

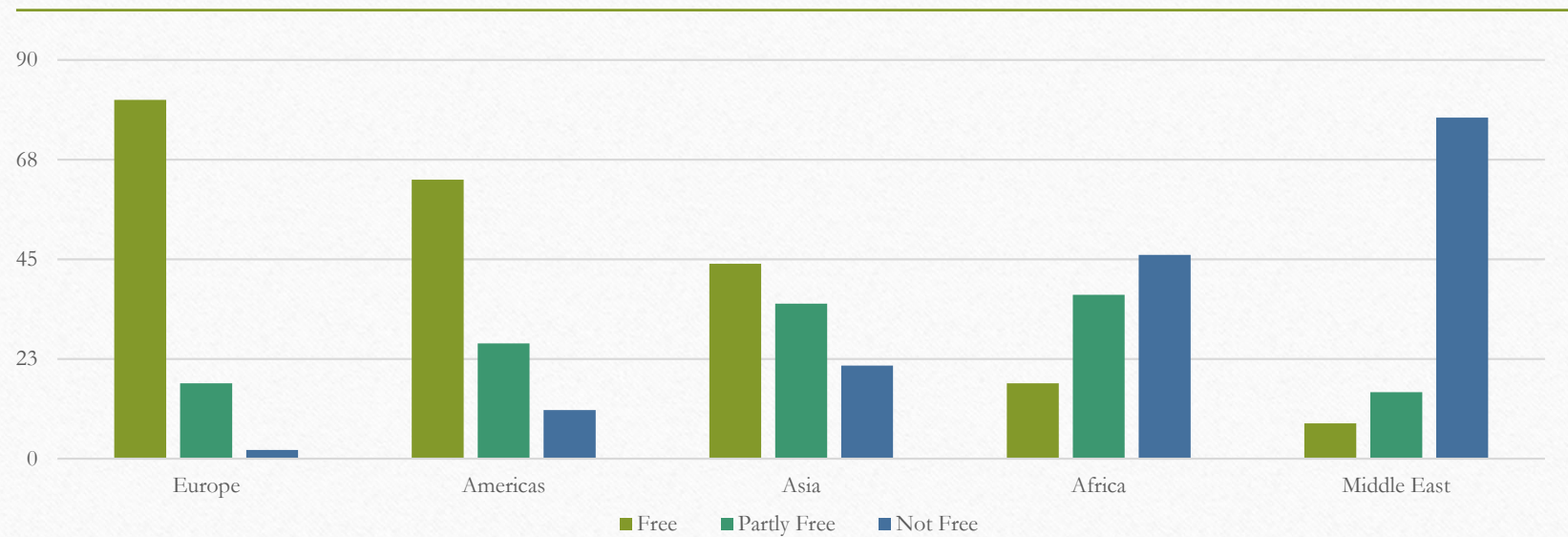
# Democratic Backsliding—and how to fight it

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*A view from Latin America*

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# Democratic Success around the World



## Backsliding

Democracy Index, 2022

Latin America\*

Authoritarian  
regimes

Hybrid  
regimes

Flawed  
democracies

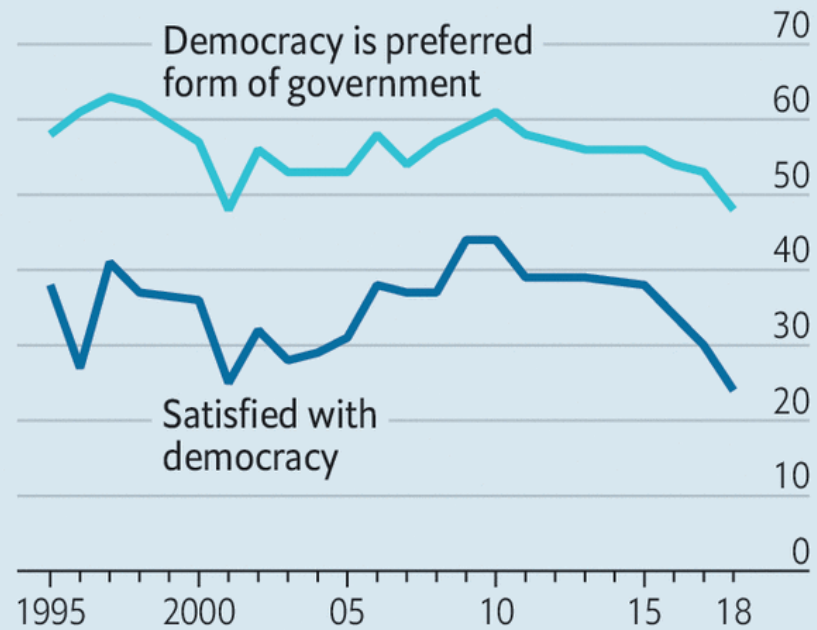
Full  
democracies



## Broken promise

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Latin America, share of respondents agreeing, %



Source: Latinobarómetro

The Economist

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## The Boiling Frog

The boiling frog is a fable describing a frog being slowly boiled alive. The premise is that if a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if the frog is put in tepid water which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death.



ifunny.co

# POPULISM

“[A]n ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘**the pure people**’ versus ‘**the corrupt elite**’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté generale* (general will) of the people.”  
(Mudde 2004)



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

## Once in power, the populist/autocrat attempts to capture or control state institutions, especially

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- Courts
- Law enforcement agencies and the military
- Oversight agencies, including national and local electoral authorities
- Regulatory agencies, such as tax authorities
- Public media
- Sources of rents, especially oil and gas

# Weaken the opposition

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- They use these institutions to deny resources to the opposition or to suppress them directly
- As the opposition weakens, barriers removed to capturing more of the state



# Polarize the political divide between the populist and his opposition

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- Polarization is an autocratic tactic common to all backsliding processes.
- Illiberal leaders need to justify the denial of rights to opposition groups, and fear the formation of a broad opposition coalition

# The case of Mexico: Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

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- Led protests for electoral reform
- Presided over one of Mexico's most important political parties in the 1990s
- Was a popular mayor of Mexico City from 2000-2005

# The case of Mexico: Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

- Is a populist who ignored court orders on the grounds that they violated social justice or the people's will
- Ran for office six times. Denied the result of the elections every time he lost (four times)



# President Lopez Obrador

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- Courts:
  - Sought to extend the term in office of a Supreme Court judge that was his political ally (Mexican Supreme Court has terms of 15 years)
  - Has ignored court orders by declaring matters of ‘national security’
- Law enforcement agencies and the military
- Oversight agencies, including national and local electoral authorities
- Regulatory agencies, such as tax authorities
- Public media
- Sources of rents, especially oil and gas

# President Lopez Obrador

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- Courts:
- Law enforcement agencies and the military
  - Created a new “National Guard” under his authority, dissolved federal police
  - Has significantly expanded the role of the military in civil tasks as well as the fight against drug traffickers
- Oversight agencies, including national and local electoral authorities
- Regulatory agencies, such as tax authorities
- Public media
- Sources of rents, especially oil and gas

# President Lopez Obrador

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- Courts:
- Law enforcement agencies and the military
- Oversight agencies, including national and local electoral authorities
  - Constantly complains that the National Electoral Institute (INE) is corrupt and politically biased
  - Attempted to defund the INE and put it under presidential authority (failed)
- Regulatory agencies, such as tax authorities
- Public media
- Sources of rents, especially oil and gas

# President Lopez Obrador

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- Courts:
- Law enforcement agencies and the military
- Oversight agencies, including national and local electoral authorities
- Regulatory agencies, such as tax authorities
  - Has attempted to control independent think tanks and universities
  - Wants to get rid of the National Institute for Transparency and Accountability
  - Reduced funding for independent civil society watchdogs
- Public media
- Sources of rents, especially oil and gas

# President Lopez Obrador

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- Courts:
- Law enforcement agencies and the military
- Oversight agencies, including national and local electoral authorities
- Regulatory agencies, such as tax authorities
- Public media
  - Constantly complains about biased media
  - “I have other data”
  - Attempts to intimidate critical journalists
- Sources of rents, especially oil and gas



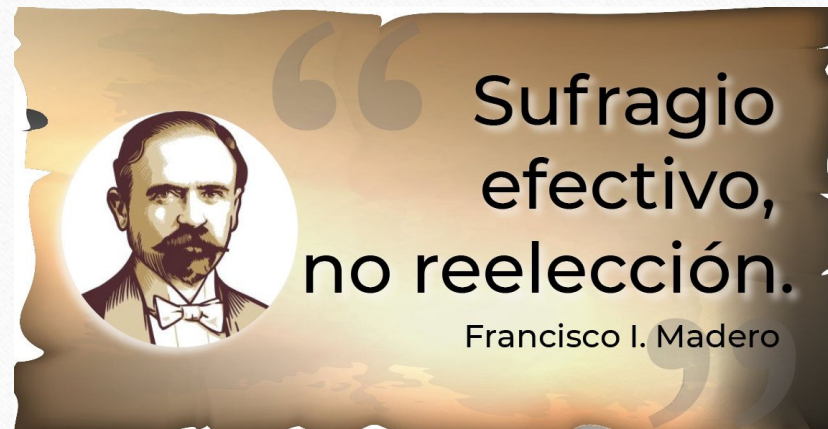
# President Lopez Obrador

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- Courts:
- Law enforcement agencies and the military
- Oversight agencies, including national and local electoral authorities
- Regulatory agencies, such as tax authorities
- Public media
- Sources of rents, especially oil and gas
  - Rejects private investment in the Mexican oil company, PEMEX
  - Wants to maintain national ownership of the energy sector in general

# Barriers to further autocratization in Mexico

- 1. Term limits: No re-election of the president, according to the Constitution
  - 14 Latin American presidents tried to reform or rewrite the constitution to remain in office. Six succeeded (including Chavez); 7 failed.
  - AMLO has not tried



# Barriers to further autocratization in Mexico

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- 2. Active but moderate democratic opposition
  - Legal stalling, using the legislature to block some reforms, especially constitutional ones
    - Constitutional reform requires 2/3 of the House of Deputies, 2/3 of the Senate, and 1/2 of the state legislatures.
  - Using the court system when reforms could not be blocked in the legislature
  - Delay, delay, delay: the next electoral cycle could be better

# Barriers to further autocratization in Mexico

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- 3. Non-partisan civil society and media
  - Breaks up the narrative of polarization
  - Moral authority to challenge anti-democratic moves by any actor
  - “National Agreement for Electoral Integrity”: signed by 32 civil society organizations, including universities, electoral observers, and the business organization COPARMEX

# To resist backsliding

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- DO engage in elections
  - Do NOT boycott them (this was a mistake by the Venezuelan opposition; allowed Chavez to gain complete control of the legislature)

# To resist backsliding

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- DO engage in elections
  - Do NOT boycott them
- DO engage in litigation
  - Do NOT engage in radical extra-institutional protest, especially involving violence
  - Venezuelan oil strike allowed Chavez to fire opponents at the top of the oil unions and company management

# To resist backsliding

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- DO engage in elections
  - Do NOT boycott them
- DO engage in litigation
  - Do NOT engage in radical extra-institutional protest, especially involving violence
- DO lobby, or engage in moderate, peaceful protest
  - Do NOT attempt to oust the elected executive, by force (coup) or by impeachment

# The Moral of the Story

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- Democratic backsliding can be slowed, halted, or even reversed
- However, efforts must work within and strengthen democratic institutions, even if it seems ineffective in the short term.
- In the long run, ‘democratic’ opposition in Venezuela did almost as much harm to Venezuelan democracy as Chavez did, by trying to take short-cuts and by assuming the only problem was Chavez

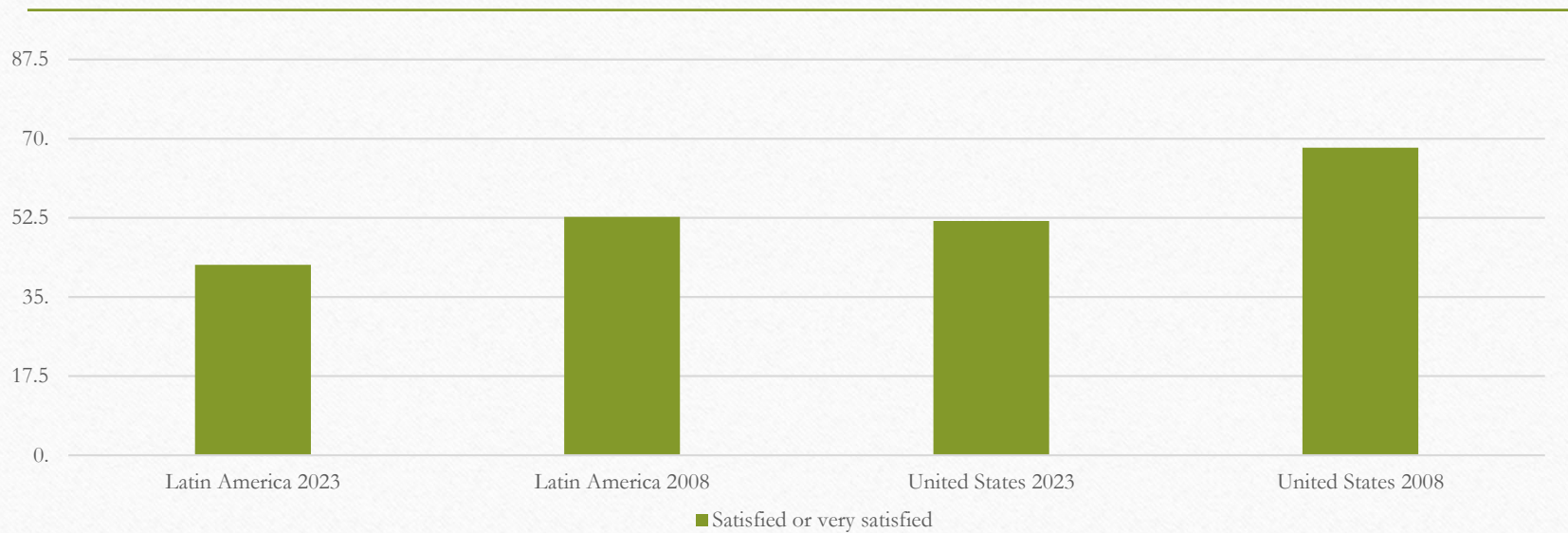


# The Moral of the Story

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- Populist autocrats don't get elected when democracy is healthy and everyone is satisfied with how it performs
- To resolve the threat of populism, democracy must deliver on its promises of security, prosperity, and social justice

# Satisfaction with democracy



### Democracy is better than any other form of government

