

To understand Donald Trump's law-and-order appeal, look south of the border

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By Dinorah Azpuru



Donald Trump speaks at a campaign event at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio, in August. (Photo by Jeff Swensen/Getty Images)

Donald Trump's acceptance speech at the Republican Convention focused on fear as the cornerstone of his appeal to voters. That speech, and many of Trump's speeches, evoke the [caudillos](#), or strongmen, who have been a staple of Latin American politics for centuries. The length of Trump's acceptance speech, the yelling, the appeals to nationalism, and in particular the personalist tone of his message ("I alone can fix it"), parallel the speeches of populists such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Rafael Correa in Ecuador.

[Donald Trump's 'rigged elections' warning could actually make his supporters less likely to vote]

Indeed, [Trump's populist style has been compared](#) to that of those leftist leaders on [several occasions](#). But Trump's law-and-order approach to campaigning is also reminiscent of right-wing leaders such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Efraín Ríos Montt in Guatemala.

Consider how this strategy worked in Guatemala

Two recent Guatemalan elections may help shed light on Trump's appeal. While some Latin American leaders have focused on economic [populism and anti-establishment rhetoric](#), leaders in Guatemala have, like [Trump, emphasized law and order](#). Here's how that strategy played out.

In 1999, Guatemala elected Alfonso Portillo, of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG). Portillo was a protégé of Ríos Montt, a former president who had come to power in a coup in the 1980s. Portillo was seen as a proxy for Ríos

Montt, who was prohibited from running for president but was elected to the legislature and appointed president of Congress by the FRG, the party he founded.

[This one chart shows what Americans believe about protests and policing]

During the campaign, the FRG emphasized the need for aggressive anti-crime policies and, drawing in part on Ríos Montt's [background](#), portrayed itself as the party of law and order. Ríos Montt had used a strong-hand approach during his 1982-1983 de facto government, and Portillo also promised to rule in an aggressive fashion. By putting the FRG in power, Guatemala was essentially choosing two strongmen at the same time.

The FRG remained in power until 2004. In the subsequent two elections, Guatemalans elected moderate presidents, Oscar Berger and Alvaro Colom.

[There is no 'Trump bump' in the polls, just a growing lead for the Democrats]

But in the midst of a crime wave in 2011, Guatemalans elected another strongman: Gen. Otto Pérez Molina. Riding on fear, like Portillo and Ríos Montt, Pérez Molina campaigned as [the law-and-order candidate](#). His Patriot Party's logo was in fact a clenched fist representing his "mano dura" (strong hand).

Who votes for law-and-order candidates?

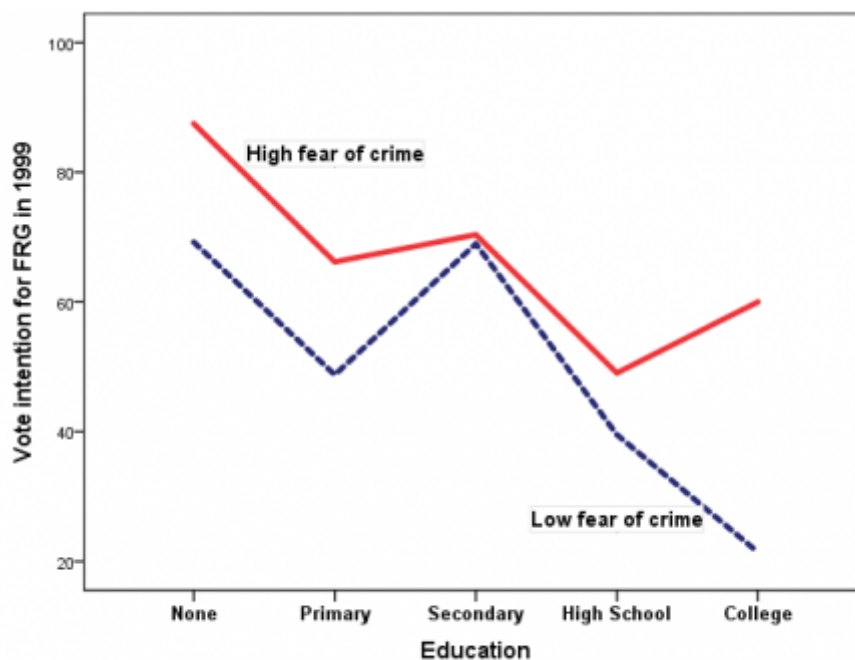
What explains the appeal of leaders like Portillo, Ríos Montt and Pérez Molina? In both the 1999 and 2011 elections, views often associated with authoritarian values and fears about various societal threats were both strong predictors of support for their parties.

To draw these conclusions, I use survey data from the [AmericasBarometer](#).

Respondents were asked whether they thought the best way to solve the country's problems was "with everyone's participation" or "with a strong-hand government." Fifty-six percent of respondents who voted for the FRG in 1999 said they preferred a strong-hand government, compared with 41 percent of those who voted for other parties. Similarly, in 2011, 49 percent of respondents who voted for the Patriot Party preferred the strong-hand approach to government, compared with 34 percent of those who cast ballots for other parties.

[Does more policing lead to less crime — or just more racial resentment?]

Respondents who expressed fear of crime were also supportive of strongmen. As the graph below from 1999 shows, this was true among respondents of all levels of education. While less-educated citizens were more supportive of the FRG than more-educated citizens, [fear of crime influenced both groups](#).



Source: Prepared by author with 1999 AmericasBarometer data

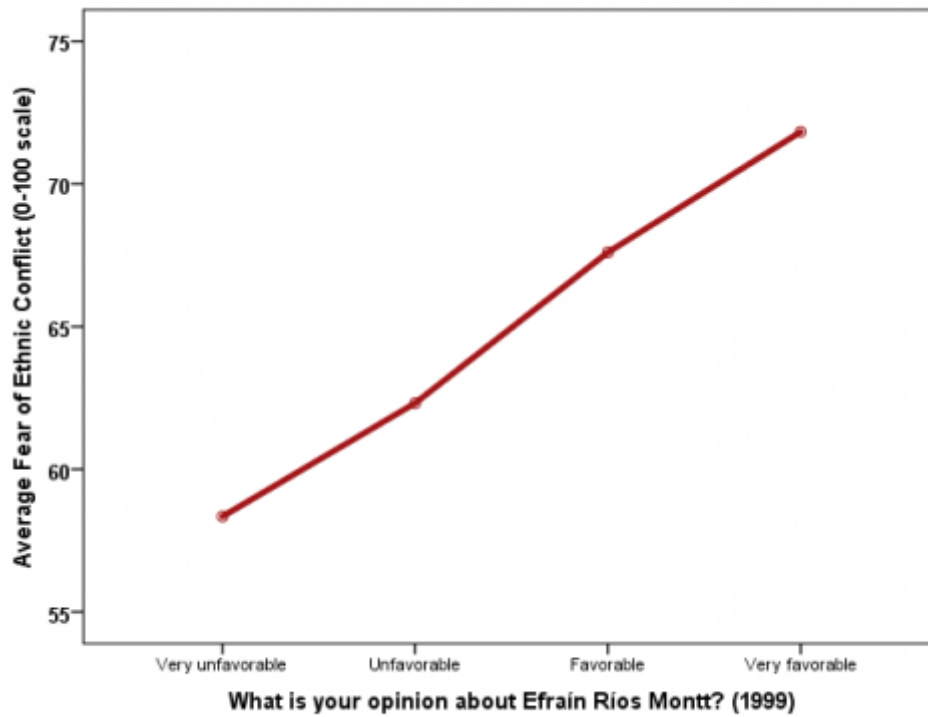
The survey also asked respondents about their views of law enforcement power. In 1999, respondents who believed that crime must be stopped, even if some rights are violated, favored allowing police to enter a home without a warrant, and believed that it is better to limit liberties to maintain order in society were more likely to support the FRG.

[\[6 things you need to know about Venezuela's political and economic crisis\]](#)

In 2011, respondents who disapproved of people participating in political campaigns and who supported the use of torture against criminals were prone to choose the Patriot Party instead of other parties. For example, respondents were asked how favorably they viewed the use of torture on a scale from zero to 100. The average among respondents who supported the Patriot Party was 65, indicating some support for the use of torture. Respondents who did not support the Patriot Party scored lower (an average of 54), suggesting more ambivalence.

During the 1999 elections, the fear of ethnic conflict also was correlated with favorable opinions of Ríos Montt and his party. After the signing of the peace accords that ended a 36-year-old civil war in 1996, conservative editorialists and the business sector campaigned against constitutional reforms intended to improve indigenous rights and stirred up the fear of an ethnic uprising by Mayan Guatemalans against non-indigenous Guatemalans. The FRG, and in particular Ríos Montt, was seen favorably by those afraid of an ethnic conflict, possibly because of the harsh counterinsurgency campaigns led by Ríos Montt during his de facto government in the indigenous regions of the country.

As the graph below shows, respondents to the AmericasBarometer survey in 1999 who were more fearful of an ethnic conflict had a more favorable view of Ríos Montt.



Source: prepared by author with 1999 AmericasBarometer data

Ironically, these law-and-order candidates went to prison themselves

One irony of these law and order campaigns is that their standard-bearers were brought down by criminal charges. Portillo was convicted of money laundering during his tenure as president and extradited to the United States, where he served time in prison before his release in 2015. Ríos Montt awaits a new trial after a 2013 conviction for genocide was overturned by the Constitutional Court of Guatemala. Pérez Molina was forced to resign three years after taking office, in September of 2015, as a result of a [corruption](#) scandal that prompted massive demonstrations against his government. He was subsequently arrested and awaits trial.

To be sure, the point here is not that Trump resembles these Latin American leaders in every respect, or that U.S. politics resembles Guatemalan politics. But these Guatemalan elections show that voters can be responsive to candidates who sow fears and advocate aggressive law enforcement tactics as a solution. Furthermore, these candidates' message may have more resonance with citizens hostile to certain civil liberties protections.

Of course, such tactics may not win Trump the presidency, as they did for Guatemala's strongmen. But the empirical evidence from these elections may help demonstrate the potential impact of a strategy similar to Trump's.

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