

Affirmative Action and Public Opinion

by Alana Tummino

While affirmative action policies have been in place for decades in Canada and the U.S., it wasn't until August last year that the Brazilian Senate passed a law requiring the nation's public universities to establish admissions quotas based on family income and ethnic background.

The Brazilian law and recent efforts in other countries point to a growing public recognition of inequality based on race and gender. But does public opinion in the hemisphere support affirmative action? According to a 2012 AmericasBarometer survey conducted by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 23 Western Hemisphere countries, support for affirmative action is mixed.¹



Members of Brazilian activist group *Educafro* protest in Brasília.

The survey revealed that a majority of respondents supported policies that would remove barriers to inequality, such as race-based affirmative action. LAPOP asked respondents to state how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement that “universities ought to set aside openings for students with darker skin, even if that means exclud-

ing other students.” High percentages of those who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” were found in Paraguay (69.8 percent), Honduras (62.7 percent) and Argentina (62.6 percent), with Canada and U.S. respondents expressing the lowest levels of support, at 28.8 percent and 25.7 percent, respectively. Brazil, at 47.3 percent, also fell in the lower

end of the spectrum. In over half the countries surveyed—13 out of 23—a majority of respondents expressed support for affirmative action policies.

Yet, a significant minority of the region's citizens still harbor prejudice. Across the hemisphere, 25.7 percent of respondents supported the view that men make better leaders than women. And when asked if individuals with darker skin color are not good political leaders, 12 percent of respondents agreed.

Latin America lacks the decades-long histories of affirmative action in Canada and the U.S. Yet significant support for affirmative action exists—despite discriminatory attitudes—and passing affirmative action laws is not impeded by lower levels of popular support.

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¹ Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Vanderbilt University. [HTTP://WWW.VANDERBILT.EDU/LAPOP/](http://WWW.VANDERBILT.EDU/LAPOP/)