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A Second Pink Wave: How the economic crisis is driving voters to the left in Latin America

Priester, Sabine

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**A Second Pink Wave: How the economic crisis is driving voters to the
left in Latin America**



**Universiteit
Leiden**

Sabine Priester (s2340925)

Democracy in Latin America (Dr. Diana Dávila Gordillo)

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1. Introduction

Since 2021 there has been increasing evidence of a shift in political power towards the left in Latin America (Lima, 2022; Londoño et al., 2022). Left-wing national leaders have already been elected in countries such as Peru, Honduras, and Chile while the leaders of left-wing parties are leading the polls in the upcoming national elections in Brazil and Colombia (Harrison, 2022; Harrison & Orbach, 2022). This increased popularity of the left has come at a time when the right had been dominating Latin American politics for the past decade (de Santibañes, 2020; Vivanco, 2018). The sudden and substantial change in the political landscape of Latin America begs the question of whether this development is a sign of a second “pink wave” coming through the region and what the potential factors could be that have facilitated such a political shift to the left.

Latin America is a region characterised by high electoral volatility and radical shifts between left-wing and right-wing presidents (Cohen et al., 2018). However, when these shifts happen in multiple countries within the region, it could be evidence of a larger regional development. The fact that there has been a rise in the electoral success of leftist parties all over the region, even in countries without a recent history of left-wing leadership, shows that this is unlikely to be a number of coincidences, but rather a sign of a broader phenomenon.

There has not been any academic research done on this current development since these elections have just happened and some of these elections have yet to take place in 2022. There is thus still an academic need for further research into this phenomenon. Research into the causes of this development could help show what region-wide factors have led to the election of leftist leaders in the early 2020s and give further insights into what drives region-wide political shifts in Latin America. Hence, this research will seek to understand the rise of the left in Latin America and answer the overarching question of: *Why has there been an influx of left-wing presidents getting elected in Latin America over the past year?*

2. Literature review

While some news articles have been written about the increased electoral success of leftist candidates in Latin America in recent years, there has not been any scientific research done on it as a larger phenomenon. There was, however, a period in the early 2000s when the left in Latin America enjoyed similar levels of success, which is referred to as the pink wave. The pink wave has been extensively researched. Theories on the rise of the left in that era could be used to build a framework to understand the current wave of leftist electoral success, due to the similarities between the two periods. It is important to note that the pink tide of the early 2000s took place in a unique timeframe with increasing democratization domestically and a change in the global geopolitical landscape and accompanying shift in the role of the involvement of superpowers in Latin America (Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Rossi & Silva, 2018). This current development is similarly occurring in a unique historical context, with a pandemic severely affecting the region for the last two years. As a result of this, not all theories on the rise of the left during the pink tide can be applied to the current wave and some theories will have to be modified to fit the current timeframe. Regardless, these academic theories could still give some interesting insights into what causes region-wide political shifts and could potentially have some explanatory value in determining why a similar development occurs two decades later.

Theories on the causes of the pink tide in the early 2000s can roughly be divided into theories that emphasise socioeconomic, sociopolitical, or geopolitical factors. Scholars who stress the role of socioeconomic factors generally argue that the failures of neoliberal governance (Arnson et al., 2007; Baker & Greene, 2011; Roberts, 2008; Silva, 2012) and long-existing economic issues (Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011), as well as short-term economic shocks (Arnold & Samuels, 2011; Benton, 2005; Blanco & Grier, 2013; Lewis-Beck & Ratto, 2013; Mainwaring & Su, 2021; Remmer, 1999; Roberts & Wibbels, 1999; Seawright, 2021) created the economic grievances that drove people to vote for left-wing parties. Meanwhile, scholars emphasising sociopolitical factors stress the importance of the previous exclusion of indigenous and other demographic groups as the driver for leftist support (Blanco & Grier, 2013; Madrid, 2008; Silva, 2012). Lastly, scholars that focus on geopolitical factors highlight the role of the shift in the international and regional environment towards the promotion of democracy and political inclusion, which opened the political arena for leftist parties (Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Rossi & Silva, 2018).

2.1 Socioeconomic factors

Scholars that focus on socioeconomic causes largely agree that the historical conditions of Latin America as a region with high levels of inequality relative to its economic growth have created a significant potential voting block of poor working-class people (Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). This strong class cleavage had previously been underutilised in the 20th century. Leftist parties in the early 2000s were able to effectively use this cleavage to create a solid voting base that was motivated due to their grievances over inequality. While this theory explains the potential voting base for leftist parties, it does not explain the timing of the first pink wave.

Seeking to explain why there was a sudden rise in left-wing popularity, some scholars point to grievances created by the two preceding decades of neoliberal market-oriented economic policies as the main driving factor for voters to turn towards leftist parties (Arnson et al., 2007; Roberts, 2008; Silva, 2012). The previous neoliberal governments were unable to effectively deal with the persistent economic inequality and increased economic insecurity for the working-class population through market liberalization and a decrease in social security spending. As a consequence, it led to a decreasing popularity of market-oriented policies and an increased popularity of leftist economic policy (Baker & Greene, 2011). Yet, various scholars have raised criticisms of this theory that show its limitations. Research has shown that many different aspects of neoliberal policy enjoyed widespread support among the population in Latin America in the 1990s (Armijo & Faucher, 2002; Baker, 2003). Additionally, economic dissatisfaction was low while leftist leaders were winning elections (Remmer, 2012).

In order to address the specific timing of the left turn and the shift in public opinion against neoliberal policy, some scholars point toward the economic crisis of 1998-2002 as the catalyst that made people turn against their incumbent presidents and their neoliberal policies. The neoliberal presidents' failure to effectively deal with this crisis caused a backlash against the presidents and their market-oriented policy, resulting in the voters turning towards the opposite side of the political spectrum (Arnold & Samuels, 2011; Benton, 2005). This effect was strengthened by the fact that the neoliberal policies of the previous decades had broken down social safety nets and social programs, which increased the economic crisis' impact on the poor working-class population. Using election data, Blanco & Grier (2013) find that leftist

candidates were more likely to get elected president when a crisis occurred during the term of an incumbent right-wing president.

Scholars have further highlighted the importance of economic voting in Latin America. They find that voters typically punish incumbents after a period of poor economic performance (Benton, 2005; Lewis-Beck & Ratto, 2013). They additionally observe that poor economic performance raises electoral volatility by creating disgruntlement towards the incumbent president (Remmer, 1999). In these situations, political outsiders and non-established parties are particularly popular as voters seek to deviate from the status quo (Mainwaring & Su, 2021; Seawright, 2021). This sudden increase in electoral volatility is especially strong during short-term economic shocks (Remmer, 1999; Roberts & Wibbels, 1999).

2.2 Sociopolitical factors

Theories that fit into the sociopolitical category mainly highlight the vital role of mobilizing ethnic and demographic groups historically excluded from the national political sphere. Silva (2012) argues that the poor and indigenous population was excluded from politics while the government at the same threatened indigenous lands and the economic security of working-class people. This created large grievances that leftist parties could use to rally votes. The coalition of indigenous and working-class voters was able to sway elections to the left in Bolivia and Ecuador (Madrid, 2008). The significance of political exclusion is further supported by quantitative analysis from Blanco & Grier (2013), who observed a positive relationship between past political exclusion and the election of leftist presidents. While this theory seems convincing for explaining the rise of the left in the early 2000s, the particular circumstances of the broadening of representation in the new democracies of Latin America make it less valuable to understanding future developments through this scope.

2.3 Geopolitical factors

Some scholars that write about the geopolitical factors that could have facilitated the pink tide point out the shift in the international order and change in perceptions of the left due to the fall of the Soviet Union. This change from a bipolar world with two ideological blocks to a unipolar world made the United States change its strategy in Latin America. The decrease in the perceived threat of leftism made them adopt a less engaged stance in the region, instead focusing on promoting democracy in the hemisphere (Cleary, 2006). This facilitated the rise of

left-wing parties because there was no longer the threat of a CIA-backed coup whenever a leftist leader gained popularity. Next to a change in US attitude towards leftist parties in Latin America, there was also a change in the elites' posture towards these parties within their countries. They perceived these parties less as a threat due to the fall of the Soviet Union and thus provided less resistance against the possibility of them gaining power (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011).

Others have highlighted how the democratization of many Latin American countries during the 1990s opened up the political arena for leftist parties (Castañeda, 2006; Rossi & Silva, 2018). These parties had previously been excluded or sometimes even prosecuted in the prior decades. Promoting democratic norms further opened up the political conversation on the different ways of looking at democracy and citizen participation that leftist parties propagated. Considering the unique place in time that these geopolitical reflect and the geopolitical changes that Latin America and the world have gone through, they cannot be applied to the current age.

Lastly, some scholars have pointed out the link between anti-American sentiment and leftist voting patterns (Arnold & Samuels, 2011; Cleary, 2006). However, while there seemed to be a rise in anti-American attitudes at the same time leftist parties, who usually took strong anti-American stances, were winning elections, it is not fully clear whether these parties were elected due to their anti-American views or if these parties drove this increase in anti-American sentiments.

To summarise, there are not yet any developed theories on why leftist candidates had increased electoral success since 2021. However, there has been extensive research done on a similar wave of leftist success in Latin America in the early 2000s. This research will attempt to contribute to the scholarship through examining the under-researched phenomenon of leftist electoral success in the early 2020s by using theories on the causes of the first pink wave and applying them in a new context.

3. Theoretical framework

Some of these theories are more applicable to the current age than others. Socioeconomic inequality remains a significant obstacle in most Latin American countries (Busso & Messina,

2020). Additionally, neoliberalism has been the dominant economic ideology for the past decade in most of the region. The theory on economic crises is equally helpful for the current events since Latin America has been hit particularly hard by the pandemic and resulting economic crisis. Some scholars have noted that while economic performance was a significant predictor of electoral volatility in the 1980s, the relationship is a lot weaker in the following decades (Cohen et al., 2018). While this may seem to weaken the potential explanatory value of economic voting on electoral results in the current age, it could still be significant for the current election cycle, due to the similarity of the circumstances between the 1980s and the early 2020s. In the 1980s Latin America experienced an extensive financial crisis. Since Latin America is similarly going through a significant economic crisis due to the economic shock of the pandemic, this may contribute to the theory of economic crisis as a significant contributing factor to the success of leftist candidates this past year.

Socio-political factors could be relevant to the current development but are unlikely to have played a key role in the election of leftist presidents in 2021. There have been increasing demands for greater political participation and rights for subaltern groups such as women, the LGBT+ community, and indigenous people. However, there was no mass mobilization or popular calls to action based on improving indigenous rights in the months leading up to the elections. Additionally, none of the successful leftist candidates had their gender or ethnic identity at the forefront of their campaign. This shows that while sociopolitical exclusion may have played a role, it is unclear whether it was a deciding factor in the elections.

Finally, since the particular geopolitical shifts that happened prior to the first pink wave were very specific to their time, it is challenging to apply this to the current age. While geopolitical factors may play a role in the recent rise in popularity of leftist parties, it is yet unclear which these are and what role they might play.

Influenced by the temporality of these arguments, I will predicate my theory on a combination of the theories on economic factors. Due to the prevalence of inequality in the region, leftist parties have a natural voting base to appeal to (Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Long-term inequality created a significant population of poor working-class voters with deep-rooted discontent with the traditional political parties that have failed to improve their economic situation. These people are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks, which greatly impact their voting behaviour in situations of economic hardship. Due to this,

the class cleavage gets particularly strong during or right after an economic crisis when poor people have their livelihood in direct danger, which drives them to shift their voting priorities to a candidate likely to support measures that protect their immediate economic needs (Arnson et al., 2007; Benton, 2005; Blanco & Grier, 2013). Economic performance is an important driving factor for voters in Latin America. Voters regularly punish the incumbent president for the poor economic performance within their term (Benton, 2005; Lewis-Beck & Ratto, 2013; Remmer, 1999). This backlash against the incumbent is particularly strong during an economic crisis (Remmer, 1999; Roberts & Wibbels, 1999). During these elections, political outsiders tend to be especially successful due to discontent with the parties in power during the crisis and a general desire for a deviation from the status quo (Mainwaring & Su, 2021; Seawright, 2021).

This effect is strengthened when the previous president implemented neoliberal policies due to the deterioration of social safety nets and an increase in economic inequality being one of the main characteristics of neoliberal policy (Arnson et al., 2007; Roberts, 2008; Silva, 2012). These market-oriented policies cause poor people to be hit harder by economic crises and thus increase discontent. While looking at other options, voters tend to move toward leftist candidates due to a want for change in the face of poor economic performance, as well as due to leftist parties offering more protections against the economic hardships that working-class people experience (Baker & Greene, 2011).

The main factors of inequality and economic downturn lead voters to vote for leftist candidates in two ways. Firstly, they increase dissatisfaction with the incumbent president. High levels of inequality can cause resentment towards the incumbent as poor citizens feel underrepresented and feel like the government has not done enough to lift them out of poverty. Furthermore, an economic crisis can lead to dissatisfaction with the president due to voters being negatively impacted and blaming the president for neglecting to provide proper social safety nets. Secondly, these factors create more demand for the redistributive policies and increased government spending that left-wing parties propagate. High levels of inequality create a large voting bloc that would benefit from more social programs and distributive policies. Moreover, an economic downturn increases poverty levels and makes voters prioritise economic policy more as a result of their economic security being threatened. Because of this, they become more receptive to leftist candidates.

3.1 Expectations

Based on this I expect a combination of several factors to be present and explain the popularity of leftist candidates in the Latin American countries that elected a leftist president this past year. Firstly, I expect a strong anti-incumbent sentiment to be present in the countries that elected a leftist president and have been a significant factor in driving voters to vote for these leftist presidents. I additionally expect this anti-incumbent sentiment to be a result of dissatisfaction with the economic policy of the incumbent president.

Secondly, these countries will expectingly have relatively high levels of inequality, which establishes the potential voting base for leftist parties and a potential grievance towards the incumbent president. Regarding inequality, I thus expect inequality levels to have contributed to the election of leftist presidents in Latin America in 2021.

Lastly, I expect the country to have experienced an economic crisis that severely impacted people's livelihood, which created grievances against the incumbent right-wing president. Because of the economic crisis, there will further be a poor perception of the state of the economy and people's economic situation. Based on this, I expect an economic downturn and the resulting threat to citizens' economic livelihoods to have been a factor in the electoral success of leftist candidates.

4. Research design

4.1 Case selection

This research will utilise a qualitative design to fully understand what factors have led to the electoral victories of leftist presidents. Three countries have elected a left-wing president within the last year in Latin America, namely Peru, Honduras, and Chile. To test the factors that might have led to the election of leftist presidents I will analyse and compare the two most divergent countries, Honduras and Chile, using a most different systems design to determine the factors that lead to leftist electoral success. If these factors are present in both countries despite their major differences, this could be an indicator that these factors are significant in explaining the success of leftist candidates in these countries.

There are a few significant ways in which these countries differ from each other. Firstly, as of 2020, Chile has the highest Human Development Index (HDI) in Latin America while

Honduras is ranked among the lowest in the region (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Similarly, Chile has one of the highest GDP per capita and lowest poverty rates in Latin America while Honduras has a low GDP per capita and relatively high poverty levels (The World Bank, 2020a; The World Bank, 2020b). These indicators show that the economic situation and quality of life are significantly better in Chile. As previously discussed, consistent poor economic performance can lead to higher rates of electoral volatility (Benton, 2005; Lewis-Beck & Ratto, 2013; Mainwaring & Su, 2021; Remmer, 1999; Seawright, 2021). Additionally, high poverty rates create a significant voting block of poor voters with grievances towards the political establishment and a predisposition toward left-wing economic policy (Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Based on this one would expect Honduran voters to be more likely to support leftist candidates while Chilean voters would have less incentive to.

Politically, there are some differences too. Chile is widely regarded as one of the region's most stable and free democracies (Freedom House, 2022; The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). Meanwhile, Honduras is seen as a hybrid regime by both Freedom House and the Democracy index and experienced a coup in the early 2000s. Additionally, Honduras has been ruled by presidents of the same party since 2009 while Chile has seen multiple switches from social-democratic presidents to liberal presidents. Considering the electoral playing field in Honduras was heavily skewed towards the incumbent president through electoral manipulation and clientelism, an opposition victory was not expected (Freeman & Perelló, 2022). Meanwhile, in Chile, both left and right-wing parties have continuously moved toward the centre since the transition to democracy, leaving no political power to more radical ideologies. This created a more moderate history of policy and more possibilities for political consensus and cooperation. At the same time, this also led to the political exclusion of the more radical political groups within the country. As previously seen during the initial pink tide, this political exclusion can cause dissatisfaction due to voters feeling underrepresented, resulting in the election of more radical candidates (Blanco & Grier, 2013; Madariaga & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2020; Silva, 2012).

4.2 Data Collection

For measuring the anti-incumbent sentiment, presidential approval ratings will be retrieved from LAPOP. These will indicate whether voters sought to vote against the incumbent party in the elections. In order to determine the main driving factor behind why voters turned away

from the incumbent president, Latinobárometer data on the most important problem according to citizens will be looked at. This will be supplemented by the main platform that the successful candidates ran on, which will be determined using their party manifestos and news reports about their positions.

In order to measure the role of inequality in the elections of each country, I will mainly focus on the perception of inequality through Latinobarómetro data. This subjective measure will be used due to how high levels of inequality can create dissatisfaction with the government (Castañeda, 2006; Cleary, 2006; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). If people perceive inequality to be high, they are more likely to have grievances towards the incumbent president, regardless of objective measures of inequality. Additionally, the extent to which leftist candidates tuned in to the anti-inequality sentiments will be measured using their party manifestos and news reports about the candidates.

To measure the economic impact of the crisis this research will utilise data from LAPOP on respondents' perception of their own economic situation and the country's economic situation as a whole. This will show whether people had a basis for dissatisfaction with the economic situation of their country and the president's inability to address the economic crisis. It will additionally illustrate to what extent voters were forced to reconsider their voting priorities due to their economic livelihood being threatened. Data on the proposed policies of the successful leftist candidates gathered from their party manifesto and news outlets will further show if the campaign promises of the leftist candidates line up with the demand for more economic protections for the working class.

5. Analysis

5.1 Chile

5.1.1 Anti-incumbent sentiment

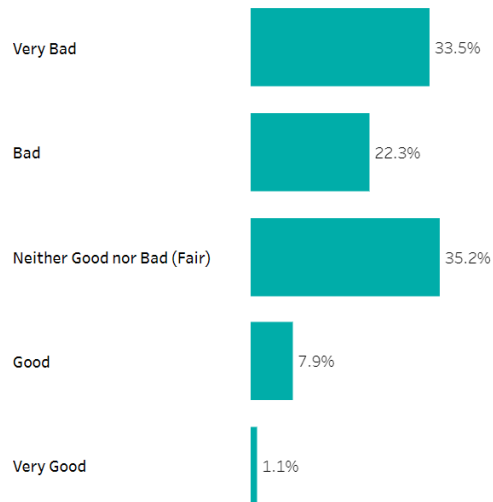


Figure 5: Perception of the performance of the Chilean president in 2021. Source: LAPOP Data Playground.

In 2021, the year of the presidential elections in Chile, the approval ratings of the incumbent president were notably low. Not even a tenth of respondents had a favourable view of Piñera (see figure 6). As he was not running for re-election, this may not seem to be significant for the election results. However, Piñera represented not only himself as president but also the political parties that are a part of his ruling coalition. Additionally, he represented his centre-right political ideology. Due to dissatisfaction with Piñera's term as president, voters could have been turned away from the parties of Chile Vamos, as they associated those parties with the policies of Piñera. Similarly, voters could have been turned off from voting for right-wing parties in general, as they sought a break from the right-wing governance of the previous four years.

While this data does show a significant level of dissatisfaction with the president, it is still unclear what caused this high disapproval rating. Something that might shine some light on this question is survey data on what citizens view to be the biggest problem within Chile. Roughly 30 percent of respondents perceived the most important problem to be within the category of economic issues, with unemployment and income distribution being among the

problems most frequently mentioned (see figure 6). This shows that economic problems were a salient issue in 2021 and could thus have played a part in the election of a leftist president. At the same time, it was not the only issue on people’s minds, as public safety and the coronavirus pandemic were also frequently mentioned as the most important problem in Chile.

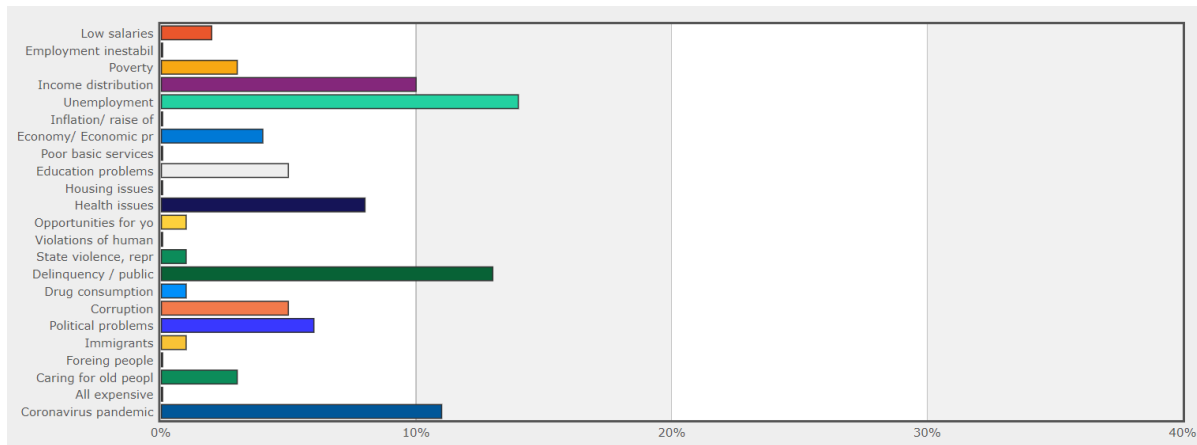


Figure 6: Perception of the most important problem in Chile in 2020. Source: Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

Looking at the party program of the winning leftist party Apruebo Dignidad, it is clear that economic policy was prominent in the campaign of their presidential candidate, Boric. He highlights four key policy proposals that are central to his plans. These four are universal healthcare, an improved pension program, free public education, and governance more focused on battling climate change (Apruebo Dignidad, 2021). The first three of these proposals centre around socio-economic issues. There appears to be a similarity between the issues that Chileans prioritised and those that Boric put at the centre of his presidential campaign. As the economic crisis showed how the lack of social safety nets endangered the lives of the economically vulnerable and the Covid-19 pandemic revealed the inherent flaws of a privatised healthcare system, there was increased societal demand to broaden the scope of the state. With a platform focused on improving the lives of the more vulnerable section of Chilean society and reducing structural inequality, Boric was able to capitalise on the renewed popularity of distributive economic policy.

Additionally, the anti-incumbent sentiment furthermore worked in his favour. For many voters, Piñera represented the previous two decades of neoliberal centrist governance. As this moderate governance has not produced the desired results for working-class Chileans, voters

sought to break with the establishment and support political outsiders and more radical candidates. This led to the run-off elections being between Boric, a young leftist former student protest leader, and José Kast, a conservative populist right-winger (Funk, 2021).

Aside from the popularity of Boric’s proposed policies, the legacy of the Pinochet regime also played a significant role in voters’ choice between the two candidates in the run-off. Throughout his campaign, Kast talked approvingly about Pinochet and his economic policies (Montes & Rivas Molina, 2021). Since there were a number of large protests directed at changing the socio-economic structures left behind by the Pinochet regime, his support of these policies was not popular with a large section of the population. Additionally, Kast’s father was revealed to be a member of the Nazi party before moving to Chile after the Second World War, which further helped political opponents paint him as a fascist (Associated Press in Berlin, 2021). Kast was thus still associated with previous governments and was seen as a continuation of the neoliberal policies established by Pinochet, while Boric was able to profile himself as a break from the past. He was consequently able to consolidate the anti-establishment vote.

5.1.2 Inequality

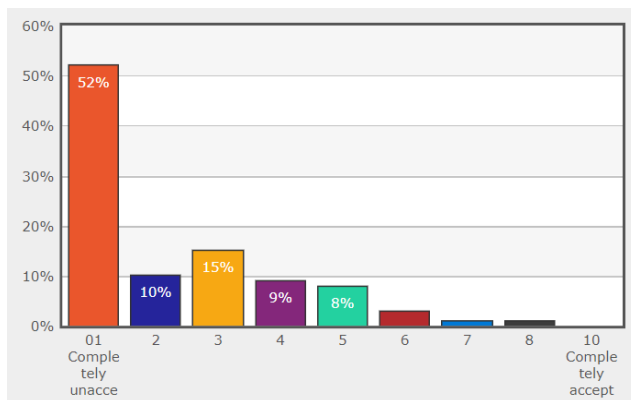


Figure 1: Perception of the acceptability of Chile’s level of inequality. Source: Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

Survey data from the Latinobarómetro shows that the majority of respondents in Chile viewed the current level of inequality as completely unacceptable (see figure 1). This indicates that Chilean citizens were unhappy with the state of the economy and wealth distribution prior to the elections. These issues of inequality are not new to Chilean society. Since the return of democracy, there have been a number of large-scale protests against the high levels of inequality and lack of social programs. The high levels of inequality are part of the legacy of

the neoliberal dictatorship led by Pinochet, who privatised many public goods, such as education and healthcare, and reduced social spending (Heine, 2020; Langman, 2019). Although these grievances had already been bubbling for a few decades, the economic shock could have made Chileans more aware of this issue, as poor people suffered the most from lockdowns and the pandemic highlighted the inequality in access to healthcare.

This increased awareness of inequality helped Boric in the presidential election in two different ways. Firstly, as previously discussed, it led to higher general dissatisfaction with the incumbent president. Secondly, leftist policies typically aim at reducing inequality, which heightens the appeal of the leftist candidate in this case. Both the dissatisfaction with the incumbent as a result of the increased perception of inequality and the increased demand for policies that combat inequality could be utilised by a leftist challenger to campaign for their election.

While Boric does not directly address inequality in the party programme for the election, several of the policies he proposes aim at increasing access to social services and education (Apruebo Dignidad, 2021). The proposed high quality free public education could work to decrease inequality of opportunity. He additionally called for higher tax rates on corporations and the wealthy to fund these projects (AQ Editors, 2021). These proposed policies play into the high public demand for a lowering of structural inequality within Chile. Boric and his left-wing coalition were able to benefit from the increased dissatisfaction with the government's inability to effectively combat inequality.

5.1.3 Economic Crisis

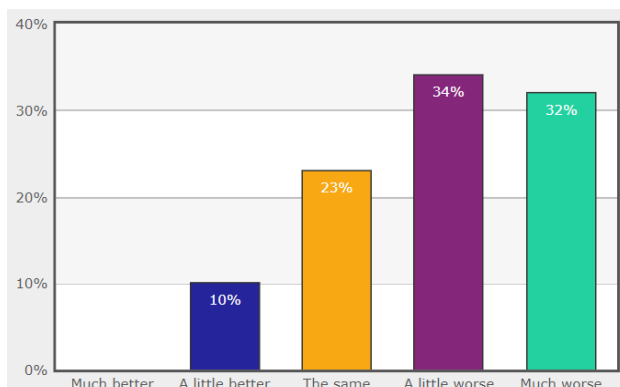


Figure 2: Perception of the current (2020) economic situation in Chile. Source: Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

The perceived economic reality in Chile significantly worsened in the year 2020 (see figure 2). This indicates a major economic shift in the build-up to the presidential elections of 2021. This economic downturn is similarly seen in the change in citizens' personal economic situation, as the majority of respondents describe their economic situation to have worsened in 2020 (see figure 3). This impact of the economic downturn on the daily economic livelihood of the general population could create a shift in the policy priorities for voters. Leftist policy generally focuses on improving the short-term economic reality of the working-class population. The threat that the economic crisis poses to working-class citizens could thus drive them to prioritise economic voting and support a leftist candidate.

Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?

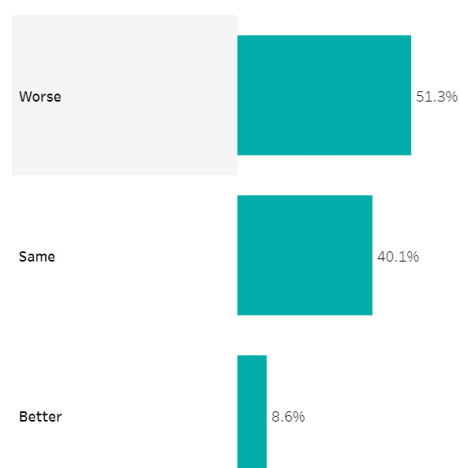


Figure 3: Perception of the change in the personal economic situation in Chile. Source: LAPOP Data Playground.

At the same time, the economic downturn created a general feeling of discontent towards the economic circumstances among the population. This can be observed through the fact that the majority of Chileans had a negative view of the economic situation in Chile in 2020 and perceived it to have worsened in that year (see figures 2 & 4). This negative assessment of the economy could transform into dissatisfaction with the economic policies of the government and lower approval ratings of the president. Economic factors tend to impact the general population more than other policy areas, especially in countries with high levels of inequality and poverty. Additionally, the economy is often seen as one of the main responsibilities of the

executive. The economic downturn in Chile could have led to dissatisfaction with the incumbent president and instigated a backlash against the coalition of parties he represented.

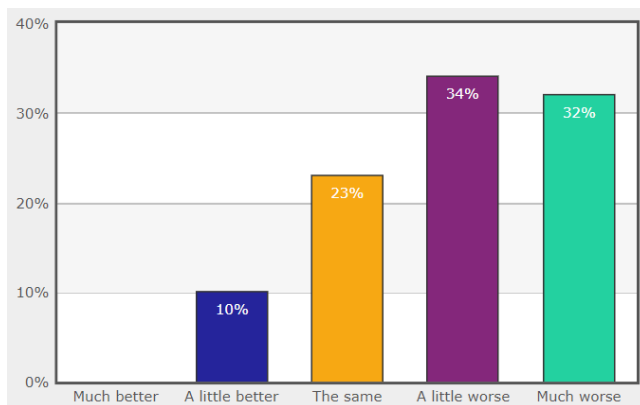


Figure 4: Perception of the economic situation compared to the previous year in Chile in 2020.

Source: Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

Since voters were looking for a change in the economic policy and more protection from the market, Boric could have been appealing to working-class voters. Among his policy plans for the presidency were plans to give free universal healthcare and overhaul the pension system to drastically increase the amount of pension retired Chileans receive (Apruebo Dignidad, 2021). The old pension system, which is a remnant of the Pinochet era, was the subject of numerous protests over the past few years (Heine, 2020). Boric's plans to change the pension system and his involvement in the student protest movement thus increased his popularity.

Boric's policies would help the people who were affected the most by the pandemic and economic shock. Meanwhile, his main opponent in the presidential election advocated for maintaining neoliberal economic policy and reducing state spending further (AQ Editors, 2021b; Funk, 2021). Based on economic policy plans, Boric could more effectively cater to the Chilean people that suffered greatly as a result of the pandemic and economic downturn. Furthermore, his plans signalled a change from the unpopular neoliberal policy of the previous decades, while his opponent sought to maintain the status quo.

5.2 Honduras

5.2.3 Anti-incumbent sentiment

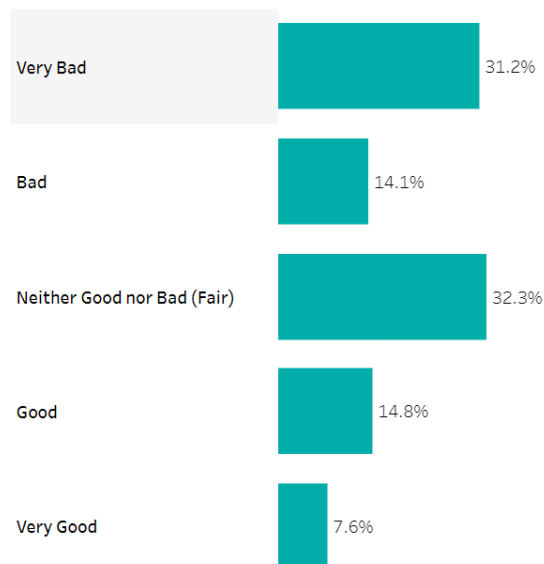


Figure 11: Perception of the performance of the Honduran president in 2021. Source: LAPOP Data Playground.

In 2021 the presidential approval ratings were not favourable to Hernández, as his party was seeking a fourth consecutive term. Less than a quarter of the population had a positive evaluation of the president, while 45 percent of respondents had a negative view of him (see figure 11). While Hernández was not running in the 2021 election as he had already served two terms in office, his party had been leading the country for the past 12 years and was one of the frontrunners in the election. There could be many reasons for this low approval rating, as his last years in office were dominated by political scandal. He was implicated in a large-scale corruption scandal, as well as a drug trafficking investigation by the United States leading to him getting extradited to the US in 2022 (BBC News, 2022). Additionally, Honduras has been struggling with issues of drug trafficking and gang violence for decades (Association for a More Just Society, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Nonetheless, survey data on the most important problem in Honduras in 2020 shows that economic issues were on the mind of many Honduran people, with around 40 percent of respondents naming issues which could be considered to be socio-economic issues see figure 12). Notably, income distribution is not as frequently named to be the most important issue as it is in Chile. This corresponds to the fact that Chileans had a more negative view of the level

of inequality within their country. The political scandals surrounding Hernández seem to additionally be seen as particularly significant for potential voters. However, while these scandals explain why voters did not want to vote for the ruling party, it does not explain why voters leaned more toward the left-wing Libre party instead of the centrist Liberal party. As will be discussed in a later section, the economic crisis in Honduras created the conditions in which leftist economic policy seemed more favourable to voters.

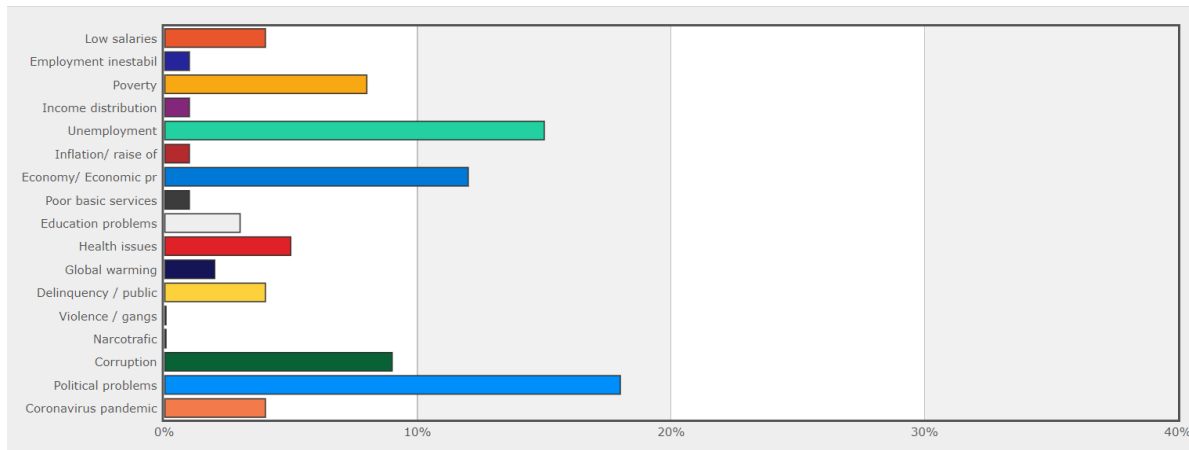


Figure 12: Perception of the most important problem in Honduras in 2020. *Source:* Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

Looking at the presidential campaign of the leftist candidate Xiomara Castro, economic issues are furthermore at the forefront of the stage. Economic policy is prevalent in Castro’s party manifesto and proposed policy ideas (O’Boyle, 2021; Partido Libre, 2021). On the other hand, corruption and the non-democratic governance of the previous president also played a major role in her campaign. In both the priorities of potential voters and the opposition campaign, the focus is split between the economic issues within the country and the political issue created by Hernández’s legacy. This shows that the economic crisis might not have been the most important factor in the elections. However, it still played a significant role in both the campaign and in voters’ priorities during the election.

While Hernández tried to distance himself from his successor Asfura in order to prevent his unpopularity from impacting the presidential candidate’s chances, he could not escape the association. His policy promises suggested a continuity of the policies enacted by Hernández. His dedication to preserving the unpopular status quo drove voters away who were dissatisfied with the Hernández government. Asfura was furthermore being investigated for embezzlement

that occurred during his time as mayor of Tegucigalpa (AQ Editors, 2021a; Perelló & Freeman, 2021). Considering the corruption accusations against Hernández, there seemed to be little difference between the incumbent president and the new candidate. As voters sought a break from the governance of Hernández, Castro gained popularity. Asfura’s embezzlement charge furthermore benefited Castro due to her anti-corruption program.

5.2.1 Inequality

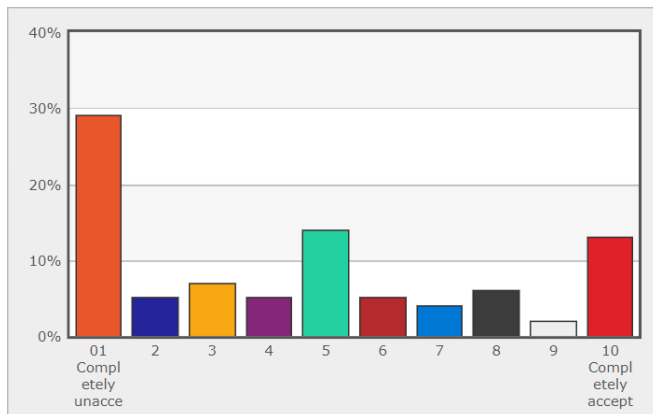


Figure 7: Perception of the acceptability of Honduras’ level of inequality. Source: Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

While the Hondurans’ view of the level of inequality in their country is not as extreme as in Chile, the majority of respondents still perceive the level of inequality to be unacceptable (see figure 7). This shows that there was a significant level of discontent with the level of inequality in Honduras and that this could potentially have been an important issue for voters and electoral campaigns. However, this issue seems to be less important than in Chile, where respondents had significantly stronger disapproval of the level of inequality within their country. While this means that inequality was likely a less important topic in Honduras than in Chile, there nevertheless seems to be a significant level of discontent with the level of inequality in Honduras.

Inequality furthermore appeared to be an essential part of the campaign of the winning Partido Libre. The contrast of the Honduran people who live in poverty while the elites fill their pockets by exploiting these people is highlighted immediately in the first paragraph of the party manifesto for the election (Partido Libre, 2021). Additionally, the main economic policies proposed by Partido Libre’s presidential candidate Xiomara Castro were primarily focused on combating inequality within Honduras (O’Boyle, 2021). The combination of concern from

Honduran citizens about inequality and the important role it played in Castro’s campaign shows that the topic of inequality resonated with voters and played a role in the success of this campaign.

5.2.2 Economic Crisis

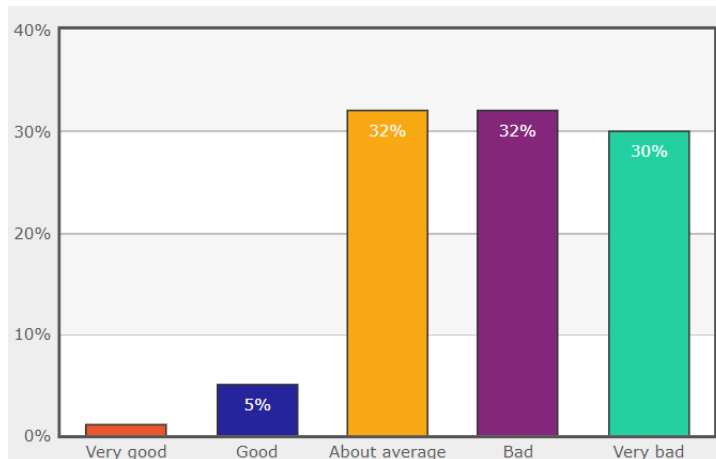


Figure 8: Perception of the current (2020) economic situation in Honduras. Source: Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

A majority of respondents considered the current economic situation in Honduras to be poor, with 30 percent of respondents even categorising it as very bad (see figure 8). This is not entirely surprising considering Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and has been so for a while. More notable is the fact that almost half of respondents perceived the economy to have declined in 2020 (see figure 9). This indicates an economic downturn in Honduras in that period, which was observed by potential voters. The perceived change in the economic situation is noticeably stronger than in Chile. This could be because Honduras is a poorer country and is more vulnerable to economic shocks as a result of this.

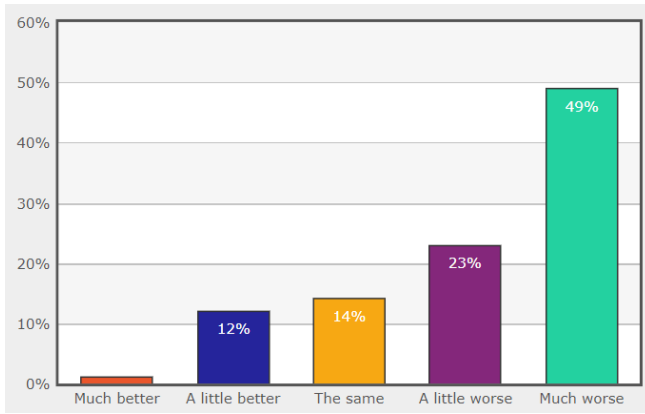


Figure 9: Perception of the economic situation compared to the previous year in Honduras in 2020. Source: Latinobarómetro Online Analysis.

The fact that Honduran society was hit particularly hard by the economic crisis can furthermore be seen in the perceived change in people’s personal economic situations, as two-thirds of respondents reported to be worse off economically in 2021 compared to the year prior (see figure 10). This illustrates that the economic downturn affected the Honduran people’s personal economic livelihood, which could have made them more conscious of economic policy and more responsive to leftist economic ideas. Additionally, it could have created a significant grievance against the incumbent president, Juan Hernández.

Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?

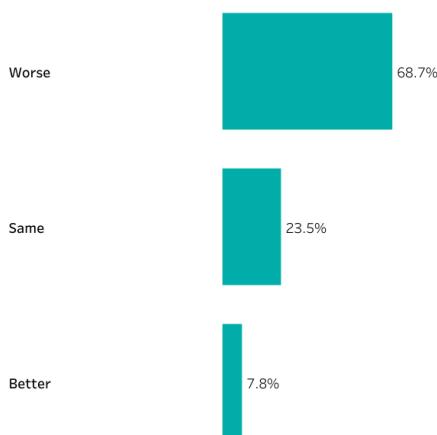


Figure 10: Perception of the change in the personal economic situation in Chile. Source: LAPOP Data Playground.

The negative sentiment on the economic status of Honduras was echoed in Partido Libre’s party manifesto. It draws attention to the country’s high poverty levels and how people’s

livelihoods were threatened by the pandemic and the economic crisis that came from it. Next to combating inequality, the party's economic policy plans are additionally focused on lowering structural poverty and creating social programs to protect the poor (O'Boyle, 2021; Partido Libre, 2021). As potential voters had their direct livelihoods threatened by the economic crisis, this raised the importance of this issue for voters. Castro offered policy solutions that would help the people affected by the crisis, which gave voters a bigger incentive to vote for her. At the same time, the recession created a shared grievance against president Hernández.

6. Discussion

As shown in this research, several factors worked together to generate electoral support for leftist challengers in Chile and Honduras. Firstly, there was a strong anti-incumbent attitude present in both countries, seen through the low approval ratings of the incumbent president. This tipped the scales in favour of opposition candidates. The first expectation of the importance of anti-incumbent sentiment in the elections is thus supported by the data from both countries.

However, anti-incumbent voting does not explain the popularity of leftist candidates by itself. It is furthermore significant to note the reasons for such negative perceptions of the incumbent, considering that this could have impacted what parties voters turned to. In the case of Chile, the low public opinion of the incumbent president was mostly due to his government's failure to reduce inequality and re-examine previously privatised government services, such as education and healthcare. The expectation that dissatisfaction with the incumbent's economic policy was the main driving factor behind the anti-incumbent sentiment hence holds true in the case of Chile. In Honduras, these economic factors were less important but still played a significant role. The corruption and drug trafficking allegations against the incumbent president turned many voters away from the incumbent party. Castro was able to garner votes from voters who were disillusioned with the incumbent party using an anti-corruption platform. Nevertheless, the high poverty levels and lack of social programs were still important issues for voters as well as Castro's campaign. The expectation about the cause of the anti-incumbent sentiment is thus weakly supported but the exceptional circumstances surrounding the elections made the relationship between the economic policy of the incumbent and anti-incumbent sentiment less significant.

Secondly, there was a significant level of dissatisfaction with the level of inequality in both countries. This discontent was the most visible in Chile but was also strong in Honduras. The elevated level of dissatisfaction with inequality in Chile is predominantly due to the socio-economic structures that were established during the Pinochet regime but are still present today. The low government pension and the privatization of education and healthcare were policies often protested in the past decade. These policies furthermore exacerbated inequality and made working-class Chileans more vulnerable to economic shocks. Boric's programme, which focused on changing these unpopular policies and reducing inequality, granted him a significant level of support among the segment of the population who were hurt the most by these neoliberal policies. In Honduras, inequality was likewise an important topic in the lead-up to the election. There was a substantial degree of dissatisfaction with the level of inequality in Honduras. These Hondurans were attracted to Castro as a result of the important role that reducing structural inequality played in her electoral campaign. The assumption that inequality was a significant factor in driving support for leftist candidates is thus supported by the data in both countries.

In both countries, there was an economic downturn that directly impacted the livelihood of a large section of the population. In Honduras, the impact of the economic downturn on the Honduran economy and on citizens' personal economic situation appears to be particularly strong. This could be due to Honduras being a relatively poor country with a high poverty rate, which makes both the economy as a whole and the Honduran people more vulnerable to economic shocks. The impact on people's economic security made them more supportive of policies that increase government spending to reduce poverty. It additionally raised dissatisfaction with the incumbent president, as voters might have felt that he did not do enough to help poor Hondurans during the crisis. Castro was able to benefit from both these sentiments by proposing a break from the neoliberal policy of the past decade and promising to implement more policies that focus on reducing poverty. In Chile, a similar mechanism can be observed. Chileans saw the national economy and their own economic circumstances decline. Boric proposed to reduce economic insecurity through the collectivization of previously privatised government programs and overhauling the pension system. As voters were more receptive to redistributive ideology as a result of the personal economic livelihood being threatened, they were more likely to vote for Boric. The expectation that the economic crisis was an important factor in the success of leftist candidates is thus supported by both cases.

7. Conclusion

This research shows that economic voting was a significant factor in explaining the success of leftist presidential candidates in Chile and Honduras. This mechanism was particularly strong in Chile, where voters were dissatisfied with the neoliberal institutions that were still left over from the Pinochet dictatorship. They were unsatisfied with the inequality and economic vulnerability of the poor that the continuance of neoliberal governance caused. Boric was able to garner a large number of votes due to the dissatisfaction with the incumbent president and his promises to overhaul the education, healthcare, and pension system. The strength of economic voting was a bit weaker in Honduras. This comes as a result of the special circumstances surrounding the election, with the incumbent president being suspected of drug trafficking and large-scale corruption. This scandal overshadowed many other issues that were going on in Honduras. However, economic issues were also important in the elections. There were high levels of dissatisfaction with the economic reality in Honduras and the successful Partido Libre had economic policy as an essential element of the presidential campaign.

All in all, the expectations laid out at the start of this research are all supported by the analysed data of both countries. However, the importance of economic considerations in the elections is considerably weaker in Honduras as a result of the special circumstances surrounding the incumbent president and the elections. Based on these results, the answer to the research question is that leftist candidates had electoral success due to an increased demand for more distributive policies and more government spending combined with a strong anti-incumbent sentiment. Both the increased demand for leftist policy and the anti-incumbent sentiment were fired up by the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic.

Considering that economic issues were important in both the elections in countries with vastly different economic and political circumstances, it could indicate that this same mechanism could have been present in other Latin American countries where leftist parties enjoyed post-pandemic electoral success. It additionally shows that economic voting is still a significant predictor of the electoral success of opposition candidates. Lastly, this research highlights the importance of region-wide economic crises in explaining region-wide political shifts. In practice, leftist parties in Latin America could use the insights of this research to better utilise the public demands for more distributive policies and stronger safety nets by putting these issues at the forefront of their campaign.

There are, however, some limitations to the scope of this research. Firstly, due to time and money constraints, I could not conduct my own survey with questions that more strongly resemble the causal mechanisms at play. Additionally, due to how recent the elections were, with some elections where leftist candidates are on course to win occurring this year, the data on this development is still incomplete. Not all survey data conducted during the election year has been released yet. This resulted in having to utilise survey data from 2020 due to a lack of data from 2021. Although there is no indication to assume the responses changed radically within that year, more recent data would make the relationship more compelling. Lastly, the extent to which the findings can be applied to the broader region is constrained by the small number of cases. While the presence of a similar mechanism in such notably different countries increases the chance of this same mechanism having occurred in other Latin American countries that recently elected leftist presidents, further case studies and quantitative research will have to be done to fully know if this is the case.

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