

# GAY IN THE AMERICAS

by Mitchell A. Seligson and Daniel E. Moreno Morales

**With only a few exceptions, the next generation in the Americas is no more tolerant of the political rights of homosexuals than their parents.**

**TOLERANCE FOR MINORITY RIGHTS IS** the hallmark of liberal democracies. Indeed, without such tolerance, democracy is fatally flawed. Creating an atmosphere of tolerance for minorities is one of the key challenges in constructing and deepening democracy in our hemisphere.

The shameful treatment of African Americans in the United States, for example, persisted for decades after the Civil War, and only began to improve in the middle of the twentieth century— finally declining in

the twenty-first century to levels that made the election of an African American president conceivable and then possible. A similar process has occurred hemisphere-wide with increasing tolerance toward the full participation of women in professions and in politics, a process that is still ongoing.

But what of other islands of intolerance? Specifically, the rights of gays, a group that has been the target of hostility for centuries around the world, including in well-established democracies. Gay rights are especially problematic in much of Latin America. It is often assumed that this is because of the persistence of the culture of *machismo*, but another factor accounting for intolerance for the right of gay people is the overall low level of education

in Latin America and the Caribbean compared to North America. Education has consistently been found by scholars to be the most important factor associated with a more tolerant society.

Measuring levels of political tolerance requires the use of valid and reliable instruments. Scientifically designed public opinion surveys are without question the best tool for measuring tolerance when one is trying to compare levels across countries. The AmericasBarometer, a series of biennial hemisphere-wide surveys organized by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) consortium at Vanderbilt University, provides ideal data for assessing the political tolerance of citizens. The 2008 survey covered 23 countries and draws from samples

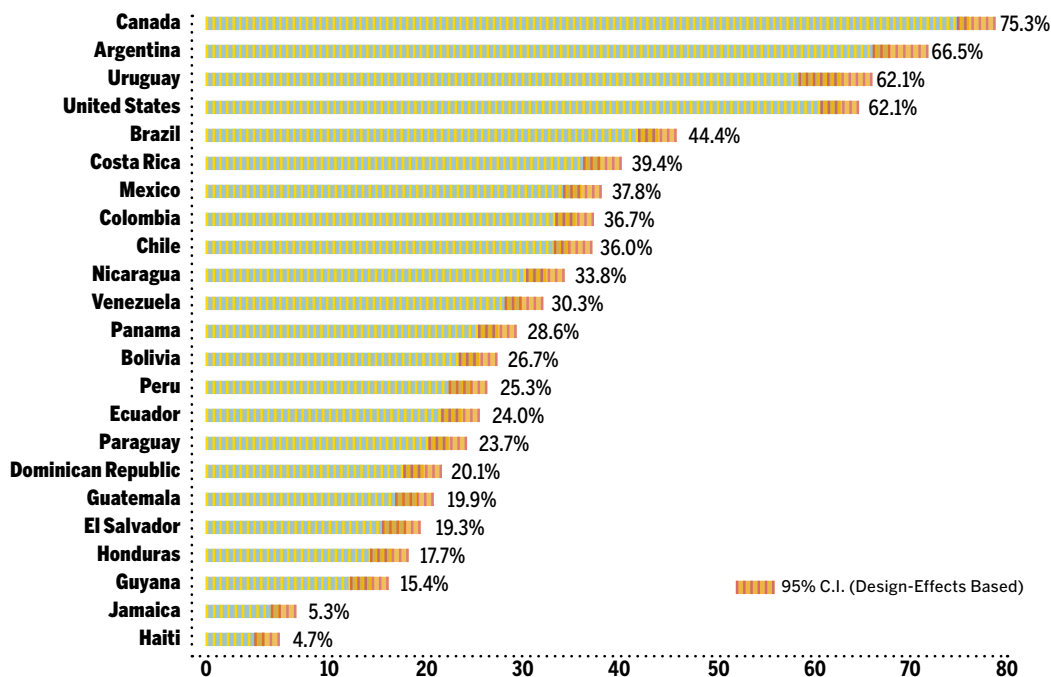
that are representative of the national voting-age population. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the samples range from 1,500 to 3,000 respondents in face-to-face interviews. The total number of interviews conducted was 40,567.

There are many ways to measure tolerance. We focus here on the acceptance of homosexuals' rights to participate as candidates in elections. The wording of the question is: "How strongly do you approve or disapprove of homosexuals being permitted to run for public office?" Accepting an individual's right to run for public office is a crucial aspect of tolerance: by accepting this right, a person is implicitly accepting that even someone whose sexual preference is disliked has the right to govern, indeed to rule.

TABLE 1

## HIGH TOLERANCE TO HOMOSEXUALS IN POLITICS

(percent of entire population by country)

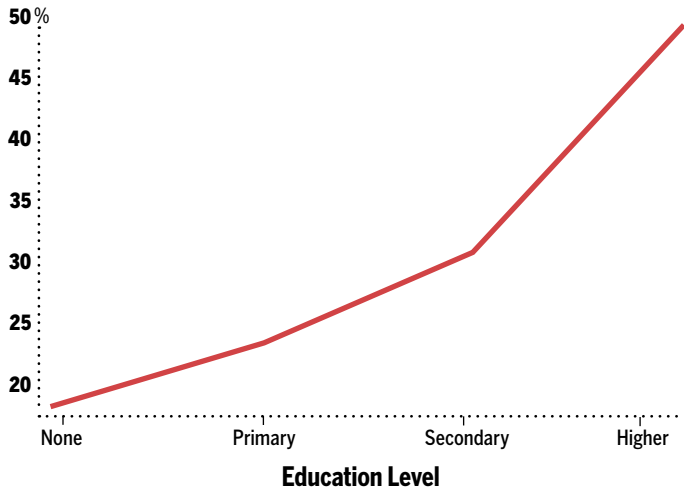


SOURCE: AMERICASBAROMETER BY LAPOP

TABLE 2

## EDUCATION AND TOLERANCE TO HOMOSEXUALS

(percent of entire population)



SOURCE: AMERICAS BAROMETER BY LAPOP

The question was asked using a one to 10 response scale. Responses 7 and higher represent “high tolerance;” responses ranging from 4 through 6 represent “medium tolerance;” and responses 3 and lower represent “low tolerance.” Table 1 shows the percentage of people exhibiting high tolerance towards homosexuals’ rights to participate in politics in 23 countries in the Americas.

The country with the highest percentage of highly tolerant people is Canada, where about three-fourths of the population expresses high tolerance toward the rights of gays to participate in politics. Argentina, Uruguay and the U.S. follow, with proportions of highly tolerant people in a statistical dead heat.<sup>1</sup>

However, less than half the population in all the other countries is highly tolerant of the political rights of gays. About 45 percent of Brazilians display high levels of tolerance, while in Costa Rica, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Nicaragua, and Venezuela,

those who express tolerance towards homosexuals represent between 30 and 40 percent of the population. Panama, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Paraguay, and the Dominican Republic share a fourth tier, with percentages ranging from 20 percent to 30 percent. The numbers are especially low in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guyana, where less than a fifth of the population shows high levels of tolerance. Caribbean nations exhibit the lowest levels of tolerance, with Jamaica and Haiti having only one in every twenty citizens with high levels of tolerance.

This ranking of countries according to their levels of tolerance resembles the ranking of the same countries by their levels of development. According to the Human Development Index developed by the United Nations Program for Development, Canada occupies first place in the region, while Haiti consistently places at the bottom. The Human Development Index combines

economic factors with education and life expectancy, providing a more integral vision of development than those based on purely economic factors, such as GNP.

More developed countries have higher national values of tolerance, while poorer nations tend to have intolerant societies. Tolerance is closely related to levels of development, and, conversely, to existing levels of poverty.

## TOLERANCE A MATTER OF EDUCATION

**FOR DECADES, RESEARCH BY** political scientists has shown the powerful effect that education has on tolerance.<sup>2</sup> More educated people tend to be more tolerant, more willing to accept difference. This is what we find in most countries considered here: independent of their levels of wealth, gender, age, religious preferences, and place of residence, people with higher levels of education are more likely to recognize and accept the political rights of a minority such as homosexuals. As Table 2 illustrates, the effect of education on tolerance is positive and very strong (the table presents the percentage of people with high tolerance across different levels of education in the pooled 23-country dataset).

More than half of all people with university education show high levels of tolerance of the rights of homosexuals in politics. In sharp contrast, the equivalent proportion for those individuals with only primary education is less than half of those having a university degree. Researchers largely agree that education exposes individuals to different ways of life, forcing people to consider their own way of life as relative and therefore leads them to empathize with those unlike themselves.<sup>3</sup>

# TOLERANCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

## MOST OF US LOOK TO THE YOUNG

as our great hope for the future. We assume that much of the impetus for future advances in democratic consolidation will emerge from youth.

In light of those expectations, we consult the AmericasBarometer database to ask: how do young people compare to the rest of the population in terms of tolerance toward the rights of gays? Once factors such as levels of education, area of residence, gender, and religious preferences are taken into account, younger people in Latin America tend to be, on average, more socially tolerant than their older counterparts. If we rank the Latin American countries by the levels of tolerance among those under 35 years, we find the same picture as when the entire population is considered. While in general we find higher level of tolerance among youth, in many countries the difference is not statistically significant. The difference in tolerance linked to age is statistically significant only

in eight South American countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and, in one Central American nation, Costa Rica. In other words, there seems to exist a generational change in attitudes related to sexual minorities in South America but not in Central America.<sup>4</sup> What we found is that younger people are more tolerant, independent of other individual characteristics, only in the countries mentioned above.

This is certainly a disappointing finding. We had hoped to find universally higher acceptance of gays among the young; but, to our disappointment, this not what our research shows.

When we dig deeper into the data we find another factor that plays an important role in helping to determine tolerance toward gays among the young: religious preference. Across the region, and particularly among people under 35 years of age, religious preference helps explain levels of tolerance for homosexuals' political rights to a significant extent, even after respondents' level of education is taken into account. We find that individuals who define themselves

as Protestants, Evangelicals, Latter Day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses (grouped as non-Catholic-Christians) are significantly less tolerant than are Catholics and than people who have a non-Christian religion or who have no religion at all. Table 3 illustrates those differences.

The percentage of highly tolerant individuals among those who have no religion or who identify themselves as belonging to a non-Christian religious denomination is almost twice the proportion as that among non-Catholic Christians. These results remain virtually unchanged when controlling for other factors that could possibly affect the level of tolerance (as already mentioned, education but also gender, political ideology, area of residence, and country of residence). The magnitude of the differences suggests that it is safe to conclude that, in Latin America, non-Catholic Christians are less tolerant of the political rights of gays than are other religious groups irrespective of their level of education, sex, ideology, area of residence, and even nationality.

Evangelical denominations have been growing in many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, usually converting people from Catholic or mainline Protestant backgrounds. This expansion has likely resulted in the dissemination among the newly converted of values that could be deemed as socially conservative, which might explain differences we find in tolerance. Many of these religious groups are very outspoken in their rejection of homosexuality and other lifestyle practices that are deemed sinful. Of course, it may be possible that those who have gravitated toward evangelical religions were already predisposed against gay rights, thus leaving mainstream Catholics as a more tolerant religious grouping in the region.

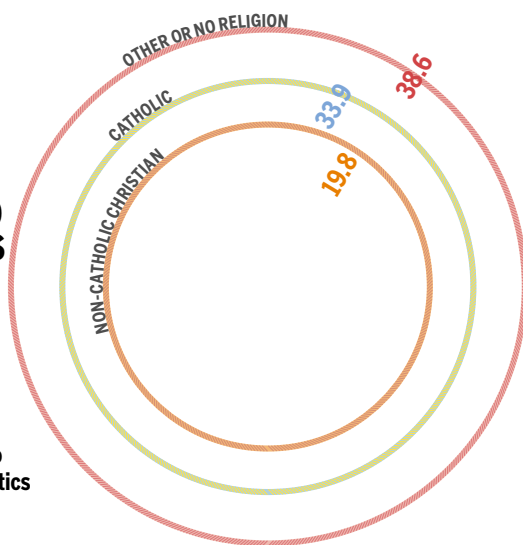
It is worth stressing that these differences in tolerance seem to be confined to social issues. When we

TABLE 3

## PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE UNDER 35 WITH HIGH TOLERANCE TO HOMOSEXUALS BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

High tolerance to  
homosexuals in politics

95% C.I.



SOURCE: AMERICASBAROMETER BY LAPOP

# TOLERANCE IS CLOSELY RELATED TO LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT.

consider other forms of measuring tolerance, such as those that measure criticism of the political system (rather than homosexuality), religious preferences do not seem to play any role in determining levels of tolerance.

Gender also seems to have an effect on levels of tolerance toward homosexuals' participation in politics. When the population of those younger than 35 is considered as a group, females are more tolerant toward the political rights of homosexuals than their male counterparts. This finding contradicts the specialized literature on tolerance, which has often found women to be less tolerant than men. However, when countries are treated separately, this difference is statistically significant only in Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Uruguay, although there is a lower level of certainty for the latter two countries.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, there is also a statistically significant difference between youths who live in urban areas and individuals the same age living in rural areas. We find that rural residents are less tolerant of gay political rights than are their urban counterparts. We suspect that this finding is a function of the fact that life in cities usually exposes individuals

to a more diverse group of people than does life in rural areas, where social homogeneity tends to be high. This difference, however, only holds constant in El Salvador, Peru and Venezuela after other factors are controlled for.

When we consider the region as a whole, this article provides sobering evidence for those who have hopes that the youth of Latin America will bring a deepening of democracy to the region. While we did find some evidence of greater tolerance for gay rights among the young, tolerance averages are low even in this group, and a majority of young people shows high levels of tolerance in fewer than a quarter of the countries.

These findings, taken as a whole, are troubling. Respect for minority rights is fundamental to the functioning of any consolidated democracy, yet in Latin America, tolerance for gays is far from ubiquitous. Among those with low levels of education and among non-Catholic Christians, it is abysmally low. While youth are somewhat more tolerant than older people in South America, the differences are small and non-existent in some countries, suggesting that based on age alone, intolerance toward gays is likely to persist in

many countries in the region.

Yet our findings also show that education has an important impact on producing greater levels of tolerance. Assuming continued progress in expanding education in the region, the results of the analyses lead us to believe that tolerance should also increase over time. This finding then reinforces the importance of investing in education, not only to help advance the economic development of Latin America and the Caribbean, but as a means to help further consolidate democracy.

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**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The horizontal "I"s or "whiskers" at the end of each bar represent the confidence interval of each average, since we interviewed a sample and not the entire population in each country. If these "whiskers" overlap, it is assumed that the averages are indistinct. The confidence intervals are adjusted for the "design effect" of each sample.

FOR SOURCE CITATIONS SEE: [www.americasquarterly.org/seligson](http://www.americasquarterly.org/seligson)