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Political Tolerance in the Americas: Should Critics Be Allowed to Vote?

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Executive Summary. This *AmericasBarometer Insights* report examines what affects political tolerance, specifically support for the right of regime critics to vote. Our results suggest that those who are wealthier, live in larger cities, are male, and are more educated are more politically tolerant. Furthermore, the fear of the threat of terrorism, even when controlling for crime, negatively affects tolerance and, conversely, support for democracy positively predicts tolerance. Finally, political participation, as measured through voting and participation in protests, is positively related to supporting the right of regime critics to vote.

LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by Vanderbilt undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar (HONS186, taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister). Biographies of the authors are provided in the report appendix.

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What affects political tolerance across the Americas? Basic freedoms related to speech and association help to ensure that, in democratic states, individuals are exposed to different viewpoints, including those that criticize the system of government itself. Tolerance of oppositional political views demonstrates commitment to core democratic values, and scholars have shown that commitment to basic democratic principles can be critical to democratic stability (see, for example, Seligson and Booth 2009). Looking at political tolerance across the region is therefore important from the perspective of high quality and stable democratic politics.

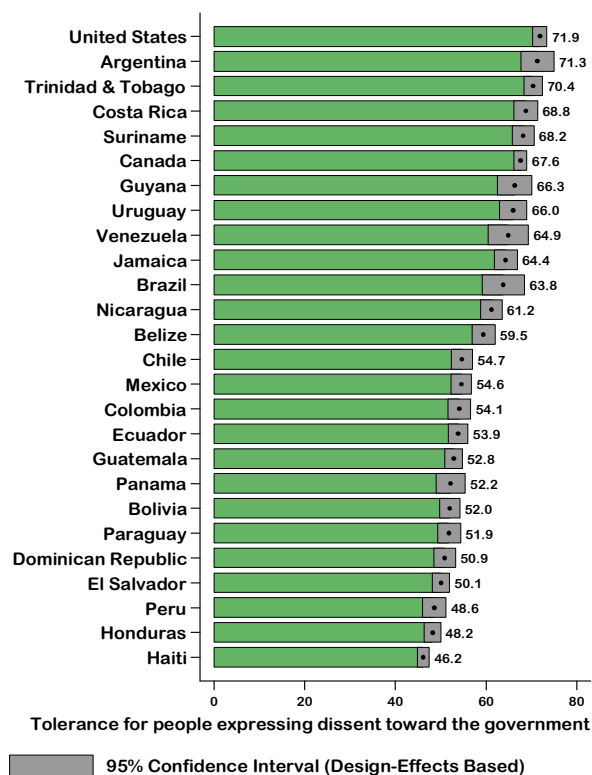
In this report of the AmericasBarometer *Insights* series¹, we examine one specific manifestation of political tolerance: support for the ability of regime critics to exercise the most fundamental of democratic rights, the right to vote. Drawing on previous research, we propose that political tolerance ought to be influenced by worry about severe security threats, specifically terrorist violence, and related to individuals' own levels of political participation. We also posit that preference for democracy will be positively related to political tolerance. As we show, we find support for this set of expectations.

Data are from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer surveys by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).² In this round, a total of 43,990 people from 26 countries were asked the following question on a scale from 1 to 10, where "1" represents "Strongly disapprove" and "10" "Strongly approve":

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>
The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop>

² Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

Figure 1. Average Tolerance for Extending the Right to Vote to Regime Critics



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

D1. There are people who only say bad things about the [country] form of government, not just the incumbent government but the system of government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's right to vote?³

Figure 1 presents, for each country, the mean level of tolerance for extending the right to vote to regime critics, with the variable recalibrated to a 0-100 scale. Except for three countries (Peru, Honduras, and Haiti), the mean level of response is above the midpoint of 50 points. This means that the average citizen in all but these three countries tends to approve of the right of a regime critic to vote. The United States, Argentina, Trinidad & Tobago have the highest levels of tolerance. It may not be

³ Non-response was 4.7% for this question across the sample as a whole. Analysis was conducted using STATA v11.

surprising that the United States has a relatively high level of tolerance for people who express dissent against the government, given the importance of both political and religious tolerance to the country's founding. At the other end of the list of countries, the lack of tolerance in Haiti may correspond to the extreme difficulties that the country has been facing, particularly after the earthquake in January 2010. The difference in average level of tolerance between the country at the top (United States) and the country at the bottom (Haiti) is 25 points; we interpret this as indicating a moderate amount of variation in mean levels of tolerance across countries. Nonetheless, rather than examine country-level explanations in this report, we focus on individual factors.

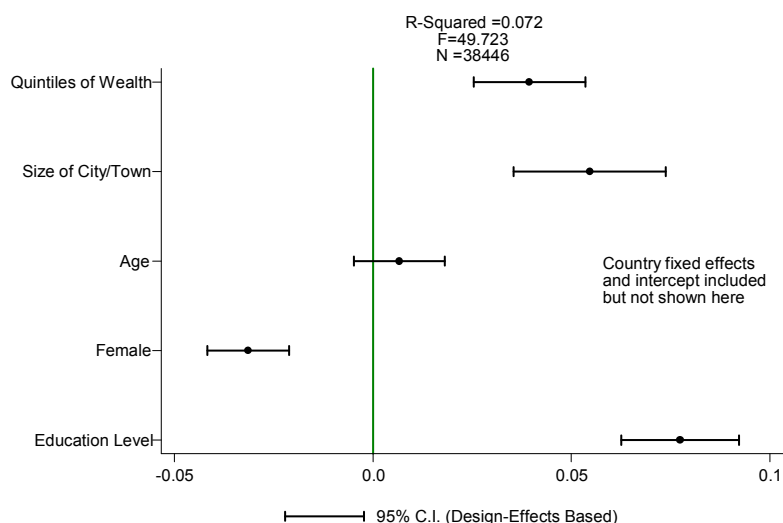
To what extent is an individual's tolerance for extending the right to vote to people expressing dissent for the government explained by his or her characteristics, evaluations, and experiences? The next section begins to take up this question.

Political Tolerance by Socio-Economic and Demographic Groups

We developed an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis testing the following socio-economic and demographic variables as predictors of political tolerance in Latin America and the Caribbean⁴: quintiles of wealth, size of city/town (higher values indicate a larger, more urban area), age (coded in number of years), gender (coded so that female is equal to 1, and male to 0), and education level. To account for country-level variation, we included fixed

⁴ We omit the United States and Canada from these analyses, in accord with standard practice for this type of *Insights* series report.

Figure 2. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics predicting tolerance for the right of regime critics to vote, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

effects for each country. In the linear regression output shown in Figure 2, dots represent the estimated effect of each variable, while the horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals for those effects. We can be at least 95% confident that a given effect is statistically significant if its confidence interval does not cross the vertical axis at 0. Effects to the left of the vertical axis are negative; ones to the right are positive.

Figure 2 shows that four out of the five variables included in this model are statistically significant predictors of political tolerance, as measured by approval or disapproval of the right of regime critics to vote. Specifically, the more educated, the wealthier, those who are male, and those who live in larger cities report more tolerance towards those expressing dissent toward the system of government. At the same time, there is no significant difference between older and younger individuals on this measure of political tolerance.

Terrorism Fears, Support for Democracy, and Participation as Predictors of Political Tolerance

Socio-economic and demographic variables explain some, but far from all of the variation in political tolerance. Thus, in this section we add to this model by considering the predictive power of fear of terrorism, support for democracy, and several measures of political participation.

We expect fear of terrorism to decrease political tolerance, as measured by support for regime critics' right to vote. Previous research in psychology, political science, and public opinion has found a negative correlation between terrorist threat and tolerance. Collective crises bring about emotions such as hopelessness and anxiety, and can cause individuals to cope by expressing more authoritarian attitudes (Zechmeister 2011). These psychological shifts induced by the threat of political violence, in the form of terrorism, may lead individuals to express lower levels of political tolerance, among other factors (e.g., Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Skitka N.d.).

Unfortunately, Latin American countries are not unfamiliar with devastating and shocking incidents of terrorist activity. Groups such as the 'Tupamaros' in Uruguay, the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) in Peru, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have instilled fear of terrorist activity in many places across the Latin American region. In fact, worry about terrorism in 2010 was high across the Americas (Zechmeister, Montalvo, and Merolla 2010).

Consequently, given both its salience and past findings on the topic, we expect to find that fear of terrorism is associated with decreased

tolerance for political opposition, represented by less tolerance for dissidents having the right to vote. The 2010 AmericasBarometer survey included the following question, which we use to capture concerns about terrorism: "How worried are you that there will be a violent attack by terrorists in [country] in the next 12 months?"⁵

Beyond fear of terrorism, we also expect that support for democracy influences tolerance for regime critics' right to vote since political tolerance is a core democratic principal. In fact, past research has documented such a relationship between democratic support and political tolerance (Norris 1999; Klingemann 1999; Sniderman 1975). At the same time, however, political theorists have brought attention to discrepancies between general democratic ideals and specific democratic applications (Sullivan et al. 1982); often there is "slippage"

between what is believed and what is practiced by individuals in a democracy. Therefore, we expect a strong but not perfect correlation between individuals' expressed support for democracy and political tolerance.

Other indicators of individuals' commitment to democratic processes might matter as well. Peffley and Rohrschneider's (2003) study of "democratic activism," or the applied use of civil liberties in the form of political engagement by individuals, is relevant here. On the basis of a 17 country study, the authors conclude that

*Tolerance of oppositional
political views
demonstrates commitment
to core democratic values.*

⁵ Haiti and Trinidad & Tobago were not included in this model, as this terrorism question was not asked in those countries. Answer categories for question WT1 are: "Haven't thought much about this"; "Not at all worried"; "A little worried"; "Somewhat worried"; and "Very worried." In these analyses, the response "Haven't thought about this" is coded to be the same as "Not at all worried." While scholars (e.g., Merolla and Zechmeister 2009) have demonstrated with experiments that there is a causal pathway from terror threat to tolerance, we cannot rule out the possibility of a reciprocal relationship where levels of tolerance affect concerns about terrorism in the survey data.

there exists a positive relationship between democratic activism and political tolerance. In our analysis, we assess whether there exists a positive relationship between conventional participation (voting) and unconventional participation (protest) and tolerance for the right of regime critics to vote.⁶

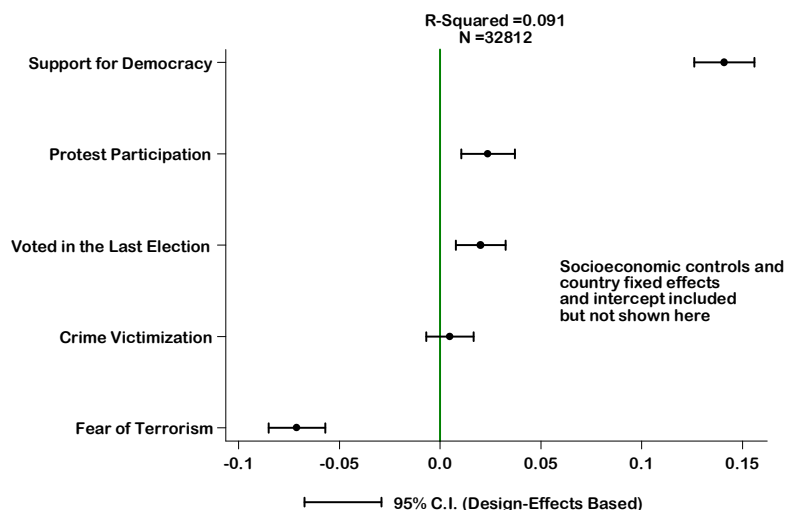
In addition to variables for fear of terrorism, support for democracy and political participation, we include a number of control variables. In order to isolate concern about terrorism, we control for crime victimization, as we would expect that fear of terrorism may be closely associated with crime. We also control for the basic demographic and socioeconomic factors included in the analysis already presented in Figure 2; country fixed effects are also included but not shown in the figure (see Appendix for the full set of results). Our key results are presented in Figure 3.

The regression results are indeed consistent with current research. According to Figure 3, there is a strong negative relationship between fear of terrorism and tolerance, indicating that fear of terrorism is key to predicting an individual's level of political tolerance.

Conversely, support for democracy and political participation have significant positive effects on political tolerance. Those who state that they support democracy express significantly higher levels of political tolerance. This is in line with our expectations that such general democratic values are highly compatible with political

⁶ The question wordings for support for democracy and conventional and unconventional participation are as follows: **ING4**. "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree with this statement?" **VB2**. "Did you vote in the last election?" **PROT3**. "Did you participate in a protest in the past 12 months?"

Figure 3. Regression analysis of the determinants of tolerance for regime critics' right to vote, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

tolerance. With respect to participation, we expected a positive and significant relationship based on the logic that those who actively practice civil liberties designed to influence and reshape politics are more likely to respect and reserve the same rights for others. In accord with this expectation, we find that those who participated in a protest or voted in the last election are more likely to be politically tolerant, though the effects here are weaker than for our other key variables.

Conclusion

Identifying the factors that affect levels of tolerance for government dissidents is important to politics in the Americas, as tolerance is vital to democratic quality and stability. Intolerance may limit constructive criticisms that could improve political systems. Furthermore, tolerance of the right of regime critics to lawfully participate in politics through the act of voting may foster stability by establishing that the formal democratic arena is available to all.

In this report, we examined several factors that predict tolerance.⁷ In general, those who are wealthier, live in more urban areas, are male, and have a higher level of education tend to have higher tolerance for regime critics' right to vote.

Three factors stood out as particularly important in determining citizens' levels of tolerance for regime critics: fear of terrorism, support for democracy, and political participation. Fear of the threat of terrorism negatively affects tolerance. This effect may be explained in two ways. First, experience with terrorist attacks that tend to be justified as acts in protest of the government may lead individuals to associate all types of opinions against government with radical, violent responses such as terrorism. In addition, when personal safety is put in danger, people tend to prioritize safety over civil liberties and freedom of speech (Davis 2007; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Since terrorist threats directly threaten personal safety, the fear of a terrorist attack could very well increase the willingness of citizens to silence government critics. Given both of these explanations for why fear of terrorism can negatively affect tolerance, we conclude that worry about terrorism is an important factor in determining individuals' level of tolerance.

As expected, support for democracy is a strong, positive predictor of political tolerance. In addition, individual political participation matters. We assessed political participation in two categories: voting and protest activity. Both of these measures of political activity are

significantly and positively related to tolerance. These effects might be due to participation having a transformative effect on how people view democratic politics. That is, the more one participates in the democratic process, the more

likely one is to accept that contrary opinions are a necessary part of democracy, and that these opinions should be accepted and listened to – or, at the least, tolerated. Furthermore, those who are

most engaged in the process of expressing their political views are those who are most compelled to defend the right to do so, even for those who criticize the system of government.

To conclude, in this brief report we hope we shed light on some key factors that predict one facet of political tolerance in the Americas.

When personal safety is threatened, people tend to prioritize safety over civil liberties and freedom of speech.

⁷ We examined a few additional factors not reported here for the sake of brevity. We found that the higher the satisfaction with the current president, the less a person tolerates criticism of the government. On the other hand, interpersonal trust positively predicts tolerance. The more trust people have in their fellow citizens, the more they are willing to tolerate dissenting opinions toward the government. These results are presented in Appendix B.

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Appendix A: Author Biographies*

Michael Edwards just completed his sophomore year at Vanderbilt University in the College Scholars (Honors) program. He is studying Medicine, Health, and Society and Economics with a pre-med concentration. He is an executive in the Honor Council, Vice President of a non-profit organization called Pearls for Life, and an executive member of Reformed University Fellowship. He also tutors at a local school.

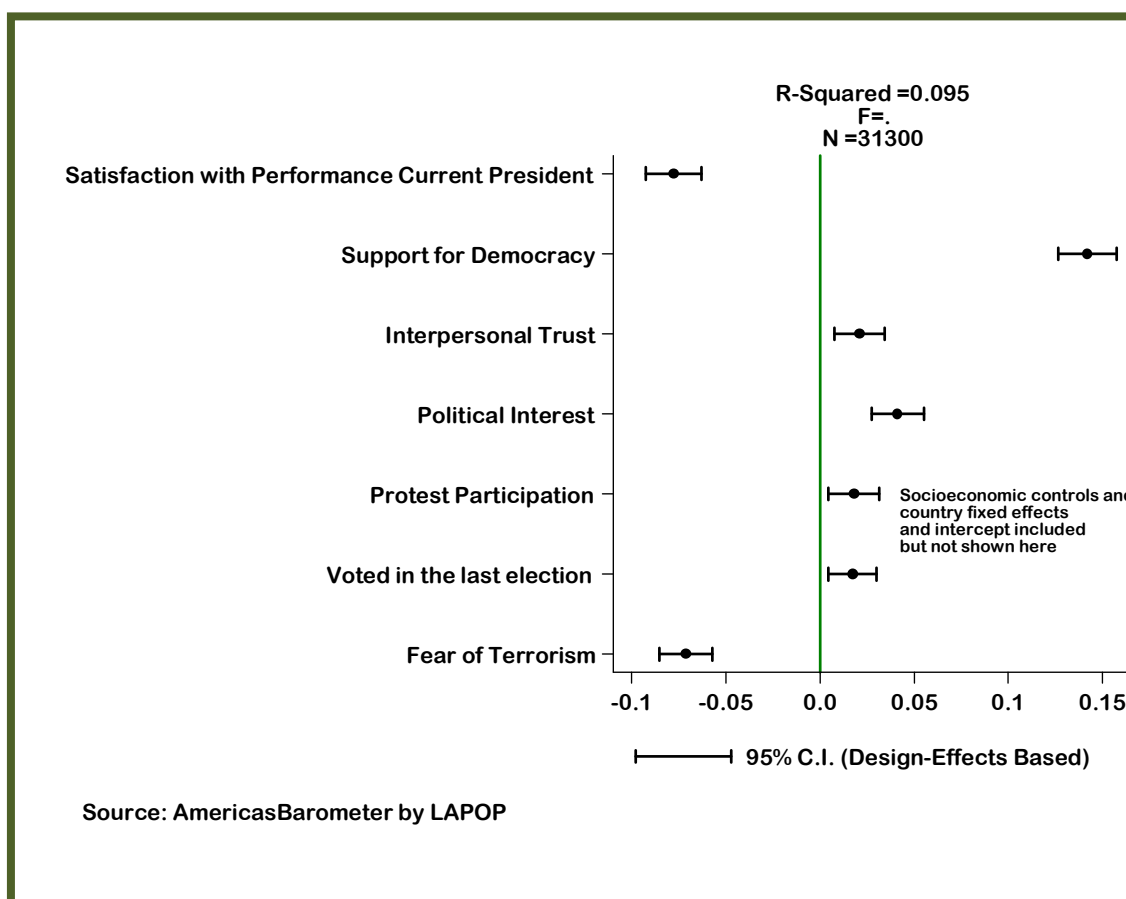
Libby Marden recently finished her sophomore year at Vanderbilt University in the College Scholars (Honors) program. She is majoring in Political Science, History, and Communications Studies with a pre-law concentration. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *The Vanderbilt Political Review*, chairperson for a philanthropic organization benefitting a children's home in Nashville, TN, a mentor for first-year students and Senator for the College of Arts and Sciences. This summer, she has been studying European political economy and economic institutions in London, Brussels, Geneva and Paris.

At the time this report was written, **Judy Wang** was a senior at Vanderbilt University and a member of the College Scholars (Honors) Program. She majored in Economics and Political Science, and she served as a Teaching Assistant for the economic department and a tutor for the athletic department. Since graduation, she has been conducting economic research in Washington, DC.

Alexandra Zarecky recently completed her sophomore year at Vanderbilt University studying Economics and Political Science. She is the Vice President of Communications & Membership for Vanderbilt Model Congress and the captain of the moot court team for the Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature. She also teaches local students science experiments. She will be interning with the Hudson Institute conducting political and military research this summer, as well as working with the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability in Chicago.

**Author names are listed alphabetically. Mariana Rodríguez, a graduate student in Political Science at Vanderbilt University, acted as a technical consultant on this report.*

Appendix B: Regression Analysis of the Determinants of Tolerance for Regime Critics' Right to Vote (Alternate Model), 2010



Appendix C: Predictors of Political Tolerance, 2010

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Fear of Terrorism	-0.072*	0.007
Crime Victimization	0.005	0.006
Voted in Last Election	0.020*	0.006
Protest Participation	0.024*	0.007
Support for Democracy	0.142*	0.008
Quintiles of Wealth	0.036*	0.008
Size of City/Town	0.054*	0.010
Age	-0.015*	0.007
Female	-0.021*	0.006
Education Level	0.054*	0.008
Mexico	-0.035*	0.011
Guatemala	-0.035*	0.010
El Salvador	-0.063*	0.010
Honduras	-0.057*	0.010
Nicaragua	0.000	0.011
Costa Rica	0.046*	0.011
Panama	-0.058*	0.010
Colombia	-0.040*	0.013
Ecuador	-0.058*	0.015
Bolivia	-0.077*	0.014
Peru	-0.069*	0.011
Paraguay	-0.043*	0.012
Chile	-0.073*	0.013
Brazil	0.008	0.019
Venezuela	0.019	0.015
Argentina	0.040*	0.012
Dominican Republic	-0.057*	0.011
Haiti	(omitted)	-
Jamaica	0.020	0.011
Guyana	0.032*	0.015
Trinidad & Tobago	(omitted)	-
Belize	-0.001	0.011
Suriname	0.013	0.011
Constant	-0.008	0.010
<i>R-squared</i>		0.09
<i>Observations</i>		32,812

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed.