Insights Series #156

Who Tolerates Military Coups under Public Health Emergencies in the Americas?

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Key Findings:

- Willingness to justify (tolerate) military coups during public health emergencies is highest in Jamaica and lowest in Uruguay
- Food and economic insecurity are particularly strong predictors of tolerance for military coups during public health emergencies: those without reserves of food and those whose conditions worsened in the past year are more likely to tolerate a military coup
- Presidential approval is correlated with tolerance for military coups during public health emergencies: more positive evaluations of presidential performance predict lower coup tolerance
- Age is a strong predictor of coup tolerance: older age cohorts are less likely to condone military coups
- Higher education, along with greater wealth, predicts lower levels of coup tolerance

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In the past year or so, the world has experienced an "epidemic of coups" as it continues to struggle against the Covid-19 pandemic.[1] Public health emergencies profoundly shape countries' economic and social conditions. Scholars have also connected the Covid-19 pandemic to regime change.[2] Meanwhile, the role played by militaries in domestic affairs across the Americas has increased recently and in particular during the pandemic, leading to some concern that norms could shift in favor of military intervention which could fuel regime change.[3] Given this situation amid the persistence of coronavirus pandemic, it is worthwhile to examine public tolerance for military coups under conditions of public health emergencies.

This *Insights* report analyzes data from LAPOP's 2021 AmericasBarometer, focusing on individuals' tolerance of military coups under conditions of public health emergencies, and testing predictors of this attitude. In this survey, 10,014 individuals answered the following question:[4]

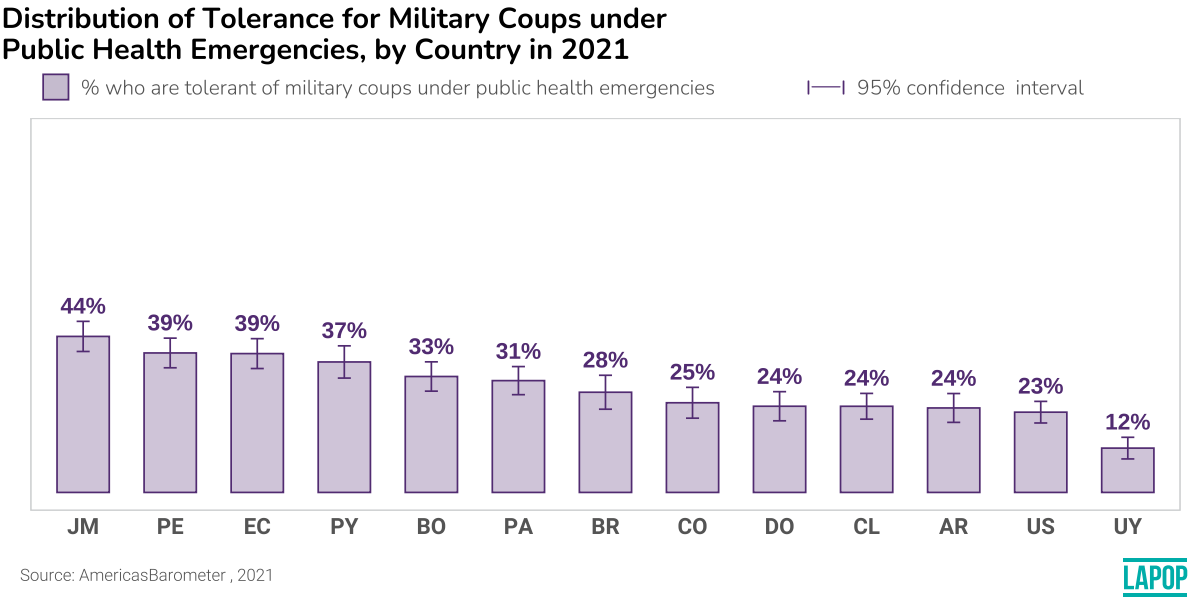
JC13COVID: In your opinion, would a military coup be justified when there is a public health emergency like the coronavirus?

Respondents selected either "It would be justified" or "It would not be justified." I refer to the former as tolerance for military coups.

Minorities Express Tolerance for Coups under Public Health Emergencies

Figure 1[5] summarizes responses by country, showing percentage of public tolerance for military coups under conditions of public health emergencies, for the subset of countries that were surveyed about this topic in the 2021 AmericasBarometer. The country with the highest tolerance for military coups during public health emergencies is Jamaica (43.8%), while the country with the least tolerance is Uruguay (12.4%). For all countries surveyed, tolerance for military coups is below the 50 percent point. However, there is significant variation in tolerance levels across countries.

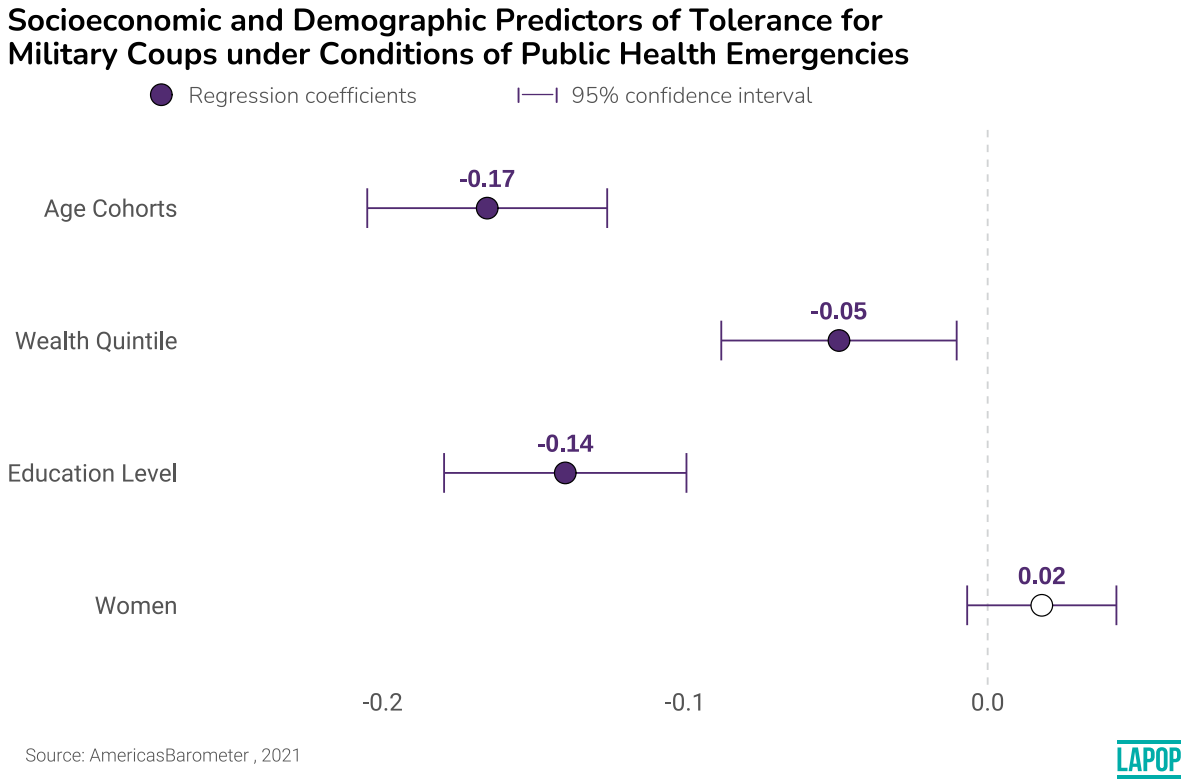
Figure 1.



The results for some countries are consistent with prior findings about tolerance for military coups under various conditions, such as during times of high crime rates—e.g., reports based on the AmericasBarometer have previously found high tolerance for coups in Jamaica.[6] Conversely, it is worth noting that some variance exists between country rankings with respect to tolerance for military coups (as shown in Figure 1) and findings about tolerance for *executive* coups in the same nations.[7]

These cross-national differences warrant more attention. One fruitful avenue might be to consider potential correlations between tolerance for military coups and the strength and success of militarization as part of countries' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the remainder of this report focuses on individual-level predictors of variation in responses among those in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region.[8]

Figure 2.



The Young and Those Marginalized by Low Wealth and Education Are More Likely to Tolerate Military Coups in a Pandemic

To assess the extent to which socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of individuals predict their likelihood to tolerate military coups during public health emergencies, I turn to a logistic regression analysis to study the dichotomous variable, which is coded so the model predicts the likelihood of expressing a coup "would be justified" (versus "not justified"). The analysis in Figure 2 includes an initial set of independent variables: age, wealth, education, and gender.[9]

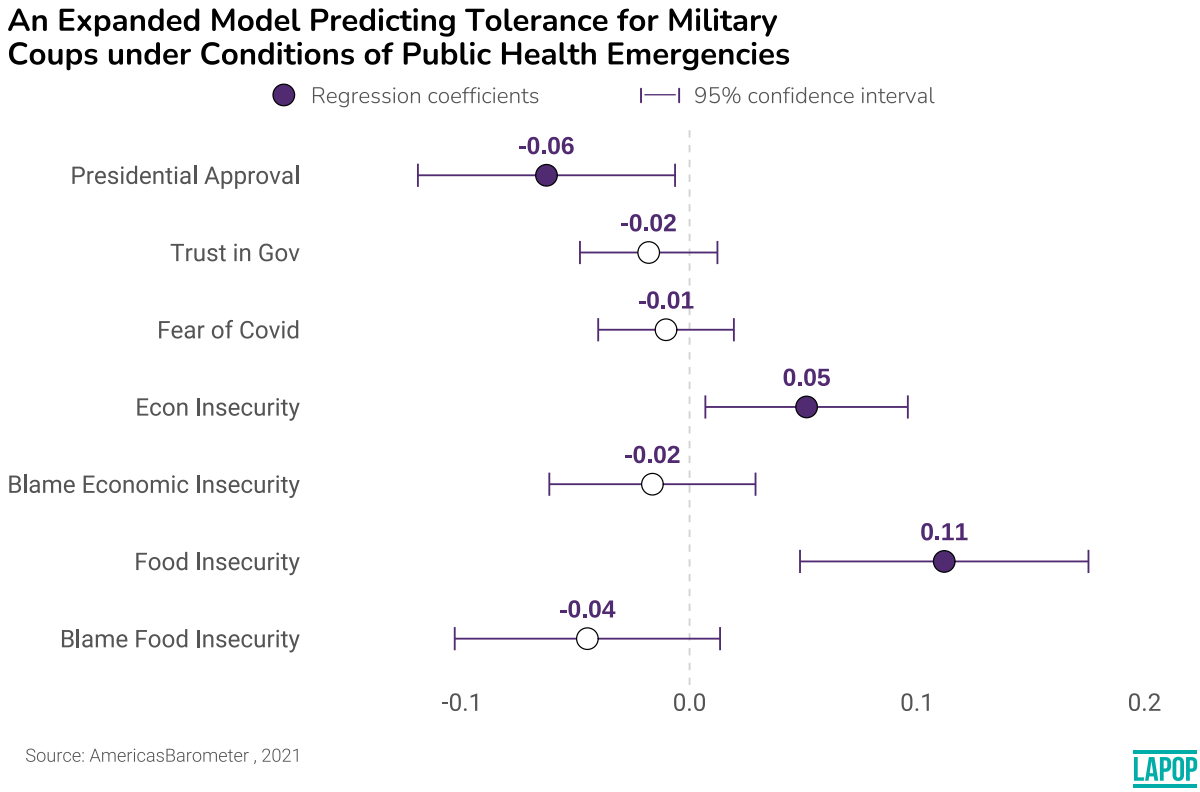
The dots in Figure 2 represent the estimated probability of change in the dependent variable given a minimum to maximum change in each independent variable; the bars which intersect them represent the 95% confidence interval around each estimate. If the bar for a given variable intersects the dotted line, the coefficient of the variable is not statistically significant; these cases are represented by open circles in place of dots.

I expect that individuals in younger age cohorts will be more likely to tolerate military coups under conditions of a public health emergency. This expectation is in line with the findings of past research by LAPOP-affiliated scholars, who, for example, analyzed survey data from Peru to find that youth (operationalized as ages 18 to 24) were less likely to reject military coups than respondents 45 years and older. [10] Others have also argued that younger age cohorts, specifically millennials, tend to be less opposed to military takeovers of their governments.[11] I did not find prior scholarship with which to derive expectations for the remaining three variables (gender, wealth, and education).

Figure 2[12] illustrates that gender is not a statistically significant predictor of tolerance for military coups under a health emergency. However, age, wealth, and education each negatively predict tolerance for coups. One's age cohort is the strongest sociodemographic predictor of tolerance for coups of those independent variables included in this model. A change from the lowest age cohort to the highest is associated with a decrease of 17 percentage points in the likelihood of expressing tolerance for military coups during a public health emergency. This result is in line with the expectation noted above: older respondents are less likely to condone military coups under a public health emergency.

Education similarly predicts a lower likelihood of expressing coup tolerance—as education rises from its minimum to maximum level, the likelihood of expressing tolerance falls by 14 percentage points. The same negative correlation exists, albeit to a lesser degree, with respect to wealth—on average the wealthier the individual, the less likely they are to tolerate military coups in conditions of public health emergencies. Those who belong to lower wealth categories may be predisposed to suffer from more economic hardship during the Covid-19 pandemic. In theory, the exacerbation of these economic conditions during public health emergencies may serve as a driver of public opinion regarding tolerance for military coups.

Figure 3.



Economic Insecurity Predicts Tolerance for Coups under Public Health Emergencies

Scholars have proposed a wide variety of explanations for variation in tolerance of military coups, in general, and—to a lesser extent—under conditions of public health emergencies. In this section, I consider explanations that focus on select key factors: evaluations of the government, attitudes towards the pandemic, and resource insecurity.

First, prior research indicates the possibility of a "rally effect" during public health emergencies—in brief, the notion is that support for incumbent leaders increases when crisis strikes. Likewise, that research finds no increased (or decreased) tendency to tolerate extralegal removal of that leader.[13] From those findings, I derive the expectation that attitudes toward the sitting executive may shape tolerance for coups under public health emergencies: the more favorable one views the leader, the less likely they ought to be to condone a coup. To measure support for the incumbent in the context of the pandemic, I include a measure of presidential approval in the analysis. Prior research has found a connection between support for an incumbent and tolerance for other types of coups.[14] I test whether this connection appears these days and in reference to health emergencies.

To further expand on existing research, I also include a more general evaluation of trust in the national government in the analyses. This measure, newly included in the 2021 AmericasBarometer, asks individuals how much they trust the national government to do what is right.

Second, existing literature has investigated the connection between the psychological burdens of a public health emergency and support for political violence.[15] Essentially, the stress of a pandemic, and its related anxieties, may exacerbate desires to impose new order and structure. This renewed order may be pursued through regime change through anti-systemic actions. To test the predictive power of psychological burdens on tolerance for coups, I include a measure of anxiety regarding the Covid-19 pandemic in my analysis. In effect, this measure captures the level of concern or worry that individuals have about the pandemic. Congruent with existing literature, I expect that heightened anxiety about public health conditions will predict higher levels of tolerance for military coups.

Third, resource insecurity may matter. Specifically, I consider the relevance of conditions of economic and food insecurity during the pandemic and whether individuals attributed those conditions to the pandemic or other causes. I posit that experiences with worsening economic insecurity and food insecurity will predict increased tolerance for military coups.[16] Further, I expect that the attribution of these insecure conditions to the pandemic will heighten tolerance for military coups in the context of public health emergencies.

Figure 3 presents the results of a logistic analysis which includes the measures described above. In alignment with the expectation that higher presidential approval would predict lower tolerance for military coups as a part of the dynamics included in a "rally effect," presidential approval is a statistically significant predictor of tolerance for military coups.[17]A shift from an assessment that one's president's performance was "Very Bad" to an evaluation of presidential performance as "Very Good" is predicted to decrease the likelihood of tolerating military coups by 6 percentage points.

In contrast, the variable assessing the predicting power of individuals' trust in government to do what is right is statistically insignificant.[18] Interestingly, and going against previous research results, an individual's assessment of their trust in government to take the correct course of action does not predict their tolerance for a military coup that would depose the government.

Next, and also contrary to my expectations, the level of concern about Covid-19 is not a statistically significant predictor of tolerance for military coups.[19] While previous studies suggested that the psychological burden of a pandemic is correlated with anti-systemic attitudes, I find this may not carry to the Latin America and Caribbean region. It is possible that this variable, which asks respondents about their level of worry that they or someone in their household will get sick from the coronavirus, does not sufficiently capture concern over the economic hardship or other distressing conditions that result from a pandemic. Future research should consider whether other concerns that arise due to a public health crisis (like economic hardship due to job losses or raises in food prices due to supply chain issues) generate results in line with other scholarship on this topic.

Both food insecurity and economic insecurity are significant predictors of tolerance for military coups during public health emergencies.[20] A shift from an assessment that one's economic condition improved or did not change to the belief that it worsened is predicted to increase the likelihood of tolerating military coups by 5 percentage points. A change from not experiencing food insecurity to experiencing food insecurity is predicted to increase the likelihood of tolerance for coups by 11 percentage points. These two findings support the posited relationship that some individuals who experience economic or food-related hardship are more inclined to support or tolerate military coups against their government.[21]

Finally, contrary to the expectation that individuals who attributed their hardships to the pandemic would more readily tolerate military coups during pandemic conditions, attributions of economic insecurity and food insecurity to the pandemic are not significant predictors of military coup tolerance.[22] My analysis of these variables compares individuals who experienced hardship and either did or did not attribute it to the pandemic to those who did not experience hardship (the baseline category). The results suggest that attribution of the hardship is not as strong a predictor of tolerance as the experience of the hardship itself; it may be that persistent systemic hardships are more consequential for attitudes toward coups.

Conclusion

This *Insights* report examines tolerance for military coups in conditions of public health emergency and the individual-level factors that predict this attitude. While average levels of tolerance vary greatly by country, there is also variance independent of country-level effects. Concurrent with prior research on the influence of demographic factors,[23] age, wealth, and education are significant predictors of tolerance for military coups. A key takeaway from this report is that worsening economic and food insecurity conditions are associated with a willingness to tolerate military coups during public health emergencies.

The emerging body of scholarship on the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on democratic backsliding is divided. Some posit that public health emergencies result in a decline in the protection of civil liberties, contributing to backsliding.[24] Others propose a rally effect where public health emergencies augment support for an executive, muting anti-systemic attitudes.[25] This report enters into that discussion by considering the connection between concern about the pandemic and tolerance for coups. An important finding in this report is that anxiety about the coronavirus pandemic does not have a statistically significant effect on tolerance for coups. That is good news from the perspective of the democratic backsliding debate; however, it is worth noting that the survey question posed to respondents may not accurately capture the full scope of pandemic-related anxiety.

It is worth noting that one notion in the existing literature is that the mobilization of troops or other militarized forces in response to public health emergencies plays a part in tolerance for military coups.[26] Some studies have argued that the militarization of pandemic response creates a "coronavirus cavalry" that disrupts the balance between military and other governmental powers, which may affect the prevalence of political change including military coups.[27] In the 2021 AmericasBarometer, no questions are available in the dataset that would make it possible to test this connection. However, this remains an important theme that could be tested in future rounds of the survey project.

Notes

1. Arieff and Ploch Blanchard (2022), Taylor (2022).

2. Cassani (2021).

3. Gedan (2021).

4. More individuals were asked the question than responded to it. In sum, 10,633 were asked the question, of which 619 responded "don't know" or declined to give a response. Thus, the item non-response rate for this variable is 5.8%.

5. All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: 2021 v.1.2_w. Figure 1 is created by coding those who say they would find a coup justified as 100, and those who would not as 0.

6. Harriott et al. (2020). From 2006 to 2019, Jamaica's tolerance for military coups under high crime levels rose from 47.5% to 65.0%, with wealth quintiles, place of residence (urban/rural), and age being the biggest predictors of this attitude.

7. See Orbay (forthcoming). The result for Colombia is interesting when considered against the country's comparatively higher tolerance for executive coups: data from the AmericasBarometer (not shown here) reveal that Colombians rank among the highest in terms of tolerance for executive coups (at 34.2%, higher than Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia); yet their tolerance for military coups is only 25.2%, less than in each of these three nations.

8. While the US is included in Figure 1, it is omitted from analyses for Figures 2 and 3 in this report.

9. These independent variables were re-coded from 0 to 1. The dependent variable is coded so that 0 represents "It is not justified" and 1 represents "It is justified." Age is coded into these cohorts: ≤25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66+. Additionally, in order to avoid excluding non-binary respondents from the analysis, we recode the gender variable to include non-binary respondents with women. The education variable is also recoded in a way that combines respondents who received only a primary level of education with those who received no education into a single category. Finally, the wealth variable, for the 2021 AmericasBarometer which is used in this analysis, is based on the principal components analysis of the following questions: r3, r4, r7, r15, r18, r18n, r16, and r27.

10. Seligson and Carrión (2002).

11. Foa and Mounk (2016).

12. Country fixed effects are included as controls in the analysis, but excluded from the figure itself.

13. Lupu and Zechmeister (2021).

14. Seligson and Carrión (2002).

15. Bartusevičius, et al. (2021).

16. Cassell, Booth, Seligson (2018).

17. Presidential Approval was measured by variable **M1**, asking "Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of the President [insert name]?" Respondents could answer "Very Good" "Good" "Neither Good or Bad (Fair)" "Bad" or "Very Bad." For the purpose of this analysis, responses are recoded to a 0 to 1 scale, with 0 reflecting "Very Bad," and 1 reflecting "Very Good." Hence, the analysis measures the change in likelihood of coup tolerance as presidential approval changes from low to high.

18. Trust in government was measured by variable **ANESTG**, asking "How much do you trust the national government to do what is right?" Respondents had the choice to answer "A lot" "Somewhat" "A little" or "Not at all." Responses were recoded to a 0 to 1 scale, with "A lot" and "Somewhat" categorized as 1 and "A little" or "Not at all" categorized under 0. Thus, this measures the change in likelihood of coup tolerance as trust in government changes from relatively low to relatively high.

19. Pandemic-related anxiety was measured by variable **COVID2AT**, asking "How worried are you about the possibility that you or someone in your household will get sick from coronavirus in the next 3 months?" Respondents could answer on a 1-4 scale from "Very worried" to "Not worried at all." The variable was recoded on a 0 to 1 scale, with 1 reflecting relatively high concern and 0 reflecting relatively low concern. This measures the change in likelihood of coup tolerance as pandemic-related anxiety changes from low to high.

20. Economic conditions were measured by variable **IDIO2**, asking "Do you think that your current economic situation is better, the same, or worse than it was twelve months ago?" Respondents could answer "Better," "Same," or "Worse." This variable is coded on a 0 to 1 scale, with 1 reflecting "Worse" and 0 representing the other two choices. Thus, it shows the change in likelihood of coup tolerance as economic situation worsens.

    Food insecurity is similarly measured by variable **FS2**, asking "In the past three months, because of lack of money or other resources, did your household ever run out of food?" This variable is dichotomous, with 1 representing "Yes" and 0 representing "No." Thus, the analysis measures the change in likelihood to tolerate coups as food insecurity changes from "No" to "Yes."

21. When analyzed alone (with country-fixed effects and gender, age, wealth, and education controlled), these variables also had positive and statistically significant predicting power, both of which continued when they were analyzed together with other variables.

22. Attribution of economic and food insecurity conditions were measured variables **IDIO2COV** and **FS2COVIDN**, respectively. Following the questions and economic conditions and food insecurity (see earlier endnote), these ask "And did that mainly happen because of the coronavirus or for another reason?" Both variables are coded on a 0 to 1 scale, with 1 representing "Yes" and 0 representing "No."

23. Seligson and Carrión (2002).

24. Repucci and Slipwitz (2021).

25. Avritzer and Rennó (2021); Lupu and Zechmeister (2021).

26. Adetuyi (2021).

27. Gedan (2021); see also Gustafson (2021).

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As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP Lab is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.

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