

# CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

72<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE

# DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING & RESISTANCES

## IN LATIN AMERICA & BEYOND

PANELS ON

LGBTQ+  
GENDER RIGHTS  
& DEMOCRACY

POPULIST CHALLENGES  
TO DEMOCRACY

DEMOCRACY IN CRISES

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

FEB. 29  
MAR. 1 2024

SMATHERS  
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ROOM 100

KEYNOTE BY BACARDI SCHOLAR FLÁVIA BIROLI

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# CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

## THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29

Room 100, Smathers Library, University of Florida campus

**2:30 - 5:00 PM**    **LGBTQ+, Gender Rights, and Democracy**  
pp. 3-5

**5:30 - 6:30 PM**    **Keynote Speech**  
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*The crisis is gendered: Approaching the challenges to democracy from the perspective of the disputes around gender*

*Flávia Biroli, University of Brasilia  
Bacardi Family Eminent Scholar*

**6:30 - 7:30 PM**    **Reception**  
p. 6

## FRIDAY, MARCH 1

Room 100, Smathers Library, University of Florida campus

**10:00 AM - 12:00 PM**    **Populist Challenges to Democracy**  
pp. 6-7

**12:00 - 1:00 PM**    **Lunch**  
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**1:15 - 3:15 PM**    **Democracy in Crises: What Has Changed, if Anything?**  
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**3:30 - 5:30 PM**    **Global Perspectives**  
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# CONFERENCE PANELS

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29**

Room 100, Smathers Library, University of Florida campus

**2:30 - 5:00 PM LGBTQ+, Gender Rights, and Democracy**

*This panel explores struggles for gender and LGBTQ+ rights that aimed to democratize democracies, and how in the name of the "traditional family" conservative Catholics and Christians are attempting to roll back rights and to impose their views of family and sexuality.*

**Moderated by Juliana Restrepo Sanin, University of Florida**

## **Ontological (In)Security and Anti-Genderism in Populist Politics**

*Elizabeth S. Corredor, Bryn Mawr College*

This paper is part of a larger project that explores the relationship between civil society, gender, religion, and democratic backsliding in Latin America. Theories of democracy purport that an active civil society, religious freedom, and gender equality add to the democratic strength of a country. Yet the explosion of anti-gender campaigns across the region brings some of these assumptions into question. Led primarily by a loose coalition of religious leaders, civil society, and conservative politicians, anti-gender campaigns demonstrate a break from the past, whereby control over right-wing politics was primarily concentrated in the hands of the political, economic, and military elite. They shine a light on the role that conservative civil society movements and the rise of evangelical Christianity play in supporting populist and illiberal politics that claim to "defend women's rights." However, anti-genderism is not simply a populist strategy nor solely a form of backlash against liberal human and civil rights. Rather, as this paper argues, anti-genderism is central to creating and sustaining illiberal notions of security for the state and civil society. Moreover, these notions of security – or what this paper refers to as 'ontological security' – support short- and long-term goals for illiberal leaders and groups, ultimately contributing to democratic backsliding. To accomplish this, I investigate how gender – and thus anti-genderism – is central to a state's perceived sense of security (or 'ontological security'). I then examine the literature on civil society, the changing religious landscape in Latin America, and anti-genderism within the context of popular politics. Finally, I bring these bodies of literature into conversation with each other to show how illiberal groups in Latin America leverage religion and anti-genderism to construct a dominant narrative around the state and human security that undermines democratic stability.

## The New Right Threat to Colonial Democracy: Proyecto Dignidad and Women's Political Rights in Puerto Rico

*Luz del Alba Acevedo, University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras*

The attacks by the new right on the political rights of women in Puerto Rico is the corollary of the neoliberal policies of the last three decades. These policies have resulted in the fiscal bankruptcy of the colonial state and the imposition of a Fiscal Management Oversight Board by the United States federal government for the reorganization of public finances and the payment of public debt. The economic and sociopolitical crisis created by poor governance has served as the basis for the realignment of political forces and the emergence of new political parties.

In the 2020 elections, two new parties managed to secure political representation in the legislature, thus disputing the dominance of the two-party system. One of those new parties, Proyecto Dignidad, is a right-wing conservative party, with a religious basis anchored in the convergent traditional values of Catholicism and neo-Pentecostalism. The female representation of this new political force in the legislature has turned women's bodies into the terrain of a political counter feminist war. The discourse of this new conservative political force is centered on the public discussion about the "threat" that the gender category represents to the notion of woman/mother, the sacramentality of the family and the education of children. The legislative activity of this new right focuses on legislative proposals that seek the restriction or elimination of reproductive rights, abortion, and the sexuality of women and other sexual minorities. The attack by the new right on colonial "democracy" represents a political counterattack on feminism that turns women (in their diverse identities) into the main source of political divisions and conflicts and the main arena in which the social and economic policies of the country are negotiated.

The right-wing attack on colonial democracy brings a process of culturalization of politics where divisions and political support for parties are formed in relation to traditional religious values and the ideology of female domesticity centered on the family, abortion, and sexuality. This suggests a retrogression in the development of colonial democracy in Puerto Rico, which reproduces aspects of counterfeminism in the United States.

This case study examines the sociopolitical, structural, and cultural factors that explain the emergence of Proyecto Dignidad. It identifies the factors that articulate the social, political, and economic fundamentalisms that support the populist ideology of the new right. This is the first approach to this new phenomenon that analyzes the discourse of the right as presented in speeches to churches and religious groups, bills, views from think tanks leaders, opinion columns and interventions in the media and social networks.

## Feminism and Democratic Resilience in Mexico

*María Inclán, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas*

Three ideas guide this essay, and we present them in the next three sections of the manuscript. First, we reflect on the possibility of considering the feminist movement as an inclusive democratic resilience. We argue that the inclusive nature of the movement's achievement makes it a movement that defends the rights of all citizens. Second, we ponder on the origins of the current force and growth of the movement in the country. In this section, we consider the challenges that the current federal administration has put forward against the previous gains of the movement, and the fact that these aggrieving challenges come from the movement's supposed political allies in power. Finally, in the third section, we analyze the potential opportunities for the movement to become a catalyzer for citizen democratic resilience.

## The Gendered Consequences of Authoritarianism in Central America

*Cecilia Menjivar, UCLA; Pamela Neuman, Texas A&M International University*

This paper analyzes how increasingly authoritarian approaches to governance (which includes but goes beyond the handling of crime and violence per se) have impacted the security and rights of women and girls across Central America. Drawing on examples from Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, we illustrate how such approaches have directly impacted women's organizations and their leaders, and by extension, the women who rely on their support when facing situations of violence. We also show how the co-optation of political institutions and the weakening of legal and institutional accountability mechanisms have exacerbated the vulnerability of women and girls to myriad forms of violence, both tangible and intangible, and circumscribed their access to justice. As government transparency declines and spaces for political dissent shrink within these regimes, these gendered forms of violence become further invisibilized, though no less real in their consequences.

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**5:30 - 6:30 PM**    **Keynote Speech**

## The crisis is gendered: Approaching the challenges to democracy from the perspective of the disputes around gender

*Flávia Biroli, University of Brasilia (Bacardi Family Eminent Scholar)*

**CONT'D ►**

Taking democracy as a process, I conceptualize the crisis as the escalation of the opposition to democratization. It manifests as obstruction and open hostility against its pluralist foundation and egalitarian potential. I argue that in Latin America current contestation takes the form of a backlash. However, that does not mean denying its positive dimensions. Antigender actors justify hierarchies, challenge the legitimacy of human rights, and stigmatize emancipatory perspectives as "ideologies." By doing that, they dispute the role of the state, redefine the circuits connecting it to civil society, and normalize authoritarian politics. In this sense, I approach the conflicts around gender in their specificity but also as the overarching dynamic revealing the substance of the crisis.

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**6:30 - 7:30 PM**    **Reception**

**FRIDAY, MARCH 1**

Room 100, Smathers Library, University of Florida campus

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**10:00 AM - 12:00 PM**    **Populist Challenges to Democracy**

*This panel explores how populists rise to power and govern, and the conditions that could lead to democratic backsliding.*

**Moderated by Carlos Suárez Carrasquillo, University of Florida**

## **Status, White Resentment, and the Rise of the Far Right: Lessons from Brazil**

*Mauro Porto, Tulane University*

Between 2013 and 2018, Brazil's white middle class established a new conservative movement that included massive street demonstrations. The movement led to the 2016 unconstitutional impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff and culminated in the 2018 rise of far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency. The presentation analyzes key causes of Brazil's process of democratic decay. It emphasizes the rise of a significant "status panic" among middle-class publics following the relative economic and social ascension of mostly Black and brown low-income laborers. The presentation argues that the expansion of racial quotas for higher education and the extension of labor rights to domestic workers generated significant levels of political resentment in the white middle-class, propelling it to action. The final section of the presentation discusses the significance of status panics and white resentment for understanding other processes of democratic backsliding in the Americas.

## **Economic crisis and democratic backsliding: the rise of Milei in Argentina in comparative perspective**

*Gabriel Vommaro, Universidad de San Martín/CONICET, Tulane University*

The rise of Javier Milei follows the rise of other extreme right-wing expressions that have recently emerged in the Americas. His emergence was surprising because of his outsider character, the radical approach of his discourse on economic issues and the fact that, despite the weakness of his organizational resources, he has defeated the two dominant coalitions in the electoral arena so far. This paper analyzes Milei's rise in comparative perspective. We focus on three dimensions: the structure of political opportunities associated with his rise, the type of programmatic offer and the organizational resources on which he relies. We compare his emergence with that of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in order to establish similarities and differences between the two processes. We argue, first, that the rise of the extreme right is preceded by economic setbacks of the incumbent lefts. It is the weakness of the distributive promise -and the effects of that weakness in the generation of a certain "distributive fatigue"- and not its acceleration that favors the access of the extreme right to power. Second, and related to this, although the components of the programmatic offer of the extreme right is variable, the economic-distributive issue is fundamental. This is usually associated with a "populist" criticism of the political establishment, accused of "stealing" the fruits of the efforts of "good citizens". Third, riding the crisis of the traditional political forces and based on a powerful populist appeal, the extreme right does not necessarily need to rely on solid organizational resources to come to power, although this weakness raises questions about the way they govern and their relationship with representative democracy.

## **Fighting Crime to Dismantle Democracy: How Anti-Crime Policies Have Contributed to the Authoritarian Drift in Central America**

*José Miguel Cruz, Florida International University*

For years, Central America has seen some of the highest levels of criminal violence in the globe. Two of the most violent street gangs in the Americas, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18) have settled in these countries, contributing to crime. Different governments have implemented various policies to address gangs and violent crime. However, no policy has been more controversial or frequently used than the zero-tolerance (*mano dura*) crackdowns. In this paper, I examine the latest installment of hard-on-crime policies in El Salvador and how they have contributed to the democratic erosion in the country. The Salvadoran case illustrates how Central American governments have repeatedly used the moral panic associated with crime to justify the enlargement of security forces without oversight, ignore human rights standards, and leverage the justice system to serve corrupt government actors.

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**12:00 - 1:00 PM**

**Lunch**

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**1:15 - 3:15 PM**

## **Democracy in Crises: What Has Changed, if Anything?**

*This panel locates historically the most recent crises of democracy. Have Latin American democracies experienced similar crises in the past? What is new in current debates on democracy?*

**Moderated by Cristian Pérez Muñoz, University of Florida**

## **Resisting Backsliding: Opposition Strategies against the Erosion of Democracy**

*Laura Gamboa, University of Utah*

In the past two decades, democratically elected executives across the world have used their popularity to push for legislation that, over time, destroys systems of checks and balances, hinders free and fair elections, and undermines political rights and civil liberties. Using and abusing institutions and institutional reform, some of them have transformed their countries' democracies into competitive authoritarian regimes. Others, however, have failed. What explains these different outcomes? This book answers this question. Focusing on the cases of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Alvaro Uribe in Colombia, it shows that the strategies the opposition uses and the goals it uses them for are key to understand why some executives successfully erode democracy and others do not. Highlighting the role of the opposition, this talk emphasizes the importance of agency for understanding democratic backsliding and shows that weak oppositions can defeat strong potential autocrats as well.

## **Parallel Universes, Time Compression, and the Crisis of Democratic Representation in Contemporary Latin America**

*Juan Pablo Luna, Universidad Católica de Chile*

This work presents an argument on the structural underpinnings that might have paved the road to crises of representation in contemporary Latin American societies. In that regard, I will argue that to understand what is happening in contemporary societies, we should analyze state-society interactions and their implications for electoral mobilization. In other words, a series of structural processes underpin (and could explain why we observe) the fall of legitimate political intermediation structures. Via different mechanisms, these structural features limit elected politicians' capacity to bridge parallel universes while buying time to govern. They also set limits to what we can understand by thinking about political representation in a traditional way, which



analytically exaggerates the role currently played by political parties and top-down maneuvering by political leadership. Parallel universes and time compression tie politicians' hands in ways that complicate structuring democratic representation. The upshot of these processes is that successful mobilization usually hinges on contingently mobilizing discontent with incumbents. Such mobilization is evanescent, however, and leads to repeated electoral cycling. In some cases, polarization between a popular/populist coalition and an oligarchic coalition consolidates, providing a modicum of stability to the system. The oscillation between these two types of coalition is triggered by contingent events (e.g., economic voting, corruption scandals, candidate traits, anti-incumbency effects, etc.) that cause the allegiance of less polarized groups of voters to switch one way or another. In cases where the state crisis is more profound, polarization is likely structured around an outsider/insider cleavage. This could lead either to the emergence of a popular and electorally hegemonic outsider or to the mushrooming of multiple electoral vehicles that, in a fragmented fashion, represent different types of discontented voters. A crucial implication suggested by the case of Chile and contemporary Peru is that the collapse of legitimate political intermediation structures is an underlying "syndrome" of contemporary political systems. These cases suggest that instead of polarizing under a top-down leadership, political systems might also fall into (an enduring) limbo.

## **On Backsliding: Democratic consolidation, progress and civilization as internal goals of the Latin American state**

*Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Haverford College*

In the last decade, what seemed like solid democratic institutions have been weakening all across Latin America. Processes, institutions, and values meant to uphold democracy have been eroding, as ruling parties and leaders undercut them from the inside. This process goes by the technical term "democratic backsliding". Surprisingly, however, this process often has broad popular support. Does this mean that democratic backsliding can be a way to deepen democracy? In this paper I argue that this apparent contradiction emerges from the underlying normative assumptions in the concepts of "democratization" and "backsliding", and of the ideologies in which they are embedded. The concept of backsliding is entwined with the idea of state consolidation and progress. These ideas, in turn, have emerged from a broad teleological understanding of civilization (and barbarianism), which has its roots in religious concepts, and in outlooks undergirding race and colonialism in the region. I argue that by unearthing these assumptions, we can clear the ground and suggest alternative values to interpret popular participation and re-ignite radical democratic hopes.

*In this panel, experts of other world regions such as Africa, Europe, and the U.S. will explore processes of democratic backsliding and resistance.*

**Moderated by Carlos de la Torre, University of Florida**

## **Populism and Democracy in Africa: Recent Developments and Future Prospects**

*Miles Larmer, University of Florida (Center for African Studies)*

Africa's post-1990 liberal democratic wave has since the early 2000s been challenged by an authoritarian populism that, in countries such as Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, has successfully mobilized growing anti-western, anti-capitalist sentiment to win/retain office and shape the continent's political direction. Populist leaders have mobilized widespread antagonism to foreign investment that, in a context of neo-liberalism, is associated with neo-colonial exploitation and increasingly unequal distribution of national resources, locally and globally. While resource nationalist populism has provided a successful basis for political opposition, it is however arguably less effective as a mode of government, a basis for economic policy and a strategy for incumbent populists seeking to retain office.

This paper provides a case study of Zambia's 2021 election, in which the incumbent Patriotic Front president Edgar Lungu lost power to long-term opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema. Lungu lost power despite his government's nationalization of economically strategic mining companies, previously owned by widely unpopular foreign corporations. The paper demonstrates that these takeovers, while ostensibly directed to elicit the support of urban and working-class constituencies in the pivotal Copperbelt region, proved in practice to be unpopular with organized labor in general and unionized mineworkers in particular. In seeking to explain the significant and electorally influential swing of support away from the populist nationalism of Lungu and toward the good governance agenda of Hichilema among key elements of PF's populist coalition, the paper develops a distinction between 'resource nationalism' from above and from below. In doing so, it explores the future prospects for African populism in the wake of its recent wave.

## **The Battle to Preserve Academic Freedom in Florida and the Nation**

*Sharon Austin, University of Florida (African American Studies)*

Dr. Sharon Austin will discuss the challenges for educators at colleges and universities both in Florida and in other states. Several states have passed legislation to curtail the academic freedom of faculty, especially when they teach material pertaining to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Dr. Austin will provide an overview of this legislation with a focus on Florida and the methods campus communities are using to fight against censorship.

## Populism and Illiberalism in Central Europe

*Lenka Bušíková, University of Florida (Center for European Studies)*

What are the social origins of illiberal rule and support for populist parties? This paper investigates current theories about the roots of illiberal attitudes, specifically with regard to state-church relations, democracy, the economy and minorities. Using new experimental data from four Central European countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), the study finds that respondents are dissatisfied with democracy and overwhelmingly support teaching Christianity in schools, economic paternalism, state regulation of ethnic relations, and opposition to same-sex marriage. However, these attitudes are nuanced insofar as they indicate support for illiberal policies without explicit xenophobia, homophobia, and religious intolerance. By offering a rigorous examination of original experimental data on the social roots of these attitudes, the study aims to shed some new light on major debates about the origins of illiberalism.

## Still the age of populism?

*Michael Bernhard, University of Florida (Department of Political Science) & Carlos de la Torre, University of Florida (Center for Latin American Studies)*

Populism shows little sign of abating. We need to keep in mind that its origins are to be found in the failure of existing systems of rule to effectively represent their populations. This is particularly acute for democracies in our present age when the privileges of the rich and powerful have shut out the grievances of extensive groups of citizens, where decision-making in many areas has been turned over to technocrats with the requisite expertise, and where substantial external shocks (recessions, financial crises, war, and natural disasters) disrupt existing social orders. Populists are constrained by domestic institutions and global interdependence, and not all who strike to undermine the institutional fabric of democracy are successful. But alas, similar to Bolsonaro and Trump, they can provoke and exacerbate crises and further delegitimize democracy as a system of rule. The crucial question for democracies is whether populists can think of democracy as a system in which losing power and contesting it in the future is preferable to overthrowing the system and staying in power. On this question, the record of populism is decidedly mixed.

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