

# Democratic Values and Support for Executive Power<sup>\*</sup>

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January 26, 2021

## Abstract

Attempts by elected executives to consolidate power have generated alarm and raised concern about democratic backsliding. In contrast with scholarship on public approval ratings of elected executives, we study the nature of mass attitudes toward the institutional power of the office of the presidency. We investigate the potential for mass publics to constrain antidemocratic behavior and argue that individuals' democratic values shape views of executive power. Using data from twenty six countries in the Americas and thirty eight countries in Africa, we find support for our perspective. Individuals who express stronger commitments for democracy and the rule of law are less supportive of institutional arrangements that favor the executive. Additional evidence suggests that governing practices are responsive to mass attitudes about executive power. Our findings suggest that citizens' democratic commitments may constrain the ambitions of power-seeking executives and the erosion of democratic practices.

Word Count: 11,876 (inclusive of text, table and figure notes and captions, footnotes, and references)

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<sup>\*</sup>For helpful comments, we thank Sarah Brierley, Brian Crisp, Guillermo Rosas, Benjamin Schneider, and Margit Tavits.

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Democratic regimes are vulnerable to the political ambitions of would-be authoritarians. In recent years, elected executives in countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland have expanded their power by enacting anti-democratic reforms. In the US, critics frequently charged Donald Trump’s presidency of nascent authoritarianism. These developments prompted concern about the potential for democratic backsliding, in which elected leaders use the democratic process to consolidate their power, thereby weakening democracy.

Stoking these concerns, elected presidents around the world have sought or endorsed popular referenda to extend their terms and increase their authority. The results of these initiatives provide a mixed portrait of popular appetites for executive power. Electorates in Russia,<sup>1</sup> Guinea,<sup>2</sup> Egypt,<sup>3</sup> and Turkey<sup>4</sup> voted to extend or remove term limits and expand the president’s formal powers. Following these votes, incumbent presidents seemed poised to strengthen their grips on power. Yet other voters approved new limits on presidential powers in Kenya<sup>5</sup> and Algeria,<sup>6</sup> and rejected attempts to relax presidential term limits in Ecuador<sup>7</sup> and Bolivia.<sup>8</sup> In these settings, public opposition constrained the ambitions of their country’s leaders. What explains variation in these outcomes across countries, and what structures voters’ decisions in these contexts?

In this paper, we study the nature of mass attitudes toward executive power. In contrast with research on public approval ratings of individual presidents (Arce 2003; Buendia 1994;

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<sup>1</sup>Scott Neuman. 2020. “Referendum In Russia Passes, Allowing Putin To Remain President Until 2036.” *NPR* July 1. <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/01/886440694/referendum-in-russia-passes-allowing-putin-to-remain-president-until-2036>.

<sup>2</sup>“Guinea votes in controversial referendum seen as presidential power grab.” 2020. *RFI* March 22. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200322-guinea-votes-controversial-referendum-seen-as-presidential-power-grab-alpha-conde-coronavirus>.

<sup>3</sup>Reuters Staff. 2019. “Egyptian voters back constitutional changes giving more power to President Sisi.” *Reuters* April 23. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-election/egyptian-voters-back-constitutional-changes-giving-more-power-to-president-sisi-idUSKCN1RZ229>.

<sup>4</sup>Patrick Kingsley. 2017. “Erdogan Claims Vast Powers in Turkey After Narrow Victory in Referendum.” *New York Times* April 16. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/16/world/europe/turkey-referendum-polls-erdogan.html>.

<sup>5</sup>James Macharia and George Obulutsa. 2010. “Kenya votes ‘Yes’ to new constitution.” *Reuters* August 5. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-referendum/kenya-votes-yes-to-new-constitution-idUSTRE6743G720100805>.

<sup>6</sup>Ahmed Rouaba. 2020. “Algeria referendum: A vote ‘to end years of deviousness’.” *BBC* November 1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54748146>.

<sup>7</sup>Simeon Tegel. 2018. “A referendum in Ecuador is another defeat for South America’s left-wing populists.” *Washington Post* February 5. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/05/a-referendum-in-ecuador-is-another-defeat-for-south-americas-left-wing-populists/>.

<sup>8</sup>Nicholas Casey and Monica Machicao. 2016. “Referendum to Let Bolivian President Seek a Fourth Term Appears Headed for Defeat.” *New York Times* February 21. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/22/world/americas/bolivia-to-vote-on-term-limits-amid-growing-doubts-about-its-president.html>.

Carlin, Love, and Martínez-Gallardo 2015; Carlin et al. 2018; Treisman 2011), we focus on public views about the institutional power belonging to the presidential office. This latter quantity is an indicator of popular support for political regimes rather than political figures (Easton 1975). Despite increased attention among scholars of comparative politics to the relationship between executive power and democratic stability, existing evidence about public opinion toward executive power is limited largely to the United States (e.g., Christenson and Kriner 2020; Reeves and Rogowski 2016). We draw from several strands of research to develop and test hypotheses about public attitudes toward executive power. According to one perspective, public opinion toward political institutions reflects individuals' political alignment with those institutions (Bartels and Johnston 2013; Bartels and Kramon 2020). This perspective suggests that the public views executive power through their partisan affiliation and short-term political interests. Therefore, we test the hypothesis that individuals are more supportive of executive power when they are politically aligned with the incumbent president, and less supportive when the presidency is controlled by the political opposition. We advance an alternative perspective based on the theory of political legitimacy (e.g., Gibson, Caldeira, and Baird 1998), in which views of political institutions are rooted in core values about the nature and organization of government. We argue that beliefs about executive power are linked to individuals' commitments to democracy and the rule of law (e.g., Reeves and Rogowski 2016). This account suggests that stronger commitments to democratic principles result in diminished support for executive power.

We test these accounts using survey data from AmericasBarometer and the Afrobarometer series. Altogether, our data include evaluations of executive power from 26 countries in the Americas between 2010 and 2019 and 37 countries in Africa between 2000 and 2019. Across a range of dependent variables and in both between- and within-country analyses, we find consistent evidence in support of both accounts. Supporters of the incumbent president express more favorable views toward executive power. Consistent with our argument, we also show that individuals who express stronger commitments to democracy and the rule of law are less supportive of institutional arrangements that favor the executive. In additional cross-national analysis, we provide suggestive evidence that public attitudes toward executive power are associated with the governing characteristics of a country's regime. Our

results demonstrate that attitudes toward the institutions of government are not shaped only by partisanship and other ephemeral political factors, but also citizens' core commitments to values about governance. These findings further suggest that public antipathy toward executive power is a potential defense against executive aggrandizement and the democratic backsliding with which it is associated.

## **Presidentialism and Executive Power**

Scholarship on presidentialism considers large-scale questions of institutional design, often focusing on the stability and duration of presidential systems vis-à-vis parliamentary systems (Carey and Shugart 1998; Cheibub 2007; Linz 1990; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997a; Morgenstern, Polga-Hecimovich, and Shair-Rosenfield 2013; Negretto 2013; Przeworski et al. 2000). A central tenet of presidential systems is that chief executives possess a “strong claim to democratic, even plebiscitarian, legitimacy” (Linz 1990, 53). This plebiscitarian legitimacy owes to the president's independent election, through which presidents make direct appeals to their constituents and claim popular mandates for their agendas. While popular elections may enhance accountability (e.g., Maskin and Tirole 2004), in the context of presidentialism this selection mechanism may undermine regime stability. According to Linz (1990, 48), plebiscitarian legitimacy may lead presidents to refuse to acknowledge the limits of their popular mandates, such that “compromise, negotiation, and power-sharing” occur only as “necessary antinomies—deviations from the rules of the system.” Presidents' personal sources of power may lead them to take actions that are harmful to the democratic system through which they were elected.

Fear of executive overreach is one of the primary concerns in debates over the merits of presidential systems. The use of unilateral or decree powers has been a particular focus of studies on executive powers. This scholarship considers how to measure presidential powers across contexts (e.g., Metcalf 2000; Shugart and Carey 1992) and identifies the institutional conditions under which presidents opt to exercise unilateral powers, especially as it relates to the legislative branch (Carey and Shugart 1998; Cheibub 2007; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997b; Palanza 2019; Pereira, Power, and Rennó 2005). Often, these analyses

probe whether executive actions better reflect a seizure of power from or delegation of authority by the legislature (Carey and Shugart 1998; Lowande 2018) and the conditions under which interbranch conflicts emerge over their use (Shugart and Carey 1992).

Despite a robust literature on public attitudes toward governing institutions in the comparative context (e.g., Inglehart 2003), studies on presidentialism often overlook public opinion about executive power. To the extent scholarship evaluates public opinion toward executives, it studies presidential approval ratings, and largely as a currency with which to bargain with the legislative branch (Calvo 2014; Helmke 2017; Neustadt 1960; Palanza 2019; Pereira, Power, and Rennó 2005; Reich 2002). Yet attitudes about executive power and its exercise may also structure incentives for presidents to draw upon it. Most theoretical and empirical accounts ignore the role of public opinion toward presidential governance for shaping the politics of executive power (but see, for example, Hassan 2015).

## **How the Public Views Executive Power**

As the threat of military coups d'état overthrowing democratic government declined markedly after the Cold War, accounts of democratic erosion emphasize the potential for elected officials—especially chief executives—to undermine democratic processes (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). These analyses often neglect or deny the role of public sentiment in explaining democratic backsliding (or its absence). Given the agency relationship between voters and officeholders (Fearon 1999), voters could deter behavior that erodes democratic practices by punishing officeholders who do so. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 19) raise the possibility that “the fate of a government lies in the hands of its citizens. If people hold democratic values, democracy will be safe. If citizens are open to authoritarian appeals, then, sooner or later, democracy will be in trouble.” Popular accounts of executive power grabs often depict executives’ supporters as complicit in their accumulation of power but conflate political support for an individual leader with beliefs about the institutional authority that accompanies the office the leader inhabits. These critiques mostly ignore the possibility that mass publics might have meaningful attitudes toward executive power, which could be mobilized against the president by political parties and other organized groups.

Existing scholarship offers competing perspectives about the capacity for voters to hold and act upon democratic values. One perspective argues that factors such as partisanship, ideology, and personal loyalties dominate public evaluations of political institutions. According to this account, attitudes toward political power are mirrors of popular support for the individual who would wield it (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 191). The implicit assumption is that voters make political decisions that reflect a leader's popularity. In the context of executive power, this perspective predicts that individuals endorse the power of the presidency to the extent they approve of the individual who serves as president. For example, Christenson and Kriner (2020) argue that American voters who support the executive also support executive aggrandizement. In its strongest form, this view denies that voters have meaningful preferences about political power and procedures that could influence evaluations of political officials and the outcomes they achieve. Accordingly, this perspective suggests that citizens are ill-equipped to defend democratic institutions against erosion from within.

Evidence from institutions other than presidencies supports weaker versions of this perspective. This scholarship links evaluations of governing regimes and political institutions to the public's instrumental partisan and political motivations. Individuals tend to view the US Supreme Court as more legitimate when they issue opinions with which they agree (Bartels and Johnston 2013). Similarly, evidence from African public opinion shows that individuals support strong judicial checks on the presidency when they do not share the president's partisanship, and weaker checks when they are from the same party. More generally, survey respondents report greater trust in government when their copartisans are in power (Morisi, Jost, and Singh 2019). Both versions of this perspective hypothesize that evaluations of executive power reflect individuals' political support for the sitting president, though they differ on whether this is the only relevant consideration that shapes these attitudes.

We advance an alternative view in which the public holds meaningful beliefs about how officials wield political power. Mass publics often express support for democracy and democratic values in the abstract (e.g., Inglehart 2003), and these beliefs shape how voters evaluate candidates and politicians. Recent scholarship shows that voters act upon their democratic values and impose electoral penalties on US political candidates who endorse anti-democratic tactics (Graham and Svobik 2020) and suggests that these beliefs are linked to the endurance

of democratic practices (Claassen 2020). With respect to attitudes about executive power, Reeves and Rogowski (2016) establishes a link between Americans' commitments to democratic values and their beliefs about presidential unilateral action. According to this research, individuals with stronger commitments to democratic practices and the rule of law are less likely to endorse concentrating power in the presidency. This perspective provides a more sanguine view about the potential for mass publics to constrain ambitious executives. If the president's political rivals can successfully generate popular backlash by appealing to the public's democratic commitments following acts of executive overreach (Christenson and Kriner 2020), presidents would have incentives to practice forbearance (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) or otherwise risk public disapproval.

The perspectives above highlight the theoretical and normative stakes of understanding how citizens view executive power and suggest two hypotheses about the sources of these attitudes. We build upon previous research in American politics (Christenson and Kriner 2020; Posner and Vermeule 2010; Reeves and Rogowski 2018) by identifying contextual and individual-level sources of attitudes toward executive power in comparative context. So doing, we take a broader approach than is typically found in the study of executive politics. While the US and Latin America are the "traditional focus" of studies of presidentialism (Chaisty, Cheeseman, and Power 2014), our study of public views toward executive power also includes African countries. The additional breadth allows us to examine the nature of public opinion across regions with distinct contemporary and historical experiences with executive power (for an overview, see Prempeh 2008). Our cross-country approach also allows us to contextualize previous research on Americans' orientations toward executive power within the range of opinions held by citizens of other countries and to evaluate whether attitudes toward unilateral power in the United States are "a culturally specific phenomenon" (Posner and Vermeule 2010, 188). Finally, our investigation relates attitudes about executive power to more fundamental questions about support for democratic governance.<sup>9</sup> We focus particularly on evaluating the potential for mass publics to serve as a backstop against the

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<sup>9</sup>Przeworski (2019, 100-102) critiques the meaning of survey reports of democratic attitudes arguing that "one should not draw inferences about the survival of democracy from answers to survey questions" (102). Our project here is to show the relationship between support for democracy and a resistance to the expansion of executive power, which has implications for democratic survival.

erosion of democratic practices by power-seeking executives. In addressing these research questions, we contribute to other scholarship on cross-national attitudes toward political institutions including the judiciary (e.g., Bartels and Kramon 2020; Driscoll and Nelson 2018; Gibson, Caldeira, and Baird 1998), legislatures (e.g., Mishler and Rose 1994), and chief executives (e.g., Bratton 2007; Dulani and Tengatenga 2020).

## Data and Measures

We measure diffuse support for executive power among the mass public using survey data from countries of the Americas and Africa. For the Americas, we rely on the AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). This series of surveys “is the only scientifically rigorous comparative survey that covers thirty-four nations including all of North, Central, and South America, as well as a significant number of countries in the Caribbean.” Our analysis of respondents from the Americas includes data from twenty-six countries from 2010 to 2019. We study attitudes among respondents in Africa using survey data from the Afrobarometer series. Afrobarometer is a “non-partisan, pan-African research institution conducting public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, the economy and society in 30+ countries repeated on a regular cycle.” Afrobarometer includes a subset of countries based on “the availability of funding, security conditions in the country, and the ability of citizens in that country to speak freely.”<sup>10</sup> Our analysis includes all cases from AmericasBarometer and Afrobarometer for which our question of interest were asked.<sup>11</sup> For a full summary of question wording and choice sets, Tables A1 and A2.

## Measuring Support for Executive Power

The AmericasBarometer and Afrobarometer surveys both contain several questions that measure attitudes toward the concentration of executive power. These questions ask about executive power in the context of other political institutions. Respondents are asked whether

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<sup>10</sup>“Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).” *Afrobarometer*. <http://afrobarometer.org/about/faqs>.

<sup>11</sup>Afrobarometer excludes Ethiopia from their merged Round 5 release and advises analysts to exclude it from any comparative analyses related to democracy. We follow that advice and do not include it in our analyses. “Special note about Ethiopia data.” *Afrobarometer*. <http://afrobarometer.org/data/special-note-about-ethiopia-data>.



they approve of the expansion of executive power as it relates to either the courts or legislative branch. These questions allow us to characterize beliefs about executive power within the larger context in which presidents govern and without reference to the specific presidential occupant. While these questions address similar concepts, the survey instruments vary between the AmericasBarometer and Afrobarometer surveys both in terms of question availability, wording, and in their choice sets.

*Support for Executive Power, the Americas.* From the AmericasBarometer, we analyze two questions on evaluations of executive power which ask respondents whether it is justifiable during an emergency for the president to suspend and govern without either the legislative or judicial bodies. The specific question wordings (also presented in Table A1) are:

- “Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress/Parliament and govern without Congress/Parliament?” and,
- “Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to dissolve the Supreme Court/Constitutional Tribunal and govern without the Supreme Court/Constitutional Tribunal?”

We refer to these survey instruments in shorthand as, respectively, *close legislature* and *dissolve courts*. Each item allows respondents a binary choice of whether they believe the act is justified. Support for executive power is low throughout the Americas. Overall, only 17 percent of respondents agreed that the executive would be justified to “close Congress [Parliament] during difficult times,” and ranged from 14 percent in 2010 and 2012 to 25 percent in 2019. Similarly, support for closing the supreme court or constitutional tribunal was 14 percent and ranged annually from 11 percent in 2012 to 30 percent in 2019. As with all summary statistics we report, these are adjusted using survey weights.

Attitudes toward executive power varied across countries though they are still generally negative. Aggregating responses to the country level, the mean and median levels of support for governing without the legislature are 16 percent, with no country reporting support higher than 32 percent.<sup>12</sup> Support for governing without courts is even lower, as the mean

<sup>12</sup>Support for this question is highest in Peru especially in 2019 when respondents expressed 59 and 50 percent support for support for executive rule vis-à-vis both the legislature and the court, respectively. These exceptional patterns may reflect political turmoil and dysfunction, which culminated with President Vizcarra dissolving Congress in 2019 amid a prolonged corruption crisis. Anatoly Kurmanaev and Andrea Zarate. 2019. “Peru’s President Dissolves Congress, and Lawmakers Suspend Him.” *New York Times* September 30.

and median country-level support was 14 percent, and no country other than Peru reported support for governing without the judiciary from more than a quarter of respondents.<sup>13</sup>

*Support for Executive Power, Africa.* We use four measures of attitudes toward executive power included in the Afrobarometer surveys. The first asks whether respondents approve of abolishing elections and parliament in favor of presidential rule. The question asks:

- “There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.”

The answer set is a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disapprove” (1) to “strongly approve” (5). We refer to this question as *decides everything*. We again find substantial opposition to executive authority among respondents from countries of Africa. Overall, 83 percent of respondents strongly disapprove or disapprove of presidents governing unilaterally, and only 11 percent approve or strongly approve with the remaining 5 percent not taking a position. Aggregated by country, the median score falls at 1.7—below a two on a five-point scale (i.e., disapprove of presidents deciding everything).

Three additional questions evaluate related dimensions of respondents’ attitudes toward executive power. In each, respondents were presented with two statements about executive power and asked to choose one that best reflected their beliefs. The pairs of statements were:

- “Since the President was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.” OR “The President must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.”
- “Parliament should ensure that the President explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers’ money.” OR “The President should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.”
- “Members of Parliament represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the President does not agree.” OR “Since the President represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what Parliament thinks.”

After reading each pair of statements, respondents selected a response option and indicated whether they “agree strongly with” or “agree with” it. We refer to these questions as *not bound by laws*, *doesn’t have to justify*, and *pass laws without congress*, respectively. We code these questions to create a four-point scale ranging from one, indicating strong agreement with

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<sup>13</sup>For additional descriptive analyses, see Zechmeister and Lupu (2019).

the statement that opposes executive power, to four, indicating strong agreement with the statement that supports executive power. Across all countries and years in the sample, mean scores for each question on the four-point scale range from 1.9 to 2.1. Median responses by country for the three questions also range from 1.9 to 2.1.

## **Measuring Support for Core Values and Executive Approval**

To evaluate our argument, we examine whether core values towards governance structure attitudes towards executive power. In political systems, democracy and the rule of law are closely related. Though not perfect mirrors, “the rule of law is among the essential pillars upon which any high-quality democracy rests” (O’Donnell 2004, 32). Gibson (2007, 593) further notes that the “rule of law and democracy are not equivalent...but most believe successful democracies must rule through law.” The connection between attitudes toward democracy and support for the rule of law has also been documented in research on public opinion (Carlin and Moseley 2014; Dahl 1971).

*Support for Core Values and Executive Approval, the Americas.* The AmericasBarometer surveys do not specifically ask about support for the rule of law. Instead, we rely on a survey instrument that asks broadly about support for democracy. For the *support for democracy* question, respondents were asked to use a seven-point scale to evaluate whether they think democracy is the most preferable form of government. Higher scores indicate more positive evaluations of democracy relative to other systems. Since 2010, annual support for democracy ranged from 4.7 to 5.3. Mean-levels of support by country range from a low of 4.5 in Saint Lucia to a high of 6.0 in Uruguay.

In testing our argument, we require a measure that distinguishes respondents’ political support for the person holding the executive office. We rely on a survey instrument that asks respondents to rate the job performance of the president or prime minister, as appropriate, along a five point scale ranging from very good to very bad. The full question wordings and choice sets for all items we used from the AmericasBarometer are presented in Table A1.

*Support for Core Values and Executive Approval, Africa.* The Afrobarometer surveys ask about both support for democracy and support for the rule of law. We measure support for

the rule of law using an item that asks respondents whether they think it is “important to obey the government no matter who you voted for,” or if “it is not necessary to obey the laws if you did not vote for the government.” This question is similar to one of the survey instruments in the rule of law battery employed in many studies (e.g., Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence 2005; Reeves and Rogowski 2016). As with several of the executive power questions from the Afrobarometer, respondents were asked to indicate with which statement they agreed and whether they did so “very strongly.” Overall, 56 percent of all respondents very strongly agreed that it is important to obey the government in power no matter who you voted for, with an additional 33 percent of respondents agreeing (though not strongly). Only 12 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is not necessary to do so. From these responses, we created *support for rule of law* as a four-point scale ranging from one (i.e., strongly agree with the anti-rule of law statement) to four (i.e., strongly agree with the rule of law statement) though we also utilize it as a binary indicator of support.

Afrobarometer also provides a measure of support for democracy, which allows for a more direct comparison to the results from the AmericasBarometer surveys. Respondents are provided with three statements about democracy and asked which most closely reflects their opinion. Similar to the AmericasBarometer question, the first statement is that, “Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.” The second statement is that, “In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable,” and the third statement is that “For someone like me, it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have.” We code *support for democracy* as an indicator based on whether respondents identified the first statement as closest to their own view. Overall, 73 percent of respondents—nearly three-quarters—identify democracy as preferable to any other kind of government.

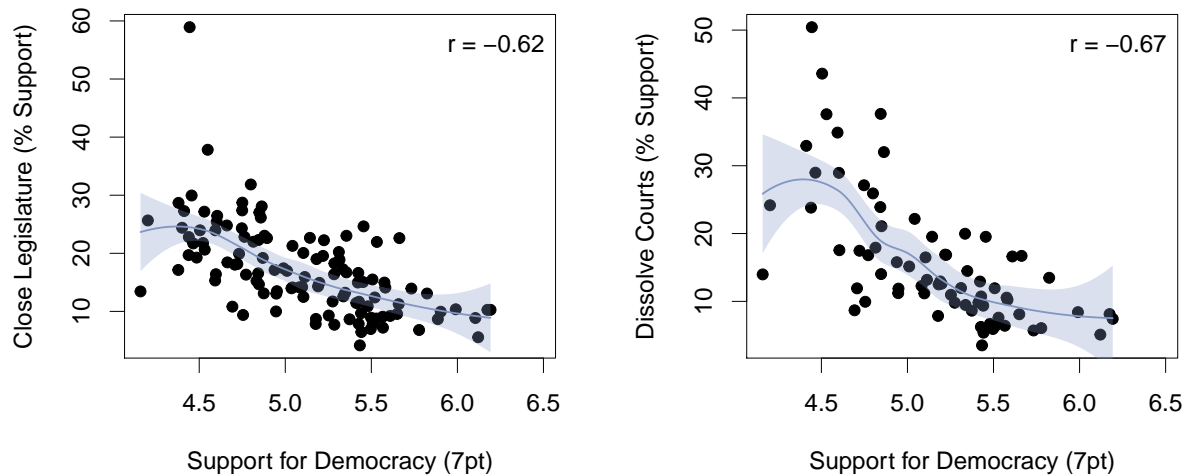
We also measure individuals’ political alignment with the current president using a measure of approval from Afrobarometer. Respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved of how the president performed his/her job over the past twelve months. *Executive approval* was asked on a four-point scale ranging from “strongly disapprove” (1) to “strongly approve” (4). Full question wordings and response sets are presented in Table A2.

## Aggregate Evaluations of Executive Power

We begin by evaluating the relationship between core values and support for executive power at the national level. Do countries that express greater support for democracy also report greater antipathy toward executive power? Figure 1 plots the relationship for the AmericasBarometer surveys. For each country and wave, we calculate mean levels of support for core values, which we plot on the  $x$ -axis, and support for executive power, which we plot on the  $y$ -axis. The  $y$ -axes of show the percentage of respondents by country/wave that believe it is acceptable for the president or prime minister to close the legislature (left panel) or dissolve the high court (right panel) and government without them. Along the  $x$ -axes, we plot the average level of *support for democracy* along a seven-point scale for each country-wave combination. We include a local polynomial regression line and indicate the correlations in the upper right-hand corners of each panel. Consistent with our argument, the figure shows a strong negative relationship between *support for democracy* and support for executive power as measured by *close legislature* and *dissolve courts*. Even though *support for democracy* is relatively high, with all country/wave scores falling between 4.2 and 6.5, the pattern is clear. The correlations are negative and relatively strong. Based on the bivariate regression, every one-point increase in national support for democracy is associated with a decline of about ten points in support for closing the legislature and about fourteen points in support for dissolving courts and allowing presidential rule.

Figure 2 presents the relationship between *support for rule of law* and our four measures of support for executive power at the country-wave level for the Afrobarometer surveys. The  $y$ -axes display the average levels of support for the four measures of executive power discussed above (and described in Table A2), and the  $x$ -axes show the average score for the rule of law at the country-wave level. We find the same patterns as in Figure 1. *Support for rule of law* is negatively correlated with an array of measures of support for executive power, ranging from  $-0.60$  to  $-0.41$ . A one-unit increase in support for the rule of law (along the four-point scale) is associated with nearly a .93 decline in support for executives governing without elections and the legislature (measured along a five-point scale). For each of the other measures of support for executive power, which are measured along four-point scales,

Figure 1: Support for Democracy and Attitudes toward Presidential Power in Countries of the Americas



*Note:* Each point represents the mean score of respondents for each country survey wave. Support for democracy is measured along a seven-point scale and support for closing the legislature and dissolving courts reflect aggregate percentages of individuals who support each indicator. Values are weighted for cross-country comparisons.

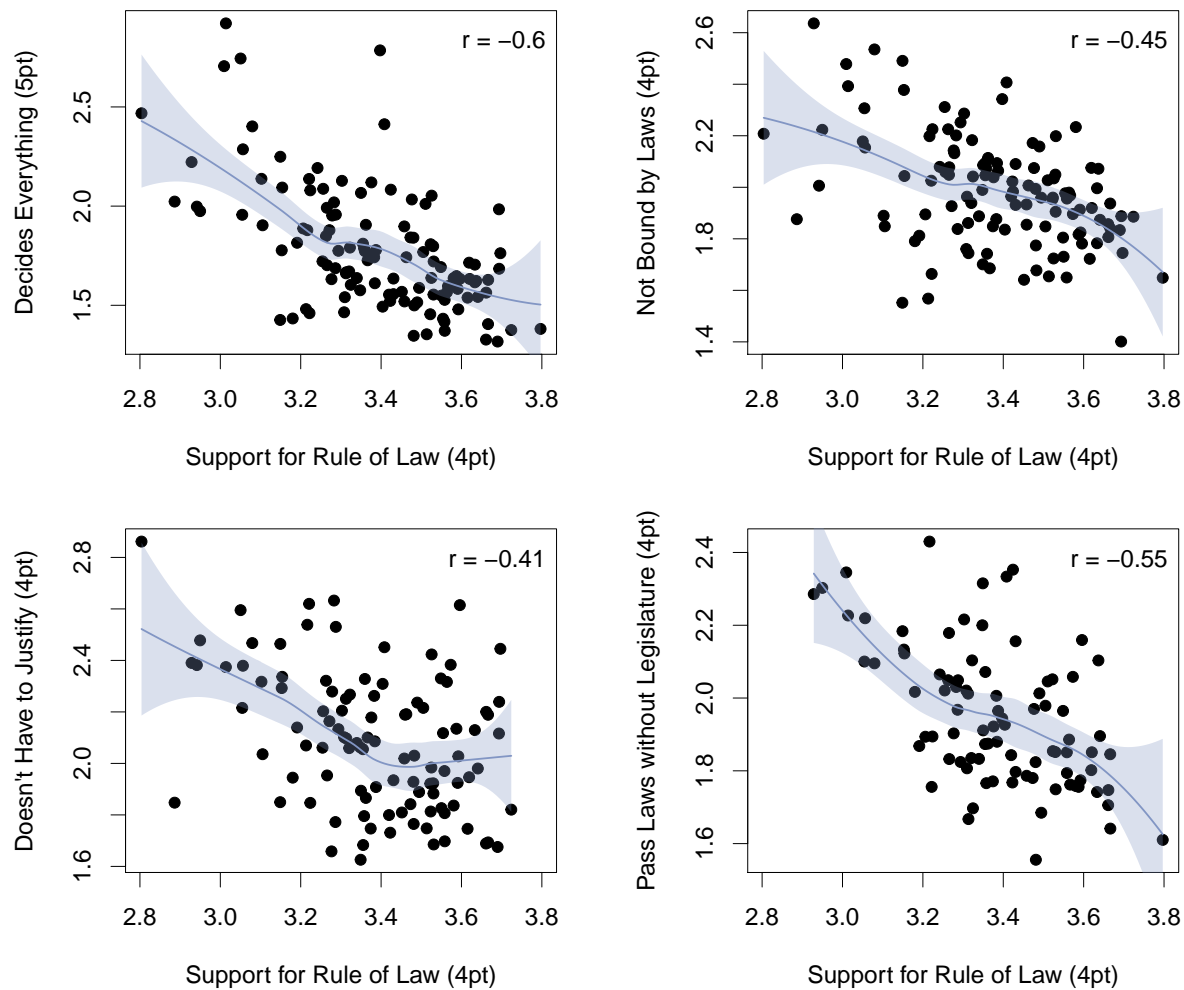
a one-unit increase in national support for the rule of law is associated with a decline in support for executive power ranging from 0.49 and 0.59 based on linear regressions.

Figure 3 shows the analogous analysis using support for democracy—a second measure of commitment to democracy available in the Afrobarometer surveys—instead of support for rule of law.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, we continue to find negative correlations between commitments to democracy and attitudes toward executive power. Here, the correlations are somewhat more variable than in Figure 2 and range from  $-0.56$  to  $0.04$ , with the latter figure providing less evidence of an aggregate association between support for democracy and evaluations of presidential term limits. Across country-years and measures, however, we find consistent evidence that stronger commitments to democracy and the rule of law are associated with more negative evaluations of executive power.

The patterns shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate that across the Americas and Africa, countries with stronger beliefs in core values associated with democracy also report lower levels of support for executive authority. Even incremental increases in core beliefs about the conduct of government are associated with changing aggregate support for exec-

<sup>14</sup>Country-wave mean scores of support for rule of law and democracy are correlated at 0.35.

Figure 2: Support for Rule of Law and Attitudes toward Presidential Power in African Countries



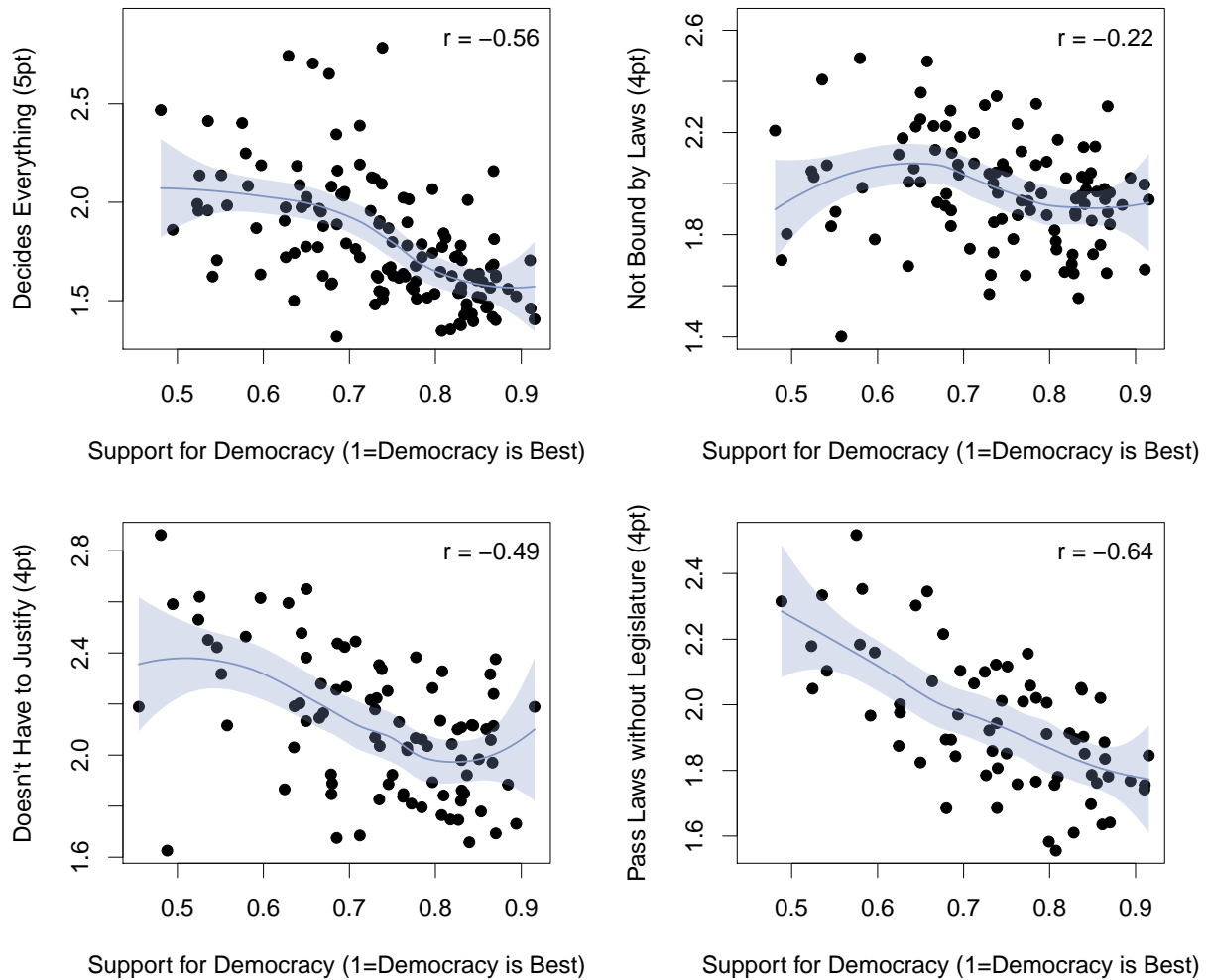
*Note:* Each point represents mean score of respondents for each country survey wave. Support for the rule of law is measured on a four-point scale, support for a president deciding everything (in the top left panel) is measured along a five-point scale, and the other measures of support for executive power are measured along four-point scales. Values are weighted for cross-country comparisons.

utive power. Across dozens of countries, stronger democratic commitments are associated with more skeptical orientations toward executive power.

## Individual Attitudes toward Executive Power

We now examine the relationship between core values and support for executive power at the individual level across our samples. As with the aggregate analyses, we explore whether

Figure 3: Support for Democracy and Attitudes toward Presidential Power in African Countries



*Note:* Each point is the mean score for a country survey wave. Support for democracy is a binary indicator, support for a president deciding everything (in the top left panel) is measured along a five-point scale, and the other measures of support for executive power are measured along four-point scales. Values are weighted for cross-country comparisons.

core beliefs about democracy and the rule of law structure attitudes about the bounds of power of executives. We also evaluate the alternative perspective that views of executive power reflect individuals' political support for the person who holds executive office.

We conduct our individual-level analyses by regressing each measure of attitude toward executive power on respondents' core values. For each of the AmericasBarometer and Afrobarometer surveys, we use measures of core values toward democracy to model the



variety of attitudes toward executive powers we previously described. All models also include the measure of *executive approval* as previously described. Given the variation in political context and institutions across country and time, we include country-wave fixed effects in all models.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, our coefficients of interest are identified with variation in executive approval and core values among respondents from the same country and survey wave. We also cluster standard errors on country-wave. Given the perspectives outlined above, we test the hypotheses that executive approval is positively associated with and democratic values are negatively associated with support for executive power.

*Individual Results, the Americas.* Table 1 presents our individual-level analysis of the AmericasBarometer surveys. The first column shows results for whether respondents believe it is justifiable for the president to close the legislature during difficult times (i.e., *close legislature*), and the second column shows analogous results for closing the courts (i.e., *dissolve courts*). Since our two dependent variables are binary, we report results from logistic regressions. We include demographic variables including age, gender, education, income, and marital status to account for covariate adjustment of the survey sample.

We find similar results for both models in Table 1. Consistent with results from the US (Reeves and Rogowski 2016), *executive approval* is positively related to support for executive power, as the coefficients are statistically significant in both models. We also find that *support for democracy* is negatively associated with views toward executive power, and these coefficients are also statistically distinguishable from zero. Across the Americas, support for democracy and, by implication, rule of law, is related to more restrained views of executive power vis-à-vis legislatures and the courts.

These patterns are robust to several alternative specifications. In an array of robustness checks reported in the Supplemental Appendix, we use survey weights in Table A3 instead of covariate adjustment. We also include models that distinguish year and country fixed effects in Tables A4 and A5 and reach the same substantive conclusions. We also distinguish parliamentary versus presidential systems using data from Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini (2018)

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<sup>15</sup>Cross-national differences in evaluations of executive power could reflect differences in formal powers enshrined in countries' constitutions. The country-wave fixed effects account for baseline differences in attitudes toward executive power that could reflect these country-level sources of variation. However, future research could more formally evaluate how constitutional differences in the separation of powers affect public opinion toward political institutions.

Table 1: Model of Support for Executive Powers, the Americas

	Close Legislature	Dissolve Courts
Executive Approval	0.135* (0.033)	0.218* (0.032)
Support for Democracy	-0.069* (0.008)	-0.087* (0.011)
Intercept	-1.629* (0.104)	-1.967* (0.126)
Country $\times$ Year Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓
Num. obs.	118108	79144

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Logistic regression with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

and include an indicator for whether the country is a parliamentary system.<sup>16</sup> Because these characteristics tend to be fixed within countries over long periods of time, we estimate a variety of models that alternately include and omit country fixed effects. These results are shown in Tables A4 and A5. These analyses provide support for two general conclusions. First, there is no systematic relationship between political system and attitudes toward executive power. Respondents living in parliamentary systems do not have systematically different attitudes about executive power than respondents living in other systems. Second, the inclusion of this term does not materially affect our conclusions from Table 1. Even when accounting for a country’s political system, *executive approval* and *support for democracy* continue to be significantly associated with attitudes toward executive power.

Figure 4 provides substantive interpretations of the results in Table 1 and presents predicted probabilities across the range of values we observe for support for democracy. Each point is the estimated probability of supporting executive power across the range of values of *support for democracy* while the other variables in the model are held at their mean values. The vertical bars around each point represent the 95 percent confidence intervals.

The top panel presents predicted probabilities for believing a president or prime minister

<sup>16</sup>Based on the coding in Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini (2018), 15 percent of respondents in the AmericasBarometer sample are from parliamentary systems (i.e., Belize, Canada, Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago) and 2 percent are from Guyana, the lone semi-presidential system in the data.

is justified to close the legislature or congress during difficult times.<sup>17</sup> Based on our model, moving from strongly disagreeing (i.e., one) to strongly agreeing (i.e., seven) that democracy is the best form of government is associated with a drop in the probability of support by six points, from 0.21 to 0.15. The estimates of the 95 percent confidence intervals for these two predicted probabilities does not overlap. We find similar results when evaluating support for dissolving the judiciary. Among those with the weakest support for democracy, our model estimates the probability of supporting dissolving courts is 0.18, which falls by seven points to 0.11 among those most supportive of democracy. We again find statistically significant decreases in support for executive power as beliefs in core democratic values increase.

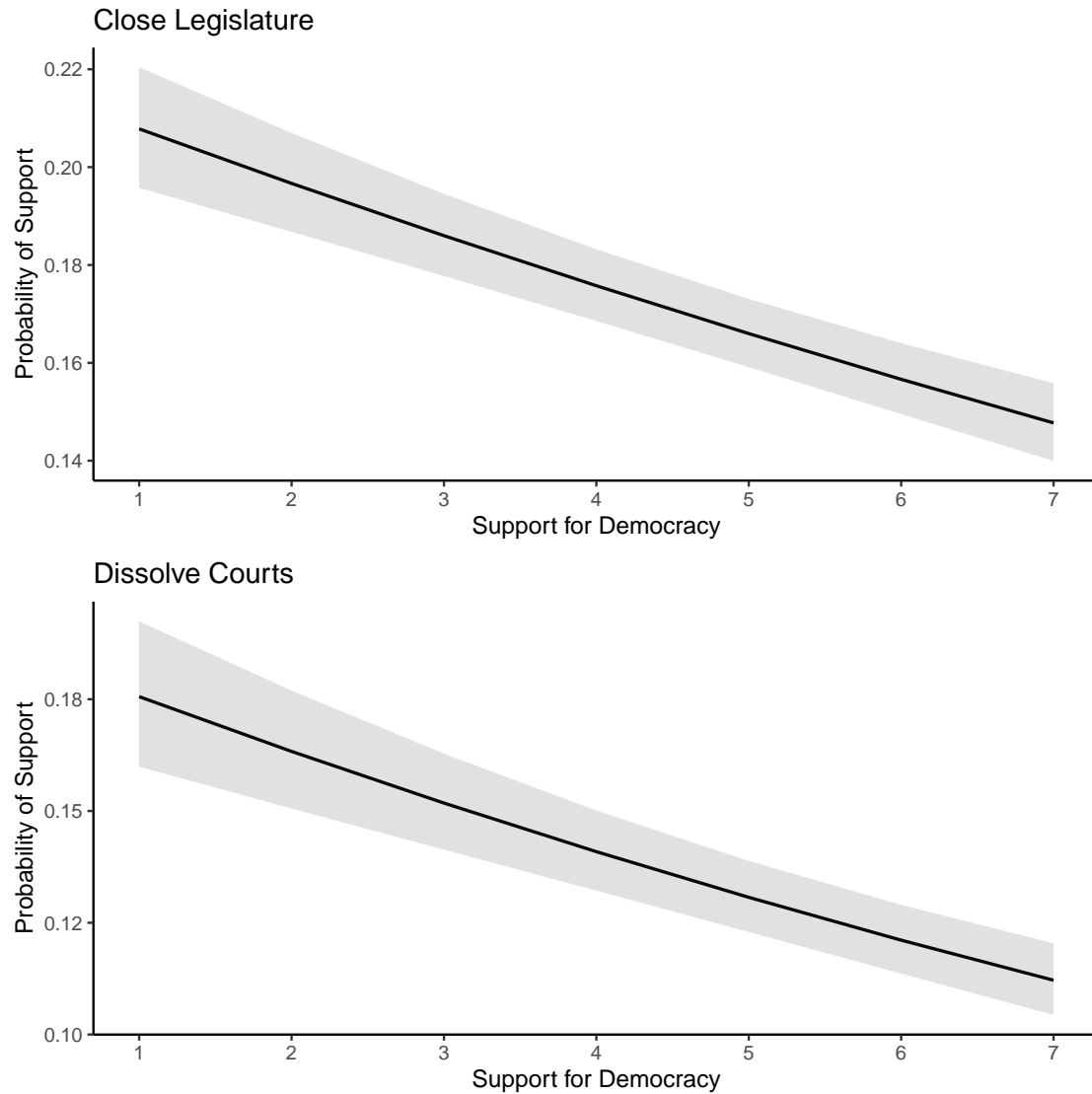
*Individual Results, Africa.* Table 2 and 3 presents individual-level models for respondents from the Afrobarometer surveys. The dependent variables are measures of executive power measured on four or five-point scales—*president decides everything*, *president not bound by laws*, *president doesn't have to justify*, and *pass laws without congress*.<sup>18</sup> In all cases, higher values indicate stronger support for executive power. Table 2 presents the results for four-point measure of *support for the rule of law* and Table 3 shows the results for the binary indicators of *support for democracy*. Given the continuous nature of these executive power dependent variables, we employ linear regressions with indicators for country-wave and standard errors clustered on those units. We again include an array of demographic controls to account for covariate adjustment. We follow Bartels and Kramon (2020) and include measures of gender, education, poverty, age, and whether their locale is urban or rural.

The patterns are consistent with our analyses of the AmericasBarometer. Across the four measures models of support for executive power, *support for the rule of law* is associated with disapproval of presidential power. Since these are linear models, each coefficient estimates the change in support for executive power (along a four or five-point scale) that is associated with a one-unit change in the independent variable. Consider a change in support from strongly opposing the rule of law (i.e., a one) to strongly supporting it (i.e., a four). The first column in Table 2 presents the results from the question that asks respondents whether they approve of abolishing elections and the legislature and letting the president **decide**

<sup>17</sup>For the predicted probabilities in Figure 4, all other independent variables were held constant at a reference category or median where appropriate.

<sup>18</sup>For full question wording, see Table A2.

Figure 4: Support for Executive Power and Support for Democracy, the Americas



*Note:* Plots show the predicted probability that an individual supports each dependent variable as support for democracy increases from its minimum to maximum values. All other covariates are held constant. The shaded regions show the 95 percent confidence intervals associated with the predicted values.

Table 2: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.059* (0.007)	0.036* (0.005)	0.036* (0.005)	0.059* (0.007)
Support for Rule of Law	-0.143* (0.008)	-0.077* (0.009)	-0.143* (0.008)	-0.174* (0.009)
Intercept	2.871* (0.051)	2.582* (0.039)	2.873* (0.047)	2.833* (0.054)
Country $\times$ Wave Fixed Effect	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	148178	145648	128494	104932

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

everything. A change from strongly opposing to strongly supporting the rule of law is associated with a decrease of .43 along a five-point scale ( $-0.144 \times 3 = -0.43$ ). The other three dependent variables—*not bound by laws*, *doesn't have to justify*, and *pass laws without congress*—are measured along four-point scales. For these models, the coefficients for *support for the rule of law* range from  $-0.18$  to  $-0.08$ . Substantively, that means that moving from strongly disagreeing to strongly agreeing on the importance of the rule of law is associated with a decrease in evaluations of executive power from a quarter-point to over half a point in support along the four-point scale.

We find similar patterns when using *support for democracy* in place of *support for rule of law* in Table 3. Since *support for democracy* is a binary indicator, the coefficient reflects a decrease in support for executive power along the four or five-point scale. Changes associated with the most extreme changes in support for democracy thus are comparable to support for the rule of law, if somewhat smaller across the board.

Finally, Tables 2 and 3 show that *executive approval* is consistently associated with views of executive power. Within countries, individuals who approve of the current president report greater support for executive power. Notably, our findings for *support for rule of law* and *support for democracy* persist even when accounting for evaluations of the current president.

As with our analysis of AmericasBarometer data, we conducted a number of robustness

Table 3: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Democracy, African Countries

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.043* (0.006)	0.031* (0.005)	0.031* (0.006)	0.044* (0.008)
Support for Democracy	-0.308* (0.016)	-0.105* (0.015)	-0.215* (0.016)	-0.184* (0.016)
Intercept	2.576* (0.037)	2.413* (0.032)	2.549* (0.037)	2.442* (0.042)
Country $\times$ Wave Fixed Effect	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	152466	118223	103468	75419

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

checks, which we present in the Supplemental Appendix. Table A6 and A7 replicate the models in Tables 2 and 3 using survey weights instead of covariate adjustment. In Tables A8 through A13, we re-estimate our models using alternative approaches to fixed effects. We also estimated models with the Afrobarometer that accounted for differences in views of executive power by political systems. Based on the coding from Cruz, Keefer, and Scartascini (2018), 84 percent of the Afrobarometer respondents are from presidential systems with 10 percent from parliamentary systems (i.e., Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius) and the remainder from hybrid systems (i.e., South Africa and Togo). The results are shown in Tables A8 through A13. Our findings for *executive approval*, *support for rule of law*, and *support for democracy* are robust to accounting for a country's political system and across model specifications. These analyses replicate the substantive findings from Tables 2 and 3. Interestingly, the results suggest that individuals in parliamentary systems report more negative evaluations of executive power than individuals in presidential or hybrid systems. While these results are perhaps a function of affinity for one's own political system, we do not wish to overinterpret this finding and note that it raises interesting possibilities for future research.

These results provide strong evidence that mass publics across much of the world view executive power through remarkably similar lenses. At the national level, we have documented strong negative associations between core democratic values and support for ex-

ecutive power. These aggregate cross-country relationships also persist at the individual level within countries. Overall, these patterns offer strong and consistent evidence about the nature of attitudes toward executive power across more than sixty countries.

## Country-Level Variation in Attitudes toward Executive Power

We now examine how the individual-level dynamics we observe in the previous section vary across countries. This analysis allows us to study whether core values translate into views about executive power in a uniform way across countries. Establishing and investigating the nature of this relationship advances our understanding of attitudes toward executive power around the world and is a step toward identifying whether contextual and institutional variation may condition the relation between core values and evaluations of government.

As a starting point, we highlight the relative place of the United States. While survey research shows that Americans dislike unilateral presidential power and penalize policies that are undertaken without legislative consent (Reeves and Rogowski 2018), Posner and Vermeule (2010, 188) suggest that resistance to unilateral power “might be a culturally specific phenomenon, unique to the United States.” Yet Americans’ opposition to unilateral power might also reflect a commitment to democracy and deference to the rule of law such that if the aggregate distribution of Americans’ support for the rule of law were different, we would observe different patterns in aggregate attitudes toward presidential power.

While we cannot manipulate beliefs in the rule of law, we instead evaluate whether the association between core values and attitudes toward executive power varies across countries. Citizens of different countries may show systematic differences in how they bring core values to bear on their views of executive power based on deep-seated geographic or cultural differences (Almond and Verba 1963; Fischer 1989). Variation in views toward executive powers may also reflect political circumstances and contexts due to more recent changes in political systems and volatility in political institutions.

*Country-Level Variation, the Americas.* As with our analyses above, we begin with the Americas. We again model the two items that measure whether respondents support executives suspending the legislative body (*close legislature*) or the courts (*dissolve courts*) as

a function of attitudes toward democracy and approval of the president or prime minister in power. Because the dependent variables are binary indicators of support for executive power, we conduct twenty-six separate logistic regressions, one for each country contained in the data. In each model, we also include an indicator variable for each survey wave for each respective country along with the same demographic controls we used for the pooled analyses in the previous section. Then, we estimate the first differences by calculating the predicted differences in the probability of support of executive power for those who strongly support democracy compared those who do not. Specifically, we generate the probability of supporting closing the legislature and dissolving courts among those who declare the strongest support for democracy (i.e., a seven on the seven-point scale) and then calculate the probability of support for those who register the weakest commitment (i.e., a one on the seven-point scale). We hold *executive approval* constant in these simulations to account for specific support of the incumbent officeholder. Negative values indicate that support for democracy is associated with opposition to executive power.

Figure 5 presents first differences from the AmericasBarometer surveys sorted by magnitude of the first difference. Consider the results for Argentina in the left panel, which examines support for a president's ability to close the legislature and govern alone. The predicted probability of support for an Argentinian with the strongest commitment to democracy (a seven on the seven-point scale) is 0.074. The predicted probability of support is 0.186 when support for democracy is weakest (a one on the scale). Among Argentinians, *support for democracy* is associated with a decline in support for this executives power by eleven percentage points, which is reflected in Figure 5 along with first differences for the other countries in the AmericasBarometer surveys. The error bars present the 95 percent confidence interval around the estimate and, in the case of Argentina, ranges from -0.18 to -0.06.

Our goal here is not to interpret the findings for each individual country but rather to understand the overall patterns across them. In our analysis of support for the president closing the legislature and governing without them (i.e., *close legislature*, left panel), twenty-three of the twenty-six estimated first differences are negative. For eighteen, the 95 percent confidence interval does not include zero, providing evidence of a statistically reliable relationship for about 69 percent of the countries in our sample. These results suggest that

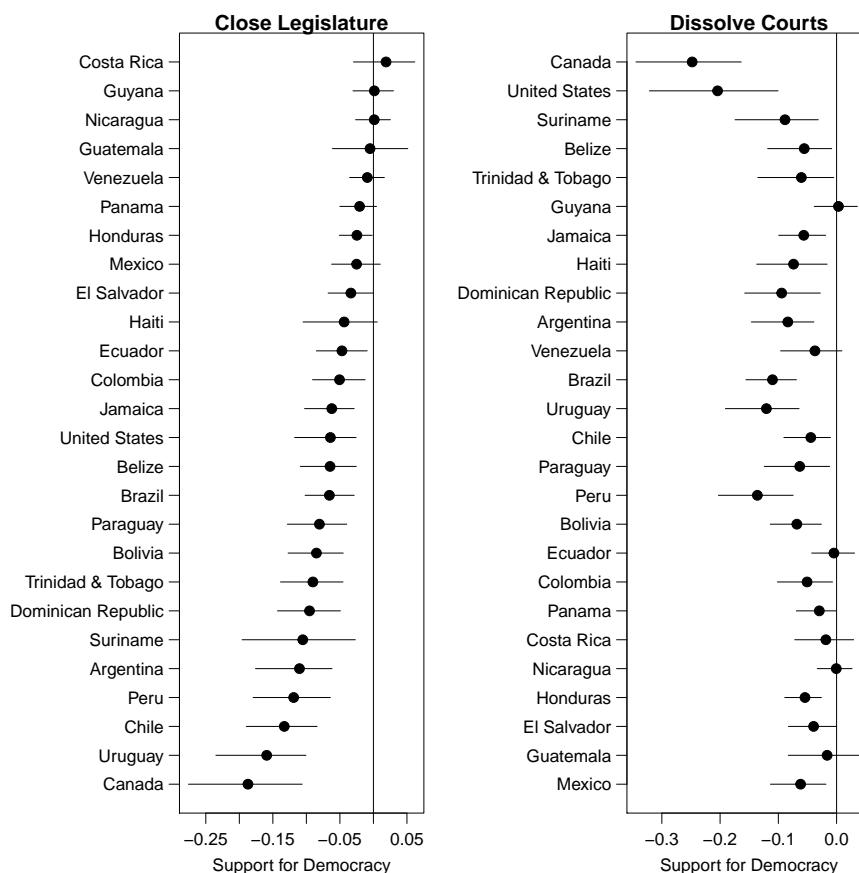


the relationship between core values and support for executive power is not fleeting or particular to only certain countries. Instead, it persists across the countries of the Americas. The magnitude of the association varies to some degree, however. For example, for Hondurans, moving from the lowest to the highest values of *support for democracy* is associated with a decline in support of executive power of two percentage points (i.e., a reduction in the probability of 0.02). In contrast, the same change is associated with an eighteen point decline in Canada. The results are similar in the right panel for the *dissolve courts* model. For all countries, the estimated associations are negative, and twenty of the twenty-six estimates are statistically distinguishable from zero. We note that, since we control for a host of demographics, these differences are not the result of compositional differences across country.

*Country-Level Variation, Africa.* We now turn to country-level variation in the relationship between democratic values and support for executive power in African countries. As we have described, the survey instruments and choice sets for our questions of interest from the Afrobarometer and AmericasBarometer survey series are substantively similar but not identical, so we take a slightly different statistical approach. We model our five dependent variable measuring support for executive power along four- or five-point scales as a function of democratic values (i.e., *support for rule of law* and *support for democracy*—and approval of the president. We again conduct separate analyses for respondents of each country running linear models, one for each country contained in the data. If the survey for the country has been conducted in multiple years, we include indicator variables for each wave.

In the first set of analyses, we consider the relationship between *support for the rule of law* and our four measures of executive power. Our independent variable of interest—*support for rule of law*—ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree, but we recode it as a binary indicator of approval in order to simplify the presentation. These results are presented in Figure 6, which displays each estimated linear regression coefficient for *support for rule of law* for each model. Consider the results for Kenya in the first panel (i.e., the *decides everything* model). The plotted coefficient is  $-0.25$ , meaning supporting the rule of law is associated with a decline of .25 points along the five point scale measuring support for abolishing elections and the legislature and allowing presidential rule (i.e., *decides everything*). Each point also includes the 95 percent confidence interval of the estimate. For the results from

Figure 5: Support for Democracy is Negatively Related to Support for Executive Powers across Countries of the Americas



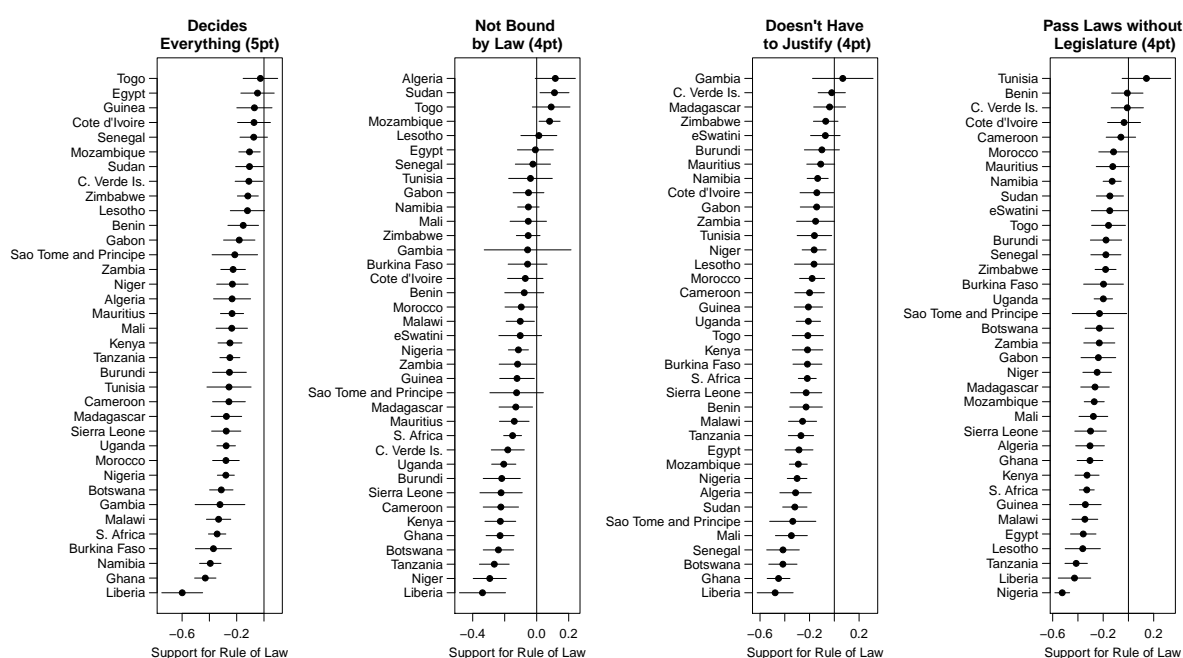
*Notes:* First differences are generated from simulations based on logistic regression models that we separately estimate for respondents from each country for each of dependent variable. For each model, we control for executive approval, a host of demographic variables, and include indicators for the survey wave when applicable. Each point is an estimated first difference in support for executive power based on high and low support of democracy. The left panel presents first differences for support for closing the legislature and allowing the president to govern without it, and the right shows first differences for supporting a president's ability to dissolve the high court and government without it. The points indicate the change in probability of supporting executive power associated with moving from strongly disagreeing to strongly agreeing that "democracy is better than any other form of government" along a seven point scale. For full question wordings see Table A1.

Kenya, that interval spans from  $-0.34$  to  $-0.16$ .

Again, our goal is to summarize the overall trend as opposed to explaining individual cases. Of the 146 models we estimated, 139 (95 percent) yield negative coefficients for *support for rule of law*. When we consider the upper bound of the 95 percent confidence intervals of our estimates, 107 of the 146 (73 percent) are negative. Nearly three-quarters of the countries we analyze exhibit a statistically reliable and negative relationship between support for the rule of law and executive power. Across the countries of Africa, core values towards the

nature of government drive views of the rightful powers of the executive, but again, there is substantial variability. In Liberia, for example, *support for the rule of law* drives down views that president is not obligated to explain his actions (*doesn't have to justify*) by .48 points along the four point scale. Among citizens of Mauritius, the relationship is much smaller yielding a .11 points decrease. And in a few cases, the association is non-existent or even in the opposite of our hypothesized direction.

Figure 6: Support for Rule of Law is Negatively Related to Support for Executive Powers across Countries of Africa



Notes: Estimates are from linear models we separately estimate for respondents from each country for each dependent variable. We control for executive approval along with a host of demographic variables, and include indicators for the survey wave when applicable. Each point is the estimated association between support for rule of law (as a binary indicator) and support for executive power. For full question wordings See Table A2.

The results are similar when we consider the relationship between *support for democracy* instead of *support for rule of law*. *Support for democracy* takes on a value of one if the respondent indicates that democracy is better than any other form of government and zero otherwise. Like Figure 6, the results in Figure 7 display the estimated linear regression coefficient along with the 95 percent confidence interval around the estimated coefficient. Consider the results for Mali in the first panel of Figure 7. The point estimate presented in the figure is -0.30, meaning that support for democracy is associated with a decrease of .3 points (on a five

point scale) in support for abolishing elections and the legislature and allowing a president to decide everything. The 95 percent confidence interval around this estimate spans from -0.37 to -0.24. The interpretations are the same for the other three dependent variables though they are measured along four-point scales.

In the 144 country-level models, 109 (76 percent) times we see *support for democracy* as a negative and statistically significant predictor of support for executive power ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). We also observe variation across countries. Algerians, for example, translate support for democracy into support for presidential power for two of the models: *not bound by law* and *pass laws without legislature*.<sup>19</sup> Somewhat speculatively, it is possible that the patterns for Algeria reflect the unique political context in which the survey was conducted, but we leave a more thorough investigation of this possibility for future research.

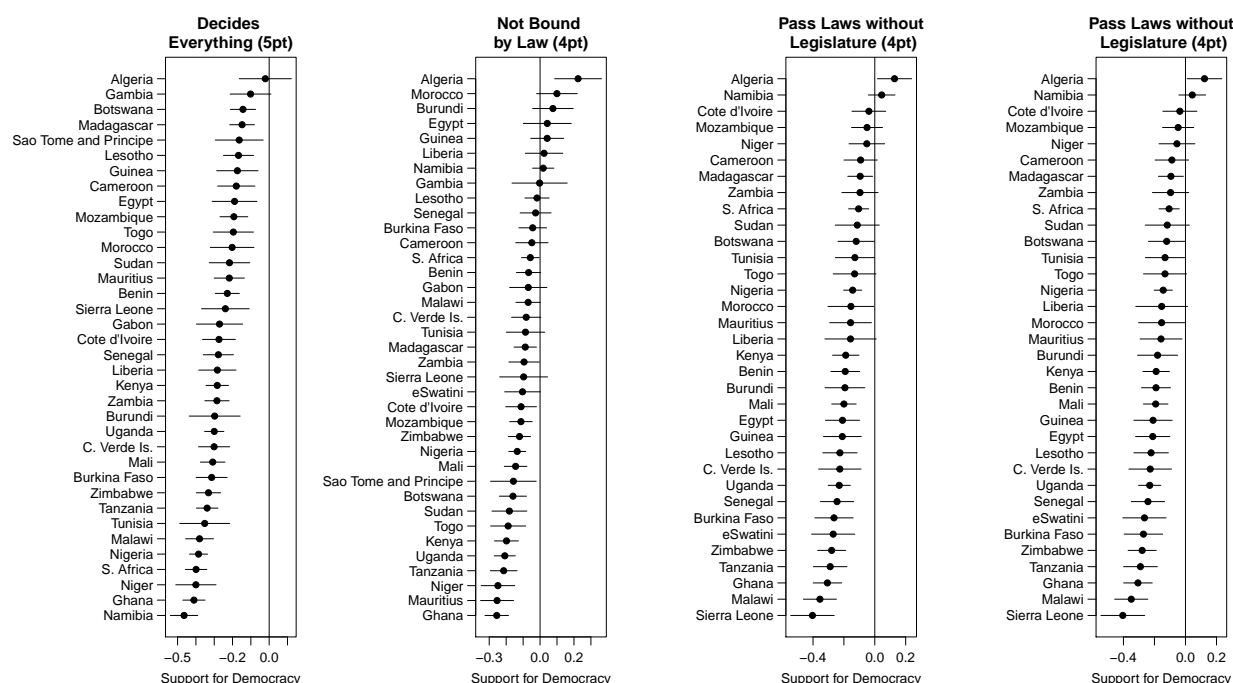
Across more than sixty countries, our findings provide strikingly similar patterns about public opinion toward executive power. Core governing values structure beliefs about executive power. This relationship is consistent across the countries of the Americas, though the association varies somewhat in magnitude. These results suggest the power of institutional systems, perhaps more so than country-specific cultures, in shaping beliefs about government. Instead, across much of the west and the global south, we find that when citizens value the process of democratic politics, they cast a skeptical eye towards executive authority.

At the same time, democratic values may not be a universal prophylactic against anti-democratic executives. Citizens of some countries more strongly translate their beliefs in the rule of law and democracy into opposition towards executive authority. Consider the US in Figure 4. Americans are not superlative in their translation of values into executive constraint, but nor are they middling. In a few other rare cases, we find core democratic values associated with positive views of executive power. Though beyond the scope of our analyses here, further research should consider the economic, institutional, contextual, and cultural factors that drive this variation.

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<sup>19</sup>These results are based on the 2015 wave, which took place a year after a presidential election in which “opponents dismissed as a stage-managed fraud to keep the ailing leader in power.” Patrick Markey and Lamine Chikhi. 2014. “Algeria’s Bouteflika wins re-election with 81.5 percent: official results.” *Reuters* April 18. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-election/algerias-bouteflika-wins-re-election-with-81-5-percent-official-results-idUSBREA3H0D620140418>.

Figure 7: Support for Democracy is Negatively Related to Support for Executive Powers across Countries of Africa



Notes: Estimates are from linear models estimated separately for respondents from each country. We control for executive approval along with a host of demographic variables, and include indicators for the survey wave when applicable. Each point is the change in support for executive power associated with a change in support for democracy. The estimated association is based on believing that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. For full question wordings See Table A2.

## Regime Characteristics and Attitudes toward Executive Power

In a final set of analyses, we explore the potential consequences of attitudes toward executive power. Our previous results establish a consistent and robust link at both the individual and aggregate levels between beliefs in the rule of law and support for executive power. Here, we consider the capacity of mass opinions about executive power to constrain the behavior of their governments. Identifying the connection between regime characteristics and attitudes toward executive power clarifies the stakes of our results. In the context of the United States, Posner and Vermeule (2010, 187) argue that “a central feature of American political psychology—fear of executive power—serves as a constraint on the executive every bit as important as the separation of powers and other institutional constraints.” If attitudes toward executive power safeguard against the concentration of executive authority, skepticism

or opposition toward executive power could serve as “a bulwark” (Posner and Vermeule 2010, 187) against the rise of dictatorship.

Testing the strongest version of this hypothesis requires data on attitudes toward executive power and the incidence of dictatorship and a research design that allows us to credibly associate the two. We focus here on a more specific version of this hypothesis, answering the question: Are mass attitudes toward executive power correlated with a political regime’s commitment to the rule of law? Our theoretical perspective emphasized the rule of law as a constraint against the concentration of executive authority. Based on our argument, we expect that countries have stronger commitments to the rule of law as more of their citizens oppose executive power. This inquiry builds upon research indicating that beliefs about democracy are systematically associated with democratic practices (Claassen 2020).

We use data from the Varieties of Democracy (2020) project (V-DEM), which utilizes administrative data combined with expert assessments to measure democracy around the world. Specifically, we rely on V-DEM to characterize country-level commitments to the rule of law. Note that, in contrast with our analysis of public opinion reported above, this measure is based on government performance rather than individual-level attitudes. V-DEM describes the rule of law measure as an index of “[t]o what extent are laws transparently, independently, predictably, impartially, and equally enforced, and to what extent do the actions of government officials comply with the law?” It is comprised of indicators regarding judicial independence, impartial public administration, corruption, and, most importantly, executives’ respect for the constitution. This variable ranges between zero and one where larger values indicate that the rule of law is more strongly observed. We use values of this measure for 1999, 2005, 2010, and 2015.

The independent variable characterizes public demand in the form of aggregate attitudes toward executive power. We use data from waves three through six from the World Values Survey (2015). These data complement our analyses of the AmericasBarometer and Afrobarometer by providing more extensive coverage of countries in Europe, the Middle East, and Central and East Asia. These surveys include an item which asks respondents whether it would be “very good,” “fairly good,” “fairly bad”, or “very bad” to “[have] a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.” While this measure differs

somewhat from the survey items included on the AmericasBarometer and Afrobarometer, it provides a direct assessment of how respondents in a large number of countries evaluate executive power. Following Posner and Vermeule (2010), we calculate the proportion of respondents in each country who reported it would be “very bad” to have “a strong leader” to provide a measure of *Oppose executive power*. Overall, the mean country-level proportion of *Oppose executive power* was 0.30.

We regress the country-level measure of the rule of law on aggregate attitudes toward executive power. The four waves of the World Values Survey were conducted between, respectively, 1995-1998, 1999-2004, 2005-2009, and 2010-2014. Therefore, each measurement of a country’s aggregate attitudes regarding executive power temporally precedes the V-DEM measure of the rule of law. We have a total of 193 country-year observations, with forty-seven from 1999, thirty-four for 2005, fifty-five for 2010, and fifty-seven for 2015, which includes eighty-seven unique countries. In some models, as reported below, we include controls for logged GDP per-capita and, alternatively, GDP growth, to account for the possibility that governing systems are more responsive to economic and demographic factors than the attitudes of their citizenry (see Posner and Vermeule 2010, 189-192). Finally, we include indicators for the year in which the dependent variable was measured to account for secular trends in observance of the rule of law and cluster standard errors on country.

Table 4 shows the results. We find consistent evidence of an association between public attitudes toward executive power and a regime’s observance of the rule of law. Across each model, the coefficient for oppose executive power is positive and statistically significant, indicating that national governance provides evidence of greater respect for the rule of law as larger proportions of respondents expressed opposition to executive power. This relationship persists while accounting for a country’s economic output, which itself is positively associated with the observance of the rule of law.

We provide evidence of an association between the values held by a citizenry and a country’s governing regime. Countries where more citizens oppose executive power exhibit greater respect for the rule of law through their institutional arrangements. Our results contrast with Posner and Vermeule (2010, 198), who use similar survey data to conclude that opposition to executive power “probably does not constitute a safeguard against dictatorship,

Table 4: Model of Regime Responsiveness to Public Opinion

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Oppose executive power	0.32* (0.15)	0.25* (0.11)	0.34* (0.15)
Gross domestic product (per capita, ln)		0.20* (0.02)	
Gross domestic product (growth)			0.47 (0.41)
(Constant)	0.56* (0.06)	-1.23* (0.29)	0.55* (0.06)
Observations	193	193	193
Clusters	87	87	87
Wave Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓

*Note:* Coefficients from linear regression with robust standard errors clustered on country in parentheses. Dependent variable is a measure of a country’s support for the rule of law. \*  $p < .05$ .

in the United States or elsewhere.” Instead, our analyses suggest that a “tyrannophobic public” is more likely to live in countries with stronger support for the rule of law, which may be a prerequisite for constraining the ambitions of authoritarian-minded rulers.

## Conclusion

While processes of democratic consolidation help to secure the long-run success of democratic systems, the consolidation of power in a chief executive may undermine democratic systems from within. Recent scholarship has emphasized the dangers that authoritarian-minded executives pose to democratic institutions. Most of this scholarship ignores or rules out the possibility that public audiences could constrain the temptation of overreach among ambitious executives. Understanding mass attitudes toward executive power, however, can shed light on the “guardrails of democracy” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 101).

We present new evidence about mass opinion on executive power and its relevance for governing regimes. Theoretically, we argue for the relevance of democratic values—citizens’ procedural commitments—in understanding how individuals view the exercise of power by political authorities. Empirically, we demonstrate a systematic relationship between support



for democracy and the rule of the law and evaluations of executive power. Individuals and countries with stronger democratic commitments express more skepticism toward executive authority. As Christenson and Kriner (2020) indicates, these attitudes suggest the potential for an executive's political rivals to generate public backlash following executive overreach.

We also showed that attitudes about executive authority are reflected in a country's governing practices. Consistent with theories of political agency (e.g., Fearon 1999), our results suggest that governments are responsive to citizens' attitudes about the distribution of political power, and that these attitudes provide incentives for how elected officials wield those powers. Though scholarship on democratic backsliding understates the potential for citizens to prevent democratic decay, our findings suggest more sanguine implications about the potential for mass publics to constrain their leaders' power-seeking ambitions.

Taking the wide view, our results suggest the political relevance of a citizenry's democratic values. This connection is consistent with contemporary debates in European politics. Consistent with our results, for example, Meijers and van der Veer (2019) show that members of the European Parliament who represented national parties with authoritarian ties were more likely to raise questions about breaches of the rule of law by governments in Hungary and Poland. There, as in our study, public attitudes about executive power appear to be associated with elite behavior and governing practices. At a more granular level, our findings also relate to several other studies of European politics that demonstrate the political and electoral relevance of public opinion about political procedures. In those studies, voters disapprove of and punish incumbents for employing opportunistic election timing (Schleiter and Tavits 2018) and confidence votes (Becher and Brouard, Forthcoming). Our results complement these findings and suggest that voters around the world hold meaningful attitudes about the exercise of political power. Theories of political accountability apply not only to policy positions and competence, but also to procedures and power.

Our results have several important limitations and provide opportunities for further research. First, our findings are purely in the camp of observational research. Future research could explore experimental opportunities to induce variation in the strength or salience of core values and study its effect on evaluations of executive power. Second, our findings provide only a general assessment of how these attitudes may bear on the exercise

of power. Future research could study how, for example, attitudes about executive power affect evaluations of decrees, vetoes, or other specific presidential actions. Third, as we noted above, additional research is needed to understand contextual variation in views of executive power. Not only might country-level variation in experiences with political regimes affect how citizens today view executive power, but other factors—such as national security threats, economic emergencies, or parliamentary performance—may also affect how individuals view executive power. These are important questions for additional study.

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## A Supplemental Appendix

### A.1 Question Wording

Table A1: Question Wording for Survey Instruments from AmericasBarometer

Question	Choice Set
<b>Support for Executive Power: <i>Close Legislature.</i></b> Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress/Parliament and govern without Congress/Parliament?	yes, it is justified; no, it is not justified
<b>Support for Executive Power: <i>Dissolve Courts.</i></b> Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to dissolve the Supreme Court/Constitutional Tribunal and govern without the Supreme Court/Constitutional Tribunal	
<i>Support for Democracy.</i> Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?	Now we will use a ladder where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 7 means “strongly agree.” A number in between 1 and 7 represents an intermediate score.
<i>Executive Approval.</i> Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of [Prime Minister or President] [Name]?	very good; good; neither good nor bad (fair); bad; very bad
<b>Demographics: <i>Age.</i></b>	Numeric age.
<b>Demographics: <i>Education.</i></b>	Recoded from various choice sets such that none = 0, primary = 1, secondary = 2, post-secondary = 3.
<b>Demographics: <i>Gender.</i></b>	Male, Female, or Other.
<b>Demographics: <i>Marital Status.</i></b>	Recoded from various choice sets such that married = 1, otherwise 0.
<b>Demographics: <i>Income.</i></b>	Ten categories based on income deciles in respective country. Extra categories added in later surveys. We standardize the ordinal values within country.

Table A2: Question Wording for Survey Instruments from Afrobarometer

Question	Choice Set
<b>Support for Executive Power:</b> <i>Decides Everything.</i> There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?: Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.	strongly disapprove, disapprove, neither approve nor disapprove, approve, strongly approve
<b>Support for Executive Power:</b> <i>Not Bound by Laws.</i> Statement 1: Since the President was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong. Statement 2: The President must always obey the law and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.	
<b>Support for Executive Power:</b> <i>Doesn't Have to Justify.</i> Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the President explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money. Statement 2: The President should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.	
<b>Support for Executive Power:</b> <i>Pass Laws without Legislature.</i> Statement 1: Members of Parliament represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the President does not agree. Statement 2: Since the President represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what Parliament thinks.	Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2? agree very strongly with statement 1; agree with statement 1; agree with statement 2; agree very strongly with statement 2
<i>Support for Rule of Law.</i> Statement 1: It is important to obey the government in power, no matter who you voted for. Statement 2: It is not necessary to obey the laws of a government that you did not vote for.	
<i>Support for Democracy.</i> Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable. Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.	Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
<i>Executive Approval.</i> Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past twelve months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?: [Name of President]	strongly disapprove, disapprove, approve, strongly approve
<b>Demographics:</b> <i>Age.</i>	Numeric age.
<b>Demographics:</b> <i>Education.</i>	Recoded from various choice sets such that none = 0, primary = 1, secondary = 2, post-secondary = 3.
<b>Demographics:</b> <i>Gender.</i>	Male or Female.
<b>Demographics:</b> <i>Poverty.</i> Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family: Gone without enough food to eat?	Recoded from various choice sets such that never = 0, sometimes = 1, frequently = 3, and always = 4.
<b>Demographics:</b> <i>Rural:</i> Defined by surveyor based on primary sampling unit.	Rural = 1 and all urban or quasi-urban designations are 0.



## A.2 Robustness Checks for AmericasBarometer Analyses

### A.2.1 Survey Weights

Table A3: Model of Support for Executive Powers, the Americas: Using Survey Weights

	Close Legislature	Dissolve Courts
Executive Approval	0.136* (0.009)	0.214* (0.012)
Support for Democracy	-0.079* (0.004)	-0.106* (0.006)
Intercept	-1.549* (0.091)	-2.172* (0.103)
Country $\times$ Wave Fixed Effects	✓	✓
Num. obs.	158429	92213

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Survey design is explicitly declared including weights as advised by AmericasBarometer documentation.

### A.2.2 Accounting for Political System and Alternative Approaches to Fixed Effects

Table A4: Model of Support for Executive Powers (Close Legislature), the Americas: Robustness Checks

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Executive Approval	0.139* (0.031)	0.126* (0.033)	0.141* (0.032)
Support for Democracy	-0.074* (0.008)	-0.084* (0.008)	-0.091* (0.009)
Parliamentary System	0.296 (0.187)	0.075 (0.255)	-0.055 (0.132)
Intercept	-1.698* (0.112)	-1.423* (0.153)	-1.771* (0.148)
Country Fixed Effects	✓	✓	
Survey Wave Fixed Effects	✓		✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	118108	118108	118108

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Logistic regression model with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

Table A5: Model of Support for Executive Powers (Dissolve Courts), the Americas: Robustness Checks

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Executive Approval	0.214* (0.031)	0.185* (0.036)	0.220* (0.033)
Support for Democracy	-0.092* (0.011)	-0.113* (0.011)	-0.108* (0.012)
Parliamentary System	0.335* (0.159)	-0.159 (0.346)	0.011 (0.131)
Intercept	-1.802* (0.164)	-1.266* (0.289)	-1.860* (0.151)
Country Fixed Effect	✓	✓	
Survey Wave Fixed Effect	✓		✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	79144	79144	79144

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Logistic regression model with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

## **A.3 Robustness Checks for Afrobarometer Analyses**

### **A.3.1 Survey Weights**

Table A6: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries: Using Survey Weights

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.062* (0.007)	0.038* (0.005)	0.039* (0.005)	0.061* (0.007)
Support for Rule of Law	-0.151* (0.009)	-0.077* (0.008)	-0.152* (0.009)	-0.179* (0.010)
Intercept	2.657* (0.048)	2.464* (0.038)	2.747* (0.041)	2.640* (0.052)
Country $\times$ Wave Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	149533	147035	129595	105990

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with survey weights. Robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

Table A7: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Democracy, African Countries: Using Survey Weights

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.046* (0.007)	0.035* (0.006)	0.034* (0.006)	0.044* (0.008)
Support for Democracy	-0.318* (0.017)	-0.100* (0.015)	-0.224* (0.017)	-0.184* (0.016)
Intercept	2.343* (0.032)	2.279* (0.026)	2.408* (0.027)	2.442* (0.042)
Country $\times$ Wave Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Survey Weights	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	156454	119363	104388	75419

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with survey weights. Robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

**A.3.2 Accounting for Political System and Alternative Approaches to Fixed Effects for both Role of Law and Support for Democracy Models**

Table A8: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries: Accounting for Political Systems

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.064* (0.007)	0.040* (0.005)	0.039* (0.006)	0.063* (0.007)
Support for Rule of Law	-0.152* (0.008)	-0.080* (0.009)	-0.149* (0.009)	-0.180* (0.009)
Parliamentary System	-0.819* (0.048)	-0.699* (0.126)	-0.374* (0.077)	-0.216* (0.023)
Intercept	2.917* (0.083)	2.737* (0.134)	2.929* (0.056)	2.859* (0.057)
Country Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Survey Wave Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	148178	143602	125403	103070

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.



Table A9: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries: Country Fixed Effects

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.064* (0.007)	0.041* (0.005)	0.038* (0.006)	0.062* (0.007)
Support for Rule of Law	-0.153* (0.008)	-0.081* (0.009)	-0.149* (0.009)	-0.180* (0.009)
Parliamentary System	-0.808* (0.033)	-0.751* (0.138)	-0.376* (0.077)	-0.218* (0.031)
Intercept	2.840* (0.057)	2.757* (0.131)	2.936* (0.057)	2.887* (0.056)
Country Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	148178	143602	125403	103070

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

Table A10: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries: Survey Wave Fixed Effects

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.062* (0.012)	0.040* (0.006)	0.038* (0.006)	0.059* (0.007)
Support for Rule of Law	-0.204* (0.012)	-0.104* (0.009)	-0.149* (0.009)	-0.203* (0.010)
Parliamentary System	-0.214* (0.056)	-0.176* (0.045)	-0.376* (0.077)	0.174* (0.034)
Intercept	2.470* (0.097)	2.375* (0.055)	2.936* (0.057)	2.563* (0.059)
Survey Wave Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	148178	143602	125403	103070

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

Table A11: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries: Accounting for Political Systems

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.045* (0.007)	0.036* (0.006)	0.032* (0.007)	0.044* (0.008)
Support for Democracy	-0.315* (0.017)	-0.109* (0.015)	-0.224* (0.016)	-0.187* (0.017)
Parliamentary System	-0.752* (0.033)	-0.494* (0.021)	-0.285* (0.098)	-0.137* (0.011)
Intercept	2.712* (0.059)	2.373* (0.049)	2.624* (0.058)	2.377* (0.055)
Country Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Survey Wave Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	152466	117245	101500	74601

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

Table A12: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries: Country Fixed Effects

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.043* (0.007)	0.038* (0.006)	0.032* (0.007)	0.043* (0.008)
Support for Democracy	-0.317* (0.017)	-0.103* (0.015)	-0.223* (0.017)	-0.184* (0.017)
Parliamentary System	-0.729* (0.014)	-0.566* (0.068)	-0.287* (0.099)	-0.139* (0.011)
Intercept	2.584* (0.038)	2.385* (0.033)	2.551* (0.042)	2.453* (0.044)
Country Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	152466	117245	101500	74601

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.

Table A13: Model of Support for Executive Powers and Support for Rule of Law, African Countries: Survey Wave Fixed Effects

	Decide (5pt)	Not Bound (4pt)	Justify (4pt)	Pass Laws (4pt)
Executive Approval	0.042* (0.010)	0.038* (0.007)	0.032* (0.007)	0.043* (0.009)
Support for Democracy	-0.399* (0.020)	-0.145* (0.016)	-0.223* (0.017)	-0.240* (0.018)
Parliamentary System	-0.192* (0.050)	-0.176* (0.047)	-0.287* (0.099)	0.169* (0.035)
Intercept	2.194* (0.115)	2.145* (0.052)	2.551* (0.042)	2.042* (0.066)
Survey Wave Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographic Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num. obs.	152466	117245	101500	74601

\* $p < 0.05$ .

Note: Linear regressions with robust standard errors clustered on country/wave.