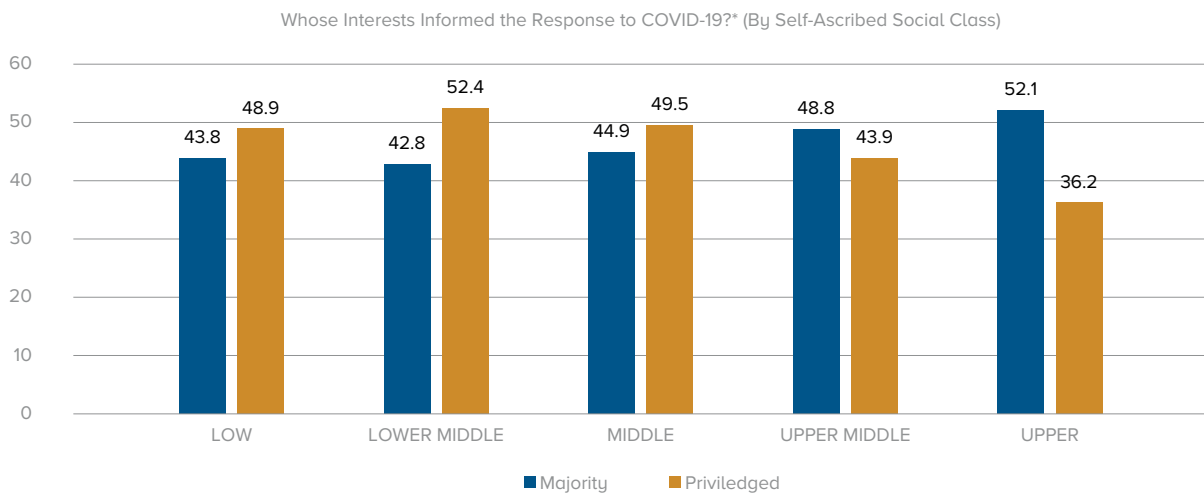
Whose Interests Informed the Response to COVID-19?* (By Self-Ascribed Social Class)

Based on the question: "In general, would you say that the decisions that the national government has been taking in response to COVID-19 have been in the interest of the majority of citizens, or of a limited group of privileged people?"

Source: Author's calculation based on CID Gallup survey.

Social class and democratic resilience

Given a softening of support for liberal democracy across the region and the emergence of a narrative according to which less-than-democratic regimes may be more effective in responding to national crises than fully democratic ones, many observers[10] have expressed the concern that COVID-19 could result in an acceleration of incipient populist tendencies in Latin America.[11]

Building on Navia and Walker's definition of populism as "the tendency of democratically elected leaders [...] to reduce the number of veto players in the political system",[12] the survey sought to test this hypothesis by investigating people's views on the appropriate level
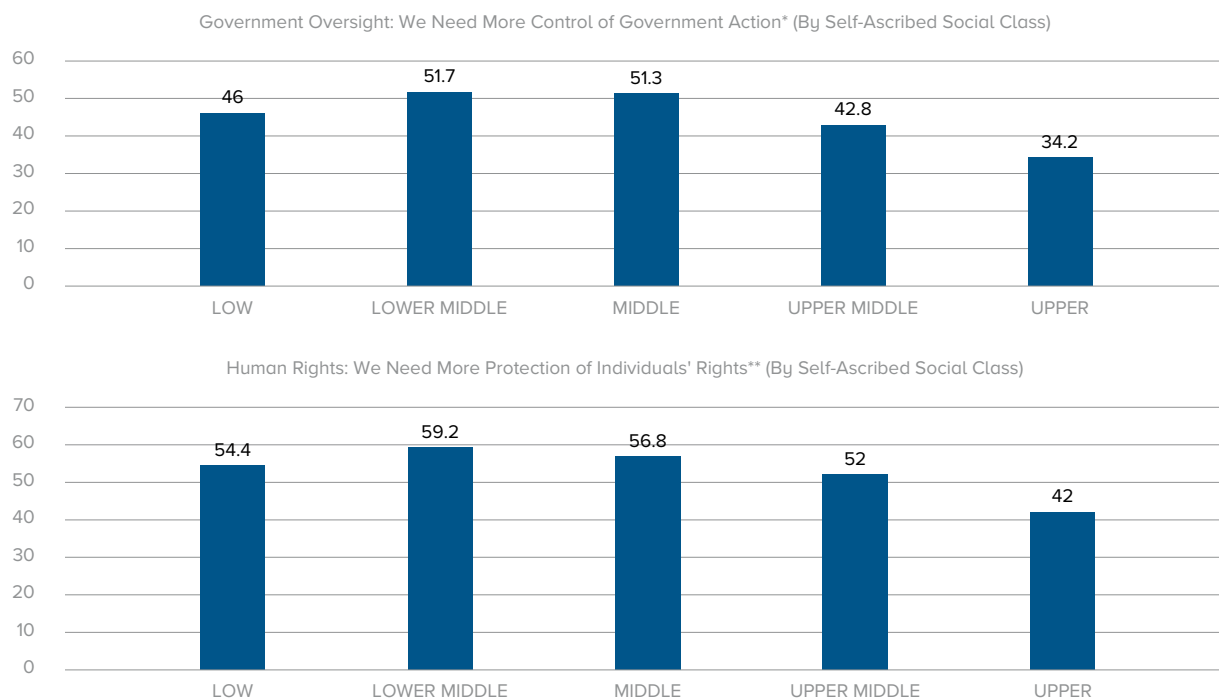
of checks and balances to be placed on executive action in light of the COVID-19 experience. In addition, a question was included in the survey instrument on whether public authorities should be given greater leverage to restrict individuals' rights when required for the common good.

Based on the survey results, the initial phase of COVID-19 responses does not seem to have given rise to widespread support for more unfettered government action. Nor has it led people to call for stronger mechanisms to limit individual freedoms. As a matter of fact, when asked to comment on lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience with respect to the system of governance, people point to the need for more (not less) government accountability

and more (not less) protection of individuals' rights. However, here again, social class seems to matter. People who describe themselves as 'lower-middle' or 'middle' class are much more likely to think that there is a need for greater government oversight

and human rights protection in their country. People who self-identify as 'upper' class are, by a significant margin, the least likely to feel this way (Figure 3).

Figure 3: COVID-19 and lessons learned for the governance system

Government Oversight: We Need More Control of Government Action* (By Self-Ascribed Social Class)

Class	Value
LOW	46
LOWER MIDDLE	51.7
MIDDLE	51.3
UPPER MIDDLE	42.8
UPPER	34.2

Human Rights: We Need More Protection of Individuals' Rights** (By Self-Ascribed Social Class)

Class	Value
LOW	54.4
LOWER MIDDLE	59.2
MIDDLE	56.8
UPPER MIDDLE	52
UPPER	42

Based on the question: "In general, would you say that the decisions that the national government has been taking in response to COVID-19 have been in the interest of the majority of citizens, or of a limited group of privileged people?"

Source: Author's calculation based on CID Gallup survey.

Social class and priorities for the recovery

In order to test priorities for the recovery, the survey asked respondents to indicate what change they would consider as most urgently needed in their country, given the vulnerabilities exposed by COVID-19. A list of six possible priorities was given, which included: less corruption, a more responsible political system, more solidarity among the people, a more equitable distribution of wealth, better public services, and more inclusive social protection.

In all countries, the reduction of corruption was seen as far and away the number one priority for the future (with 38.2 percent of respondents selecting this option). Greater solidarity among people and a more responsible political system also emerged as key issues (with 21.1 and 18 percent of support, respectively). The other options (better public services, broader social protection and a more equitable distribution of wealth) received considerably less support, perhaps because it was perceived that progress on these fronts would flow from the realization of the top three priorities.

While there is great consistency across population subgroups in the ranking of priorities, a closer look at the data reveals important differences in the intensity of support for different measures along both demographic factors and social class. The most notable contrast is perhaps the one between 'lower-middle' and 'upper' class.

Among 'lower-middle' class respondents, there is significantly higher-than-average support for the prioritization of anti-corruption, wealth redistribution and social protection (with significantly lower-than-average support for greater solidarity among people as a top priority). In contrast, 'upper' class respondents highly prioritize "greater solidarity among the people" and, compared to the average of all respondents, are much less likely to prioritize anti-corruption, wealth redistribution, better public services and more inclusive social protection as necessary measures to ensure an effective and sustainable recovery (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Priorities for the recovery

Self-Ascribed Social Class and Prorities for the Country* ("Lower-Middle" vs "Upper Class")
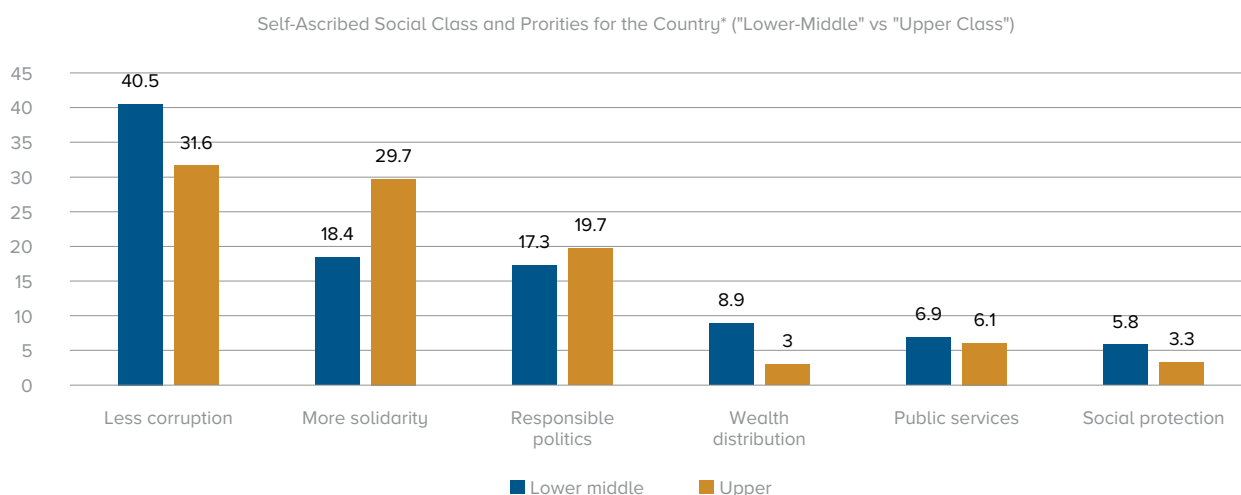
* Based on the question: "Taking into account what has happened in relation to COVID-19 in the country, which of these changes do you consider as the most important in order to strengthen [COUNTRY's] capacity for recovery? a) less corruption; b) more solidarity among people; c) a more responsible political class; d) broader social protection; e) better public services; f) a fairer distribution of wealth"

Source: Author's calculation based on CID Gallup survey.

Some considerations on the way forward

The findings presented in this brief are based on people's views after the initial phase of country responses. As such, they will be used as a baseline for comparison with the results of a similar survey planned for September 2021. However, a number of important elements are already emerging from the analysis and warrant careful considerations.

No such thing as the 'middle class'. Self-ascribed social class is a relevant dimension to understand the different ways in which people are experiencing the COVID-19 crisis, assessing state performance in the face of the pandemic and drawing conclusions for the future. When analyzed through a self-ascribed social class lens, the results of the survey clearly bear out the need to understand the 'middle class' in Latin America as a set of fairly diverse social groups as opposed to a homogeneous bloc.

The 'barely middle class'. The 'lower-middle' class in Latin America cannot be described, socially or economically, as 'poor'. Yet, it experiences significant vulnerabilities[13] and could be regarded, in many respects, as 'barely middle class'. There is some evidence that this unique condition is translating into a unique outlook on state and society. Survey results confirm previous research findings that the 'lower-middle' class represents an important democratic constituency in the region. This is evidenced, for instance, by its strong support for government accountability and human rights protection. However, the data also shows that this constituency

has been harbouring increasing frustration towards the state of politics, in large part due to distributional outcomes that are perceived as extremely unfair. While, to a significant extent, 'lower-middle' class frustration predates COVID-19, it appears to be deepening as a result of the pandemic.

Representation, vulnerability and democratic resilience. It may take some time before these dynamics fully play out in the political arena, in part because the COVID-19 crisis is still unfolding and in part because of the impact the pandemic has had in terms of putting on hold some expressions of discontent such as large-scale protests. However, there is little question that middle-class disenchantment introduces an additional element of fragility into already strained systems of democratic governance. For this reason, responding to the representation aspirations and addressing the vulnerabilities of the 'barely middle class', particularly in the face of the enormous social and economic pressures triggered by COVID-19, will be essential for long-term democratic resilience in Latin America. This will have multiple implications for economic policy (ranging from the design of social protection systems to the implementation of measures in support of small-scale enterprise just to mention a few). But it will also have implications for how governance systems are reimagined (particularly with respect to inclusion and accountability).

A renewed dialogue for a renewed social contract. Even a cursory look at the data, like the one presented in this paper, reveals significant divergences

along the self-ascribed social-class dimension with respect to priorities for policy and governance reform. On the one hand, distributional fairness appears to be an existential question for many in the region, especially within the 'lower-middle' class. On the other hand, there is some evidence that Latin American elites may be less sold on the need for a more equitable distribution of resources than has been recently suggested. Despite the impact of COVID-19 in laying bare many of the inequities of Latin American societies, people who describe themselves as 'upper-class' remain comparatively more likely to prioritize slightly moralizing options for the COVID-19 recovery ("more solidarity among the people") and significantly less supportive of state intervention on

issues such as the reduction of corruption and the redistribution of wealth. Similarly, the intensity of demand for government accountability and human rights protection seems to be quite variable in relation to perceived social class. And this is, of course, just an example of the many different forms of polarization that can be observed in the region. Arguably, new deeper and more meaningful forms of dialogue will be needed if the social contract in Latin America is to be reimagined.[14] This will, of course, not be easy, also due to the profound trust deficit that has been building in the region over time, but it will be essential to seize the opportunities offered by COVID-19 to advance such dialogue and establish common ground for reform.

Endnotes

1   Emanuele Sapienza is a policy advisor on governance at UNDP's Regional Hub for Latin America and the Caribbean; email: emanuele.sapienza@undp.org.

2   Birdsall, Nancy, "Middle-class Heroes: The Best Guarantee of Good Governance", *Foreign Aff.* 95 (2016): 25.

3   Motadel, David, "The Myth of Middle-Class Liberalism", *New York Times*, 22 January 2020.

4   United Nations Development Programme, *Attitudes Towards Politics in Latin America: A Review of Regional Perception Data*, Panama City, PY, UNDP, 2020.

5   The survey was carried out by the company CID Gallup and covered a random and representative sample of the general population (approximately 1,200 respondents per country). Additional findings beyond the ones discussed in this paper can be found in Acuna-Alfaro, Jairo, and Sapienza, Emanuele, "COVID-19 and the Social Contract in Latin America: Citizens Views of National Responses One Year On", 18 May 2021.

6   The question was: "People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to a certain social class. Would you describe yourself as belonging to a social class that is... Lower, Middle-lower, Middle, Middle-upper, Upper?". This formulation has been used for several years in both regional surveys (such as Latinobarometro) and global surveys (such as the World Values Survey).

7   A couple of important methodological clarifications are needed here. First of all, responses to questions on self-ascribed social class are just one of many ways to capture social class dynamics using opinion polls' demographic variables. Other strategies use, for instance, education level, occupational status or various combinations of multiple factors (not to mention approaches aimed at capturing even broader issues of identity, which bring in additional dimensions such as ethnicity and location). Second, a comparison of opinion polls' results and the literature on income-based stratification shows that perception and material circumstances do not necessarily match. (See, for instance, López-Calva, Luis F., and Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez, "A Vulnerability Approach to the Definition of the Middle Class", *The Journal of Economic Inequality* 12, no. 1 (2014): 23–47.) For example, we know that the ranks of the economically 'vulnerable' go beyond the group of people who consider themselves as 'low class' or 'lower-middle class', extending well into the group that would describe itself as 'middle-class'. The strategy of using self-ascribed social class that was selected for this paper, like all methodological choices, comes with advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, we know that perception often matters as much as reality—and sometimes more. On the other hand, due to a range of cognitive and affective factors, people experiencing very comparable material

circumstances may perceive themselves as belonging to different social classes. It is important to keep these potential biases in mind when considering the findings of the paper.

8   United Nations Development Programme, *Attitudes Towards Politics*, 28–32.

9   The same study finds that, taking into account dissatisfaction levels and reported propensity to join demonstrations, the 'lower-middle' class could be regarded as the group that is most likely to mobilize outside of formal political institutions.

10 See, for instance, Andres Velasco, "The Populists' Pandemic," *Project Syndicate*, 1 May 2020.

11 Populism is a notoriously slippery and contested concept. What is referred to here is what Cas Mudde in "The Populist Zeitgeist" (*Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–563) defines as a form of political discourse based on three pillars: 1) a dualistic view of society (society is composed by two groups—the 'elites' and 'the people'; each group is internally homogenous); 2) a moral opposition between the 'elites' and 'the people' (the 'elites' are corrupt and deceiving, while 'the people' are honest and virtuous); and 3) a 'non-mediated' understanding of popular sovereignty (political decision-making should be a direct, non-mediated expression of 'the will of the people'). As noted by various authors, populism can be 'thick' or 'thin' (i.e., built or not on a strong ideology or comprehensive worldview) and can be linked to both 'left-wing' and 'right-wing' political orientations. (See, for instance, Norris, Pippa, "Varieties of Populist Parties", *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45.9–10 (2019): 981–1012.) In actual political practice, populist approaches often express themselves in a weakening of the institutional safeguards that characterize liberal democracy—"veto players in the political system", to use Navia and Walker's terminology—that are regarded as some of the tools through which elites dominate political spaces. See, for instance, International IDEA, "Populist Government and Democracy: An Impact Assessment Using the Global State of Democracy Indices", The Global State of Democracy, *In Focus* no. 9, February 2020.

12 Navia, Patricio, and Ignacio Walker, "Political Institutions, Populism, and Democracy in Latin America", *Democratic Governance in Latin America* (2010): 245–265.

13 See, for instance, the already mentioned López-Calva, Luis F., and Eduardo Ortiz-Juarez, "A Vulnerability Approach to the Definition of the Middle Class", The Journal of Economic Inequality 12, no. 1 (2014): 23–47.

14 See also United Nations Development Programme, Latin America and the Caribbean: Effective Governance, beyond Recovery, New York, UNDP, 2021 for a comprehensive overview of opportunities and challenges.