



FINAL REPORT
JUNE 2024

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

REGIONAL SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

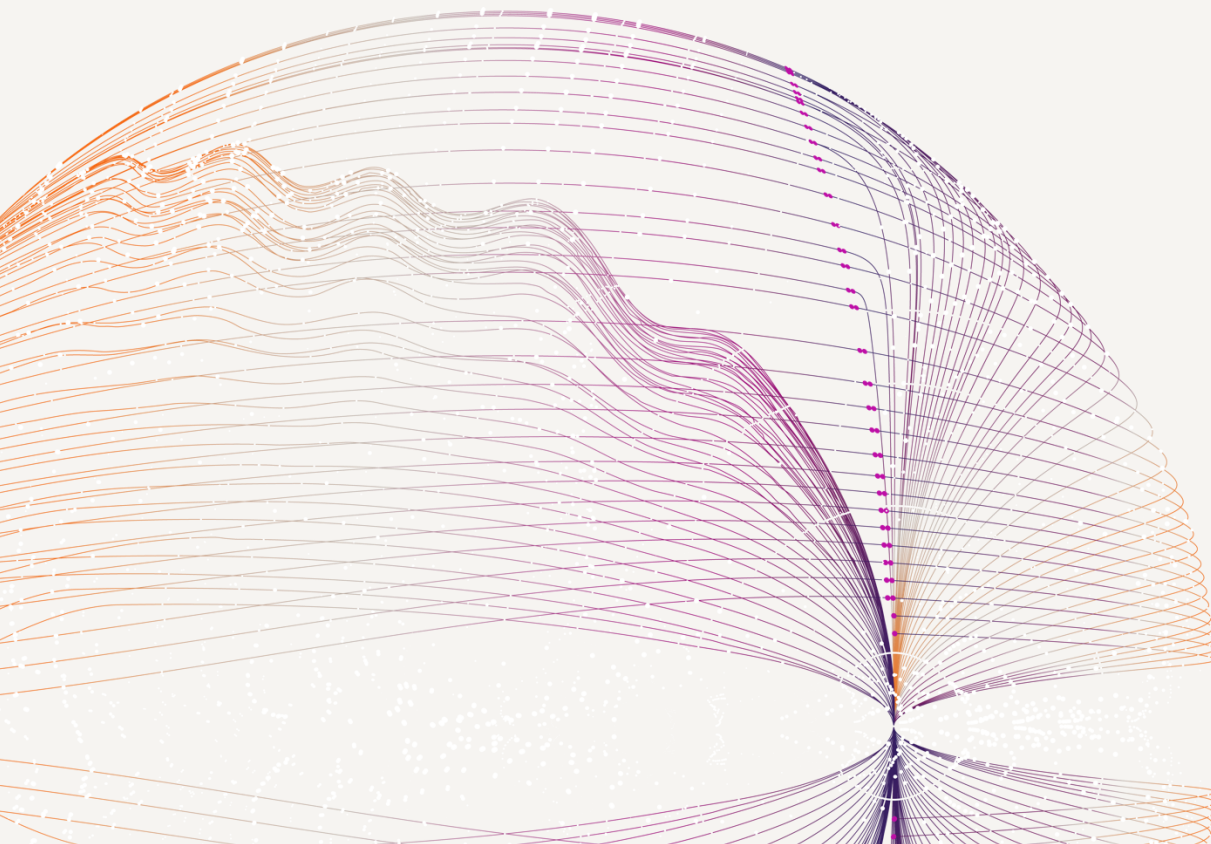


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This brief summarizes the main findings from three related studies examining the connection between democratic backsliding and migration in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The full results are presented in three companion reports, available [here](#).

Key Findings and Implications

Analysis of multiple data sources reveals a conditional relationship between democratic backsliding and migration in LAC. While democratic declines do not always contribute to population outflows, backsliding in some cases has increased migration, particularly when it affects livelihoods through widespread repression or causes deterioration in economic and security conditions.

In Nicaragua, the 2018 government crackdown on public protests led to a significant spike in migration to the United States and Costa Rica. Other key backsliding events since Daniel Ortega's return to power in 2006 had no discernible effect on migration.

In El Salvador, available data offer no evidence that democratic erosion since Nayib Bukele's 2019 election has contributed to an uptick in migration.

These findings confirm the importance of investing in strategies that preserve and expand respect for human rights and democratic freedoms in LAC. While not all backsliding episodes contribute to migration, it is difficult to know in advance whether specific periods of erosion will cause mass departures. For this reason, the best strategy is to support vibrant democracies that protect individual freedoms and restrain executive authority throughout the region.

Background

Democratic backsliding is defined as the gradual dismantling of democracy from the inside by popularly elected leaders. It typically occurs through executive aggrandizement, whereby anti-democratic leaders expand their power by undermining checks and balances and includes measures that undermine electoral integrity and restrict public expression. Democratic backsliding affects all world regions, including LAC, where erosion in the last two decades has undermined progress toward democratic consolidation in several countries. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset, more than a dozen LAC countries have experienced backsliding episodes since 2000.

The research team used multiple data sources to study how backsliding affects migration throughout LAC and in two priority countries, Nicaragua and El Salvador. This included: 1) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data on encounters at the Southwest Land Border that tracks the number of *individual encounters* by country of origin from 2004 to 2024; 2) opinion poll data series that tracks *migration intentions* for a large set of LAC countries from 2004 to

2023; and 3) Google Trends and Twitter data that provide alternative measures of migration intentions and estimates of country-to-country migration flows.

Main Results

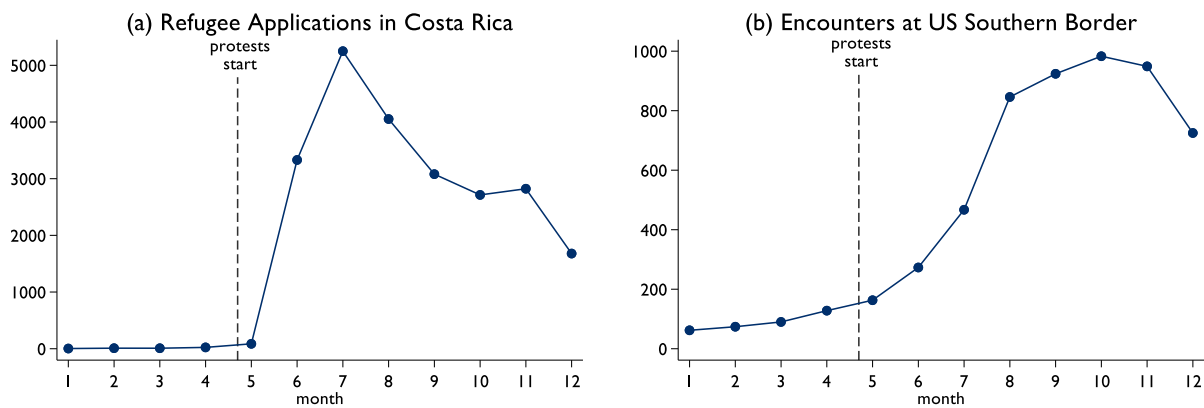
The analysis reveals a conditional relationship between democratic backsliding and migration: while democratic declines are not always related to migration pressures, backsliding has increased migration when it affects livelihoods through widespread repression and/or when it causes deterioration in economic and security conditions. To understand why some types of backsliding contribute to migration, this analysis focuses on multiple backsliding events that occurred during an extended period of democratic decline in Nicaragua following Ortega's return to power in 2006, and a comparison of Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Nicaragua Conclusions

The clearest evidence of a direct connection between democratic erosion and migration is observed in the study's analysis of the immediate aftermath of the government's 2018 crackdown on public protests in Nicaragua. Figure 1 below plots monthly refugee applications submitted by Nicaraguans in Costa Rica during 2018 (left side) and encounters by the U.S. CBP agency (right side) for the same period. We observe a substantial increase in refugee applications starting in June, suggesting an immediate spike in emigration following the crackdown in April and May. The CBP data likewise show a steady growth in encounters, peaking in August to November – a delay that likely reflects the greater difficulty of making the journey to the U.S. Southwest border. The research team used an event-study regression framework to show that this is a causal relationship that cannot be attributed to other short-term factors within Nicaragua or region-wide trends in the Central American sub-region. Other data corroborate these findings. Specifically, we find that Google searches related to migration increased substantially in the months following the 2018 crackdown, and we observe a spike in migration intentions in the 2019 opinion poll data among regime opponents.

Nicaragua experienced a substantial increase in migration intentions and actual migration from 2019 to 2024. Survey data show that migration intentions jumped from 30 percent in 2019 to over 50 percent in 2021 and 2023. This was matched by a significant increase in migrants encountered at the U.S. Southwest border. In FY 2022, for example, more than 160,000 Nicaraguan encounters were recorded, compared to less than 10,000 in 2019. The analysis indicates that several factors contributed to this surge, including the direct effects of the regime's ongoing public repression and the indirect effect of repressive policies on economic conditions. External factors, including COVID-19 and two hurricanes that struck Nicaragua in 2020, also contributed to the recent spike in emigration.

Figure 1: Migrant Flows from Nicaragua to Costa Rica and the U.S., 2018



To understand why some types of democratic erosion contribute to migration, the research team also examined two prior backsliding events in Nicaragua: 1) the 2014 constitutional amendment that removed term limits and 2) the 2016 election in which key opposition figures were barred from running. These represent key points in Nicaragua’s steady slide toward authoritarianism under the Ortega regime and are typical of the strategies anti-democratic incumbents throughout LAC use to centralize their hold on power and limit the threat posed by elections. The analysis shows no evidence of increases in migration to the U.S. or migration intentions in response to these prior events. We conclude that because these events did not include widespread public repression or cause a deterioration in economic/security conditions, they did not generate an uptick in migration pressures.

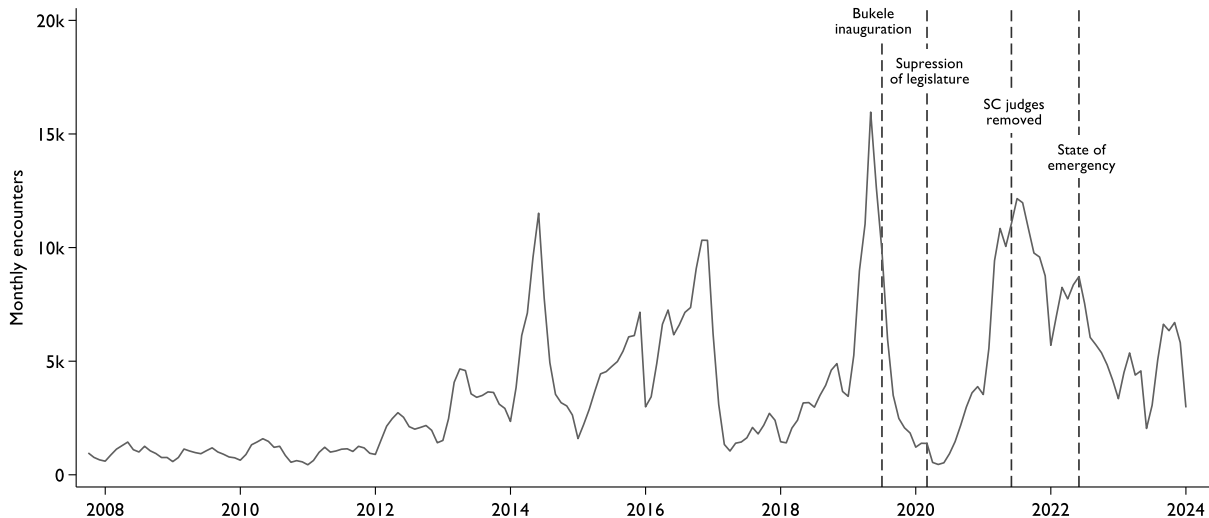
El Salvador Conclusions

In El Salvador, backsliding since 2019 has not produced an uptick in migration intentions. Since his election, President Bukele has undermined the independence of the judiciary and legislature, enacted a state of emergency that suspends due process for suspected gang members, and eroded constitutional constraints. Yet, these actions have not generated a spike in emigration, largely because the reforms – particularly Bukele’s Mano Dura (i.e., iron fist) policies on gangs – have led to perceived improvements in the incidence of violence, contributing to widespread public support for Bukele.

Figure 2 below shows monthly encounters at the U.S. Southwest border from 2008 to early 2024 for individuals from El Salvador. Following Bukele’s 2019 inauguration, migration to the U.S. declined significantly, likely due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, subsequently rebounding to pre-pandemic levels from late-2021 to the present. While it is difficult to isolate the effects of democratic erosion from ongoing economic and security issues during this period, the data suggest that Bukele’s attacks on democratic norms and procedures are not a primary driver. As shown in Figure 2, we do not observe migration spikes in response to any of the key backsliding

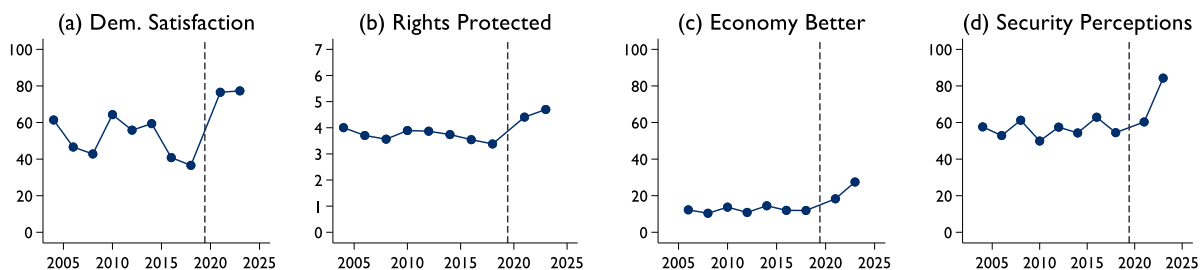
events since Bukele’s election. Analysis of Google search data likewise shows no evidence of increased search activity related to migration following these events.

Figure 2: CBP Encounters at U.S. Southwest Land Border, 2007-2024



Opinion poll data provide insight into why backsliding has not produced a spike in migration akin to Nicaragua’s experience since 2018. The data show that perceptions related to the root causes of migration – including governance, economic conditions, and personal security – have improved since Bukele came to office. Despite El Salvador’s democratic decline, Figure 3 below shows that satisfaction with “democracy” has increased substantially since Bukele came to office. Notably, perceptions that rights are well protected by the government have also increased, even after the imposition of the 2022 state of emergency that has been widely criticized by human rights groups for suspending due process. At the same time, a growing number of Salvadorans report that their personal economic conditions have improved since Bukele came to office. Security perceptions have also improved, with the share of respondents who feel safe in their neighborhood increasing significantly, particularly following the 2022 state of emergency.

Figure 3: Opinion Poll Data from El Salvador, 2004-2023



Note: dashed vertical lines represent Bukele’s election