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**Do Left and Right  
Differentiate Citizens and  
Politicians in Latin  
America?**



## Introduction

The use and meaning of the categories “left” and “right” are among the most debated topics in the comparative political science literature.<sup>1</sup> Recently, there have been great advances in theoretical reflection regarding the validity of these originally European concepts for describing Latin American realities. Several studies have analyzed Latin American parties along the left-right spectrum,<sup>2</sup> using these terms as heuristic categories that reduce the cost of information gathering for citizens and simplify the relationship between parties and constituencies, in spite of potential cross-national differences in the meanings of these terms.<sup>3</sup> Other works have centered their analyses on the content of the concepts of left and right, providing these labels with specific and common meanings across countries.<sup>4</sup> Finally, during the last decade, much research has been carried out on the “levels” or “degrees” of representation, leading to an analysis of the “quality of representation”<sup>5</sup> as well as the level of congruence between the preferences of citizens and politicians.<sup>6</sup>

The goal of this study is to examine how citizens position themselves on the left-right scale, aiming to compare citizens’ self-placement to that of legislative elites. Thus, this study attempts to analyze the ideological distance between citizens and elites in order to clarify to what extent these groups coincide in the distribution of ideological preferences. First, the average self-placement of citizens and elites are calculated, and I distinguish between four possible groups of countries. The cases analyzed in this study fall into three of these groups. Second, the standard deviations of citizens and legislative elites are calculated to evaluate the degree of ideological coherence in both groups<sup>7</sup> and to analyze to what extent those distributions are (or are not) dispersed.

Third, I discuss the cases that present important ideological gaps in the ideological positions on the left-right scale, indicating that the ideological preferences of citizens and politicians are not aligned. The distance is considered significant when the difference between the average positions of the two groups exceeds 25 percentage points. The cases where an important concentration of preferences is observed at one (or both) of the ideological extremes are also emphasized. Thus, the average positions at both extremes are explored in comparative perspective. The key objective of this paper is to analyze to what degree citizen and elite preferences on the ideological spectrum coincide, and to offer some clues as to the causes and consequences of any distance between them.

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<sup>1</sup> See Downs (1957), Inglehart and Klingemann (1976), Sani and Sartori (1980), Bobbio (2003) and Mair (2007).

<sup>2</sup> These works have been carried out from different perspectives using a variety of methods. Coppedge (1997), Altman *et al.* (2009), and Wiesehomeier (2010) used expert surveys. Colomer (2005), using data from the Latinobarómetro, classified political parties in Latin America based on citizen perceptions. The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) of the Vanderbilt University makes use of the citizen surveys and the PELA Project of the University of Salamanca uses questionnaires asking legislative elites about their own ideological self-placement, as well as those of their own and other parties.

<sup>3</sup> This problem has been dealt with in various comparative studies on the meaning of left and right in Latin American countries. See Zechmeister and Corral (2010).

<sup>4</sup> See Luna and Zechmeister (2005), Rivas (2006), Alcántara (2006; 2008) and Wiesehomeier (2010).

<sup>5</sup> See Luna and Zechmeister (2005), among others.

<sup>6</sup> See Otero y Rodríguez-Zepeda (2010).

<sup>7</sup> See Ruiz Rodríguez and García Montero (2003).

The data for the analysis of citizens' preferences come from the AmericasBarometer, conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project, (LAPOP), which is housed at Vanderbilt University.<sup>8</sup> For elite preferences, data are from the Parliamentary Elites in Latin America Project (PELA, University of Salamanca). The study includes 16 countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic and Uruguay) and the selection was made according to two criteria: a) having field work from a similar time period, and b) having relatively current data.<sup>9</sup>

The structure of this study is as follows. First, the distribution of citizens' preferences across the ideological spectrum is described, according to their self-placement on a 1-10 scale where a response of one means extreme left and ten indicates extreme right. The percentages of the answers "do not know" or "do not respond" to the ideological position question are also analyzed in order to contextualize the use of these categories.<sup>10</sup> Second, the ideological distribution of elites is compared to citizens' positions and a classification of four basic groups is established.<sup>11</sup> Third, ideological coherence is examined by analyzing the standard deviations within and the gaps among the groups. Fourth, several national cases are examined in more detail, and the particularities of the distribution of ideological preferences, both of citizens and elites, are stressed.

### ***Ideological Placement of Citizens in Latin America***

Since the region's "shift to the left" (2005/2006), the ideological orientation of political elites, political parties and citizens in Latin America has been broadly studied. More generally, using data from the AmericasBarometer surveys, various authors claimed in 2006 that, based on average ideological self-placement of the citizens themselves, Latin Americans lean slightly to the right of the ideological center.<sup>12</sup> This tendency persists today. According to the most recent data, in more than half of Latin American countries, including Brazil and Mexico, citizens position themselves to the right of the mid-point of the ideological spectrum stipulated at a value of 5.5.<sup>13</sup>

In general terms, the data do not allow for the detection of a common pattern in the ideological preferences of citizens, once again confirming that the region cannot be treated as uniform and that it is necessary for scholars to recognize national-level particularities. Nevertheless, in all Latin American countries the majority of citizens position themselves at values 5 or 6 on the ideological spectrum, indicating that the ideological center continues to have the greatest weight. The only exception is the Dominican Republic, where the largest

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.LapopSurveys.org>. The interpretation of the data is the author's sole responsibility.

<sup>9</sup> Due to the lack of current and comparable data from PELA, Venezuela and Brazil are excluded from this study.

<sup>10</sup> The question used is the following: "On this card there is a 1-10 scale that goes from left to right. One means left and 10 means right. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those on the left and those on the right. According to the meaning that the terms 'left' and 'right' have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?"

<sup>11</sup> The formulation of the question about the ideological position of legislators is the following: "As you know, when talking about politics, usually the expressions 'Left' and 'Right' are used. On this card there is a row of boxes that go from left to right. On which box would you place yourself, bearing in mind your political ideas?" "And on this same scale, where would you locate your party?" The calculations based on both surveys exclude those that did not know or did not place themselves on the scale.

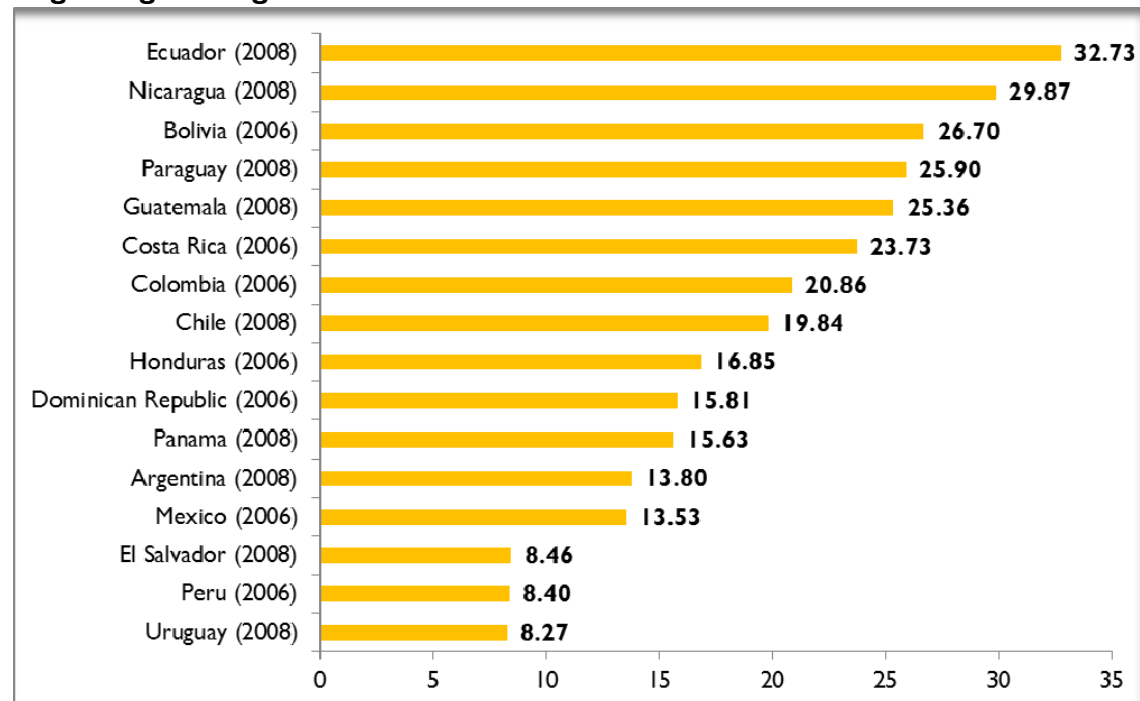
<sup>12</sup> See Seligson (2007).

<sup>13</sup> See Donoso *et al.* (2010).

sector positions itself at the values 9 and 10. The percentage of citizens placing themselves at the ideological center oscillates between 32.32 percent in Honduras and a more substantive majority of 55.09 percent in Panama. Moreover, the data reaffirm the thesis that survey respondents perceive 5 as the mid-point of the scale.<sup>14</sup> This is reflected by the fact that, except in Guatemala and Panama, more citizens identify themselves with 5 than with 6 in all the countries included in this study.

There is a sizeable group of citizens who either refuse to respond to the question about their ideological position or respond that they “do not know.” The size of this group varies significantly among the countries analyzed. The largest proportion of citizens who cannot identify themselves on the left-right scale (see Figure 1) is found in Ecuador (32.73 percent), Nicaragua (29.87 percent), Bolivia (26.70 percent), Paraguay (25.90 percent) and Guatemala (25.36 percent). At the other extreme, in Uruguay, Peru and El Salvador the proportion of non-response is under 10 percent of the sample. The average non-response rate in the 16 countries examined is 19.11 percent.

**Figure 1: The Percentage of Citizens that Do Not Know/Do Not Respond Regarding Ideological Placement**



Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

Generally, citizens locate themselves closer to the theoretical ideological mid-point (5.5) than elites, with a cross-national average self-placement of 5.81 among citizens, and 5.07 among elites (Table 1). At the citizen level, Uruguayans position themselves farthest to the left, with a value of 5.09, and Dominicans position themselves farthest to the right (7.41). At the elite level, the Bolivians and the Ecuadorians locate themselves farthest to the left (3.86 and 3.97), while Panamanian elites report the farthest right positions (6.73).

<sup>14</sup> See Seligson (2007: 83).

**Table 1: Ideological Positions of Citizens and Legislative Elites in Latin America**

Country	Average Ideological Self-Placement (LAPOP)	Average Ideological Self-Placement (PELA)
Argentina	5.52	4.34
Bolivia	5.34	3.86
Chile	5.54	5.15
Colombia	6.24	4.88
Costa Rica	5.90	5.64
Ecuador	5.31	3.97
El Salvador	5.30	4.87
Guatemala	5.99	5.55
Honduras	6.64	6.13
México	5.99	4.59
Nicaragua	5.74	4.69
Panamá	5.85	6.73
Paraguay	5.52	5.96
Peru	5.61	4.99
Dominican Republic	7.41	5.42
Uruguay	5.09	4.37
<b>Average</b>	<b>5.81</b>	<b>5.07</b>

### ***The Ideological Self-Placement of Elites and Citizens: Four Different Groups***

The countries analyzed in this study are ordered according to reported distance from the theoretical ideological center of 5.5 among citizens and elites. Depending on whether citizens and elites position themselves further from the center and closer to the left or right, it is possible to differentiate four ideal-type groups. These are the following:

LAPOP-LEFT – citizens position themselves further from the ideological center and are on the left.

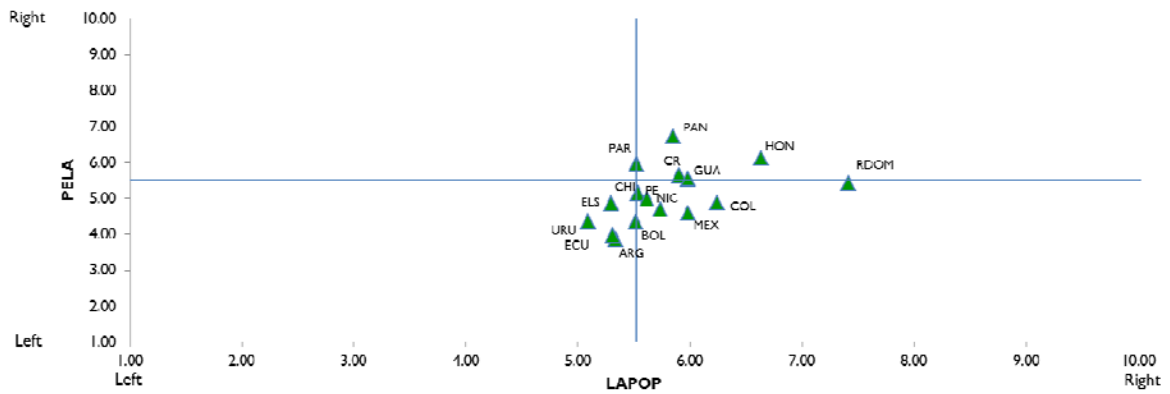
PELA-RIGHT – elites position themselves further from the ideological center and are on the right.

PELA-LEFT – elites position themselves further from the ideological center and are on the left.

LAPOP-RIGHT – citizens position themselves further from the ideological center and are on the right.

The countries examined in this paper only occupy three of the four possible categories, since citizens do not position themselves further from the ideological center and to the left in any country in this study. This implies that, in Latin America in general, elites are located further to the left than citizens.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Countries According to Citizen and the Elite Distance from the Ideological Center**

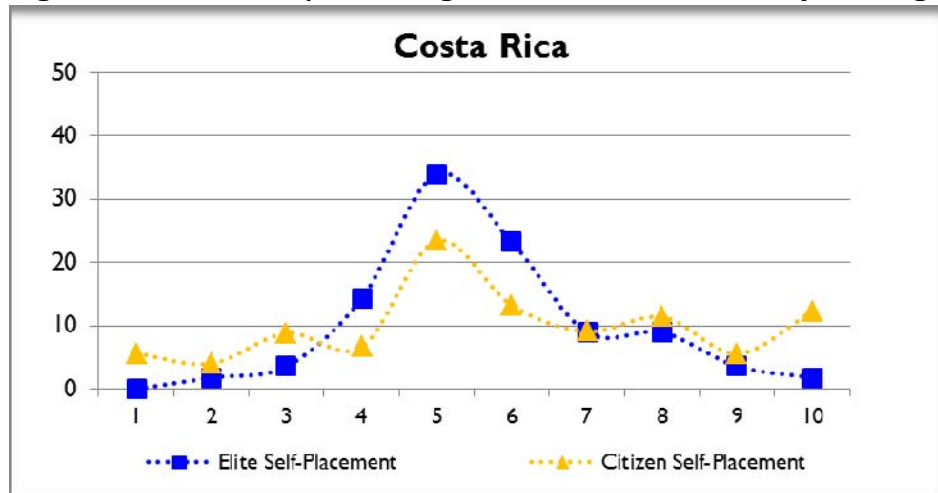


Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

***Group I: Citizens are Located More to the Right***

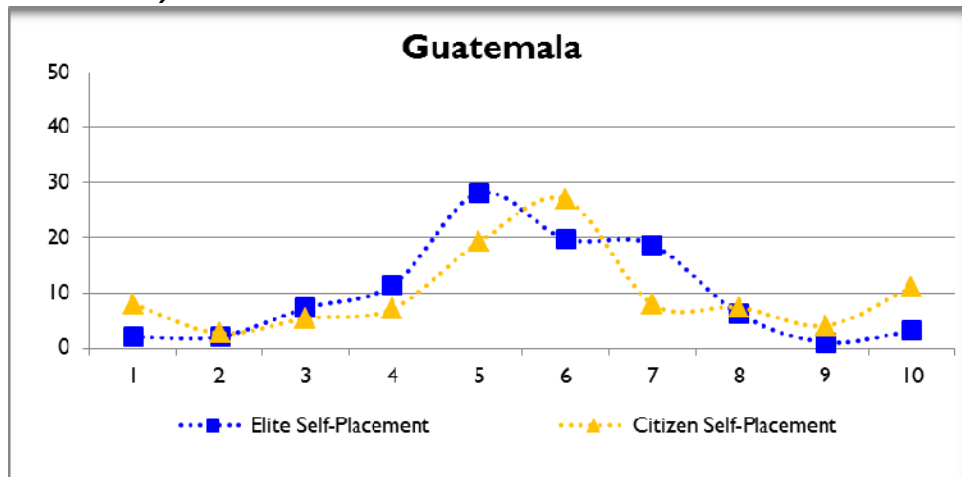
The first group comprises those countries in which citizens place themselves further from the ideological mid-point, and where citizens are also further to the right on the ideological scale. Three Central American countries – Costa Rica, Guatemala and Honduras – are members of this group, as well as Colombia and the Dominican Republic; the last three countries report the greatest distance from the ideological center (6.64, 6.24 and 7.41, respectively). The most distinctive case is the Dominican Republic. Both the distance between citizens and the ideological mid-point and at the distance between citizens and elites is the greatest among all the countries studied, with elites placing themselves at an average of 5.42, while citizens’ average self-placement is 7.41. The difference is substantially smaller in Honduras, with legislative elites situating themselves at 6.13 on average, and citizens’ placing themselves at an average of 6.64. Colombia shows the fourth largest gap (after the Dominican Republic, Bolivia and Mexico) between representatives and the represented; the average distance between the two groups is 1.37 points (Figures 3-7).

**Figure 3: Costa Rica (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**



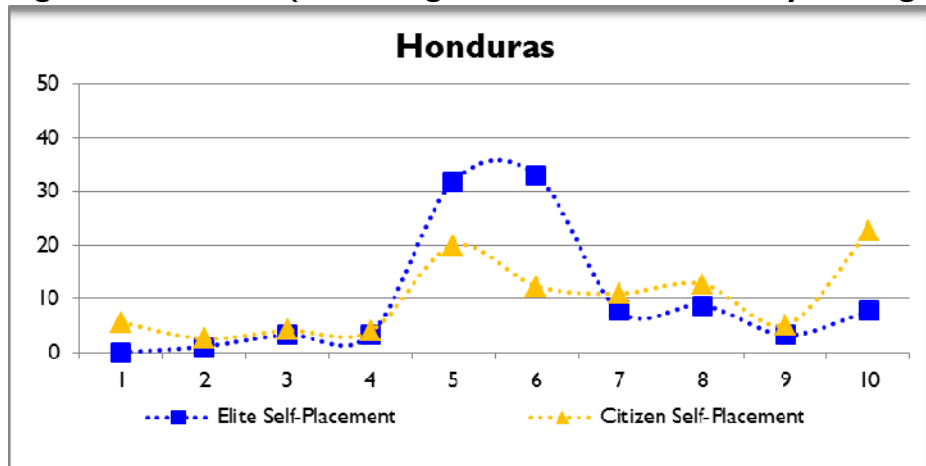
Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 4: Guatemala (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**



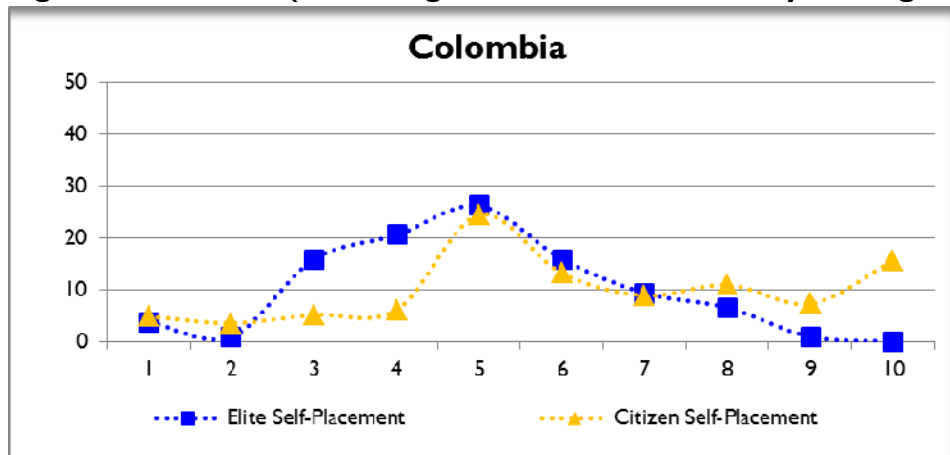
Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 5: Honduras (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**



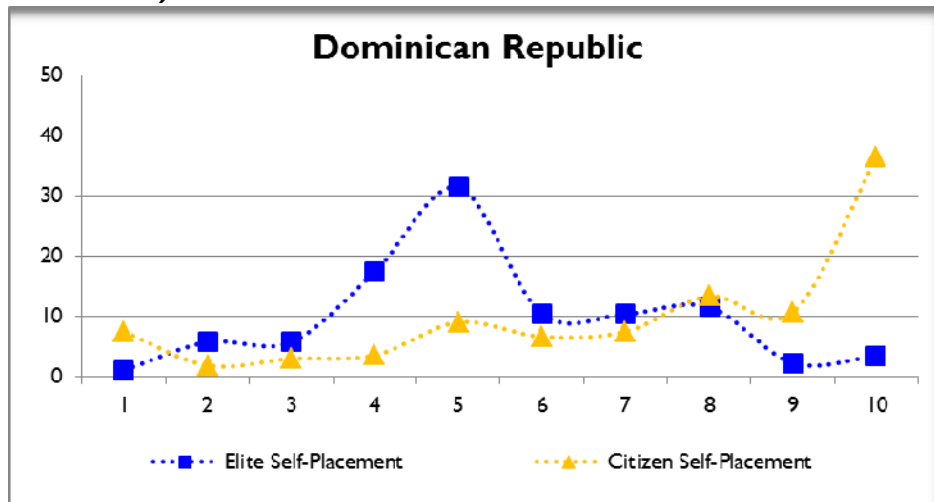
Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 6: Colombia (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**



Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 7: Dominican Republic (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

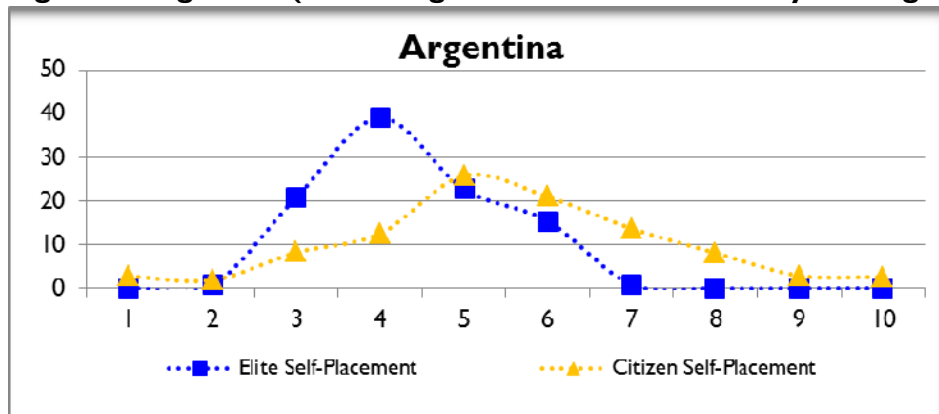


Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

### ***Group II: Elites are Located More to the Left***

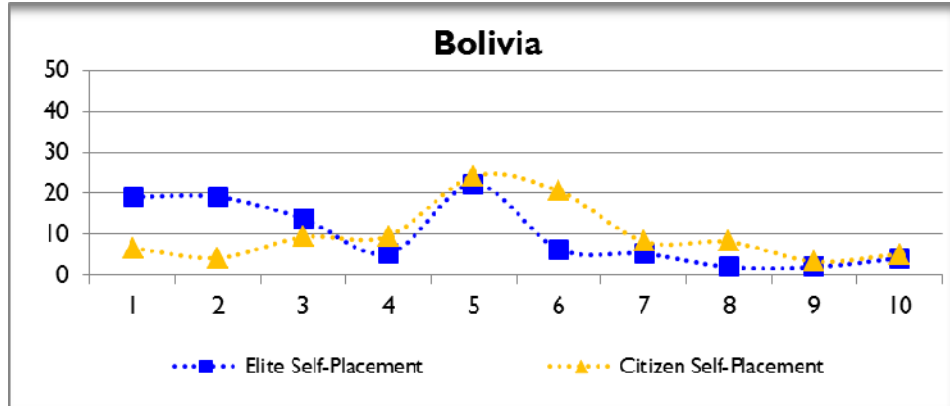
The second group is the largest, and is comprised of those countries whose elites place themselves further from the ideological center than citizens and, simultaneously, to the left of the ideological spectrum: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru and Uruguay. Among these cases, those whose elites are located furthest from the ideological center are Bolivia (3.86), Ecuador (3.97) and Argentina (4.34). Only in Argentina do citizens position themselves to the right of center, though in an insignificant manner. In this second group, the Mexican case is the most striking, with elites placing themselves at 4.59 and citizens at 5.99 (Figures 8-16).

**Figure 8: Argentina (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

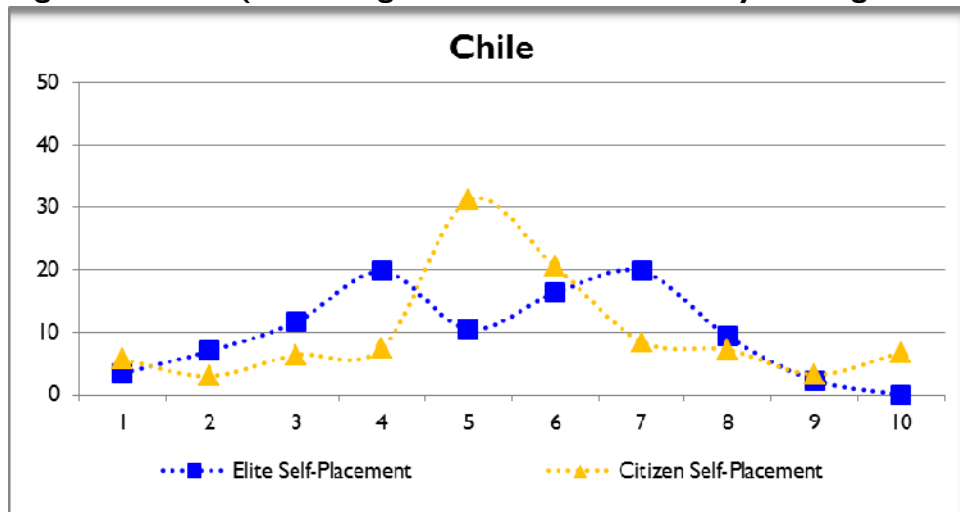


Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

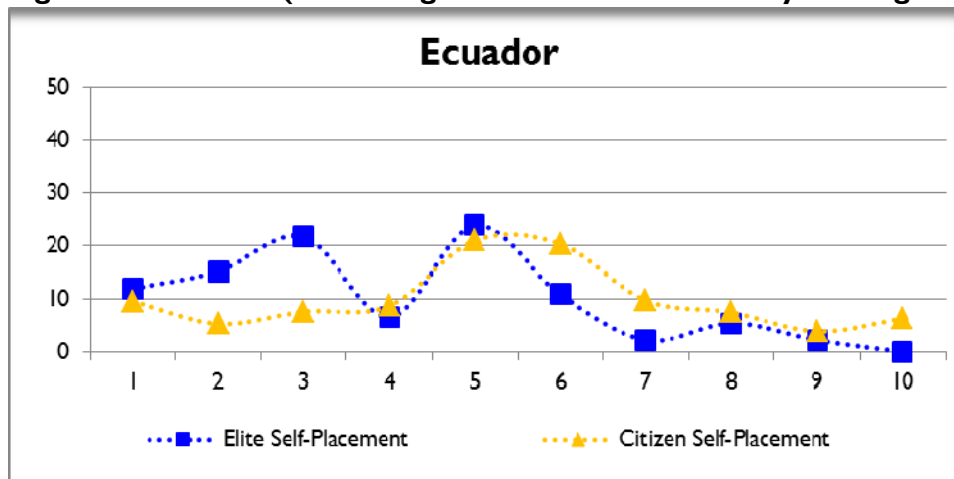


**Figure 9: Bolivia (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

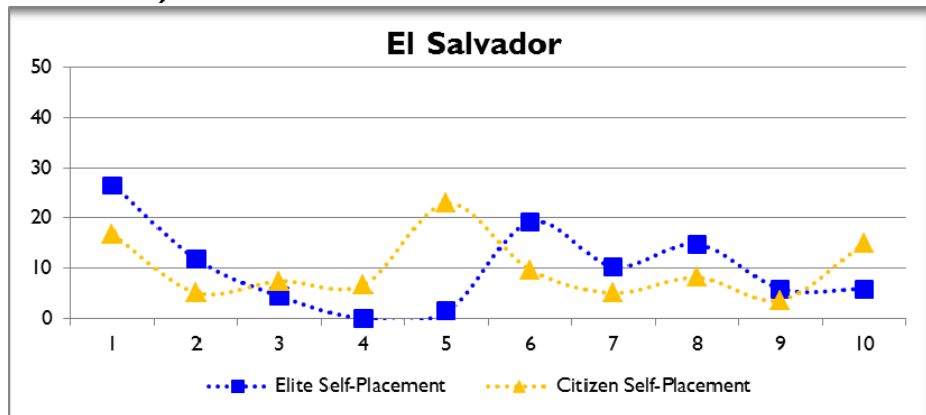
**Figure 10: Chile (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 11: Ecuador (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

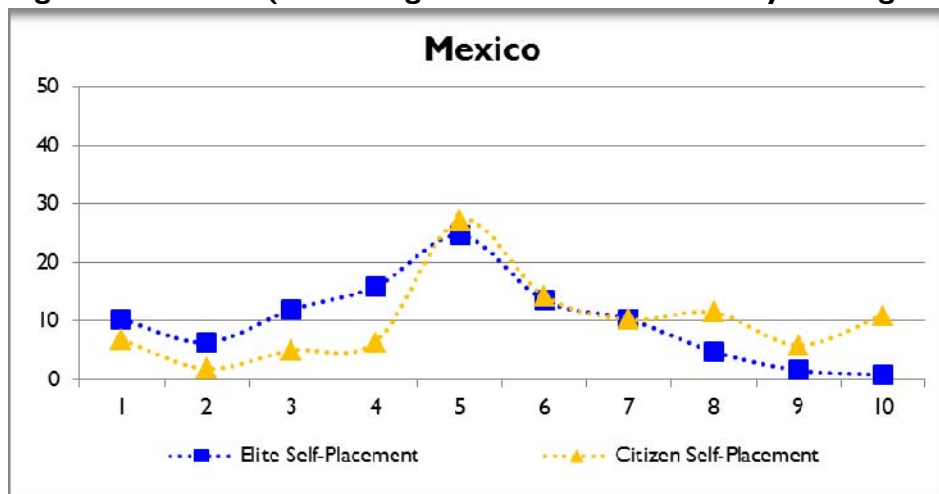
Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 12: El Salvador (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**



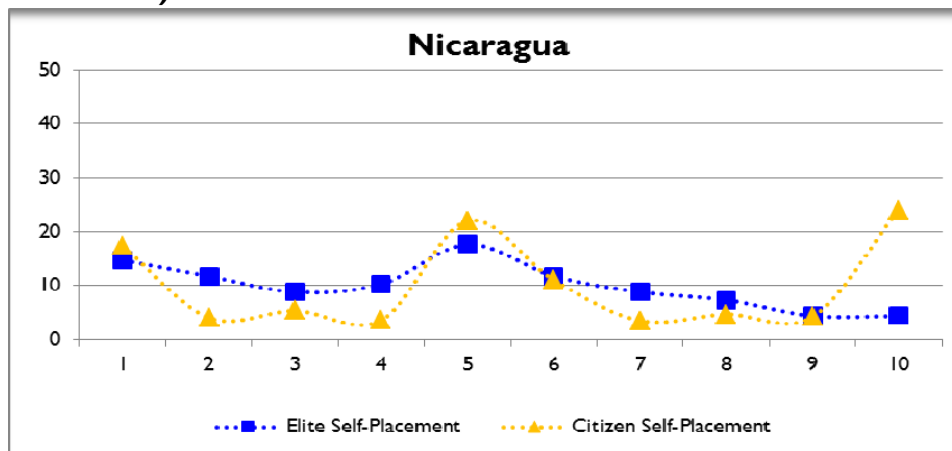
Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 13: Mexico (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

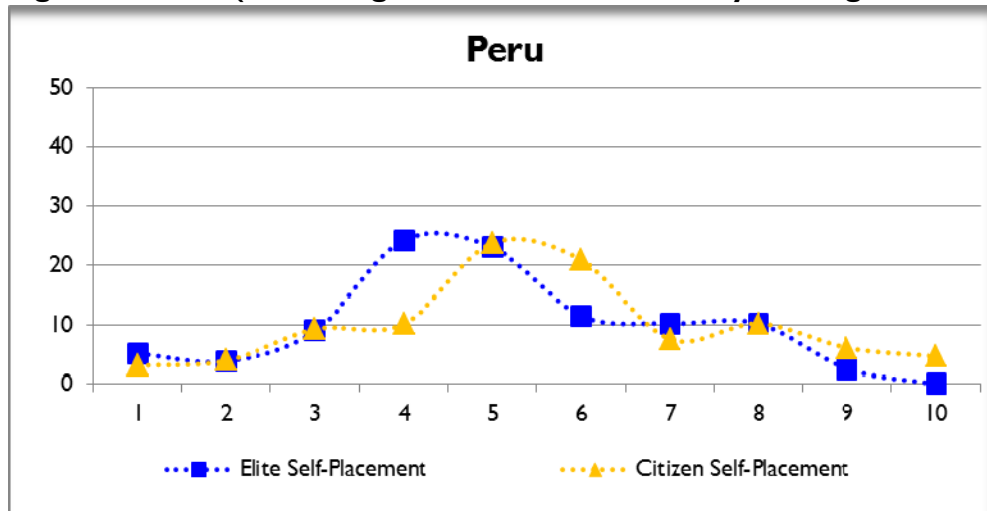


Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

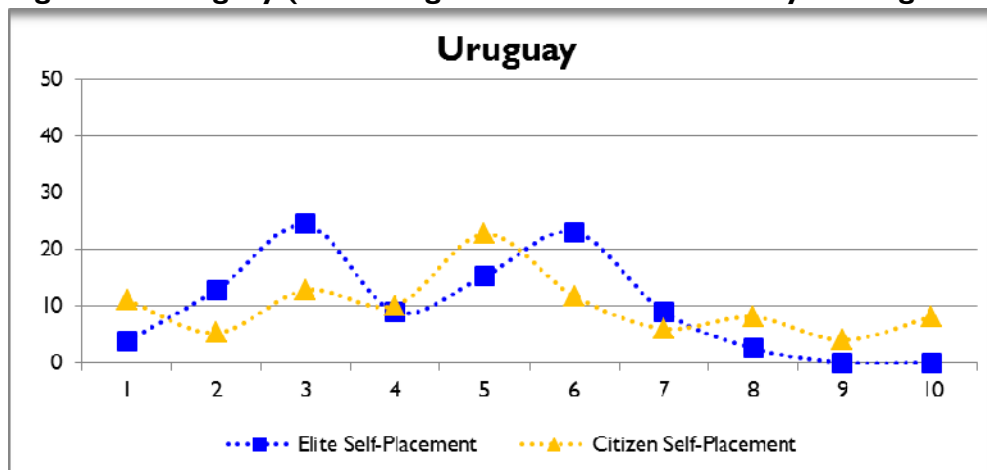
**Figure 14: Nicaragua (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**



Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 15: Peru (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

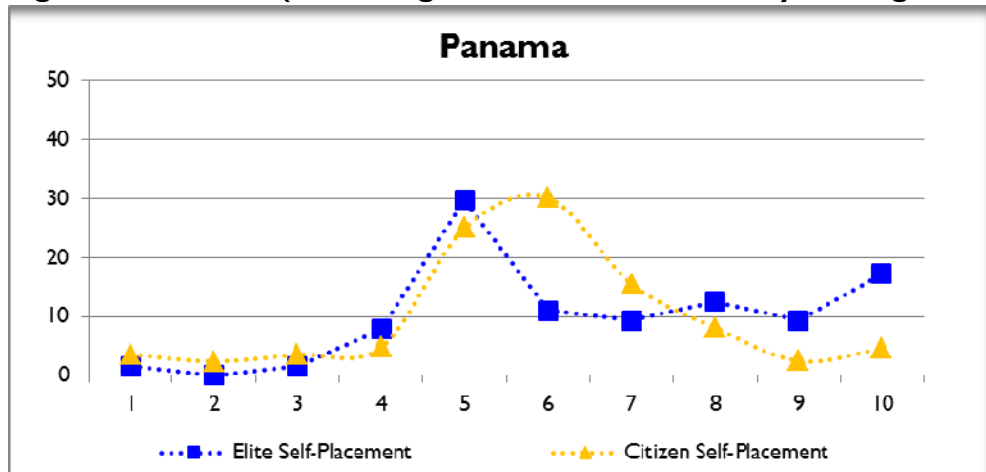
Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 16: Uruguay (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

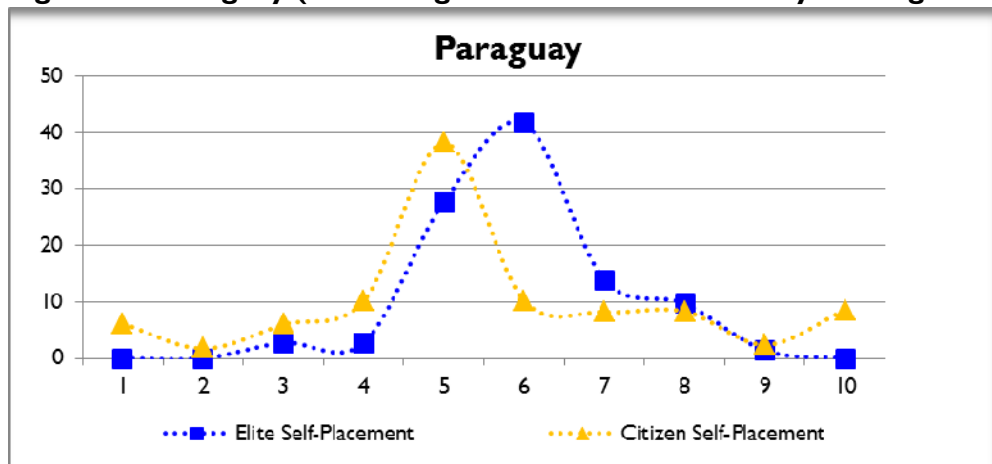
Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

### ***Group III: Elites are Located More to the Right***

The third group includes the two countries (Panama and Paraguay) where elites place themselves further from the ideological center than citizens, and also locate themselves on the right. Panamanian elites' self-placement is 6.73, which makes them the furthest to the right among all the analyzed cases. Meanwhile, the Paraguayan elites position themselves at 5.96, and thus are more moderate than their counterparts in Panama (Figures 17-18).

**Figure 17: Panama (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

**Figure 17: Paraguay (Percentage of Citizens and Elites by Ideological Placement)**

Source: The Author, based on LAPOP and PELA database

In sum, elites in Latin America generally place themselves further from the ideological center and to the left (5.07) of citizens, who position themselves slightly to the right (5.81) of the theoretical middle. This may mean that it is easier for elite-level ideological shifts to take place, and it also indicates that the “shift to the left” occurred at the elite level rather than at the level of the citizenry, whose ideological positions are more stable. The most frequent pattern observed in the sample is that of elites placing themselves further from the ideological center than the citizenry, and to the left. Nine countries belong to this group, among them Argentina and Mexico.

### ***Ideological Coherence***

Ideological coherence is measured by calculating standard deviations. This measure indicates the dispersion of ideological self-placement around the average, and is calculated for both citizens and elites. Among citizens, the greatest ideological coherence is found in Panama and Argentina, with values of 1.85 and 1.86, respectively (Table 2). In Argentina the proportion of citizens that situate themselves at the positions 1-2 and 9-10 of the ideological scale does

not exceed 6 percent. In contrast, the least ideologically coherent citizens are found in Nicaragua (3.20), El Salvador (2.95) and the Dominican Republic (2.85). All these cases register important sectors of the population at both ideological extremes (1-2 and 9-10). In the two Central American countries, the distribution is rather symmetrical, while in the Dominican case, 47 percent of respondents position themselves at the extreme right of the scale, but only 9 percent at the extreme left (values 1-2).

At the level of elites, Argentines (1.03) and Paraguayans (1.14) are the most ideologically coherent, with standard deviations very close to one. Like citizens, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan elites are the least ideologically coherent based on standard deviations. Almost 40 percent of the former (38.24) place themselves at the values 1-2 of the ideological scale. Regarding the latter, this proportion reaches nearly 30 percent of the legislators interviewed.

Across the region, elites are more ideologically coherent than citizens (1.93 vs. 2.43). Argentina and Paraguay are the most coherent countries studied at the levels of both citizens and elites. On the other end, El Salvador and Nicaragua have the highest standard deviations at both the elite and mass levels, meaning that they present the least ideological coherence.

**Table II: Ideological Coherence of Latin American Citizens and Legislative Elites**

Country	Standard Deviation (LAPOP)	Standard Deviation (PELA)	Percent Ideological Self-Placement			
			Left (1 and 2) (LAPOP)	Right (9 and 10) (LAPOP)	Left (1 and 2) (PELA)	Right (9 and 10) (PELA)
Argentina	1.86	1.03	4.76	5.92	0.91	0.00
Bolivia	2.22	2.44	10.98	8.66	38.30	6.38
Chile	2.15	2.00	8.66	9.97	10.47	2.33
Colombia	2.52	1.67	8.39	22.80	4.67	0.93
Costa Rica	2.52	1.56	9.62	17.83	1.79	5.36
Ecuador	2.40	2.05	14.92	10.16	27.17	2.17
El Salvador	2.95	3.10	21.72	18.55	38.24	11.76
Guatemala	2.42	1.76	10.71	15.16	4.17	4.17
Honduras	2.61	1.69	8.19	27.69	1.10	10.99
Mexico	2.41	2.03	8.60	16.83	16.67	2.38
Nicaragua	3.20	2.59	21.39	28.66	26.47	8.82
Panama	1.85	2.19	5.94	7.02	1.56	26.56
Paraguay	2.22	1.14	7.87	11.00	0.00	1.39
Peru	2.13	1.90	7.01	10.77	8.97	2.56
Dominican Republic	2.85	1.94	9.43	47.12	6.98	5.81
Uruguay	2.57	1.81	16.35	12.14	16.67	0.00
<b>Average</b>	<b>2.43</b>	<b>1.93</b>				

## ***Focusing on Individual Countries***

Studying individual countries allows us to highlight some interesting features. Among the cases analyzed, citizens from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and the Dominican Republic are concentrated at the ideological extremes (1 and 10). Nicaraguans and Salvadorans are distributed in a bipolar way, with a high concentration of citizens at both extremes, coinciding with the high elite polarization in these countries. In Nicaragua, similar proportions of the citizen and elite populations place themselves on the extreme left, indicating ideological correspondence between citizens and elites; however, on the extreme right the distance between citizens and elites is 19.66 percentage points. In El Salvador, meanwhile, we observe low levels of correspondence between the self-placement of citizens and elites. On the extreme left, the difference in concentration of responses is 9.90 percentage points, with greater elite presence. At the extreme right, the difference is 9.00 points, with more citizens than elites occupying these positions.

The case of Honduras can be classified as “unipolar,” since the highest proportion of citizens position themselves at the extreme right (22.53 percent at 10, versus 5.61 percent at 1). At the ideological level, Honduran citizens are poorly aligned with their elites, since only 7.69 of the latter place themselves at 10. To a lesser degree, this is also the case in Colombia and Costa Rica, where citizens who place themselves at position 10 have difficulty finding legislators with the same ideological orientation. Also remarkable is the difference between the self-placement of citizens and elites in the Dominican Republic, where 36.37 percent of the citizenry placed themselves at the value 10, versus 3.49 percent of elites (similarly to the Honduran case).

Bolivia and Ecuador present two other interesting cases, where leftist elites are more radicalized than citizens. In Bolivia, fewer than 11 percent of citizens position themselves at 1 and 2. This contrasts with the preferences of elites, almost 40 percent of whom place themselves in these positions. A similar tendency appears in Ecuador, where the proportion of citizens that place themselves at 2 and 3 reaches 12.93 percent but the proportion of legislators is 36.56 percent. These findings could suggest a certain ideological disconnection between the preferences of citizens and their representatives in these countries, with the latter being more radical.

Meanwhile, at the other extreme is Panama, where the percentage of elites that identify themselves with the values 9 and 10 on the ideological spectrum reaches 23.81 percent, but only 7.02 percent of citizens position themselves there.

Finally, Chile and Uruguay are two countries that present similar traits. Most legislative elites in these countries place themselves in a homogeneous fashion at two values on the scale. In Chile, 19.77 percent of elites identify their position as 4, and another 19.77 percent as 7. In Uruguay, 24.60 percent of elites placed themselves at 3 and 23.08 percent at 6. In both countries, the majority of citizens place themselves between these two peaks. In Chile, 51.80 percent of respondents position themselves at the center (5 and 6), while in Uruguay this proportion decreases to 34.45 percent of respondents. Notably, in both of these countries, a small segment of citizens identifies with the extreme right, and not one legislator expresses such orientation.

## Conclusions

One of the principal findings of this study is that Latin American citizens place themselves slightly to the right of the theoretical ideological center (5.81) whereas legislative elites locate themselves slightly to the left (5.07). Furthermore, in several countries there is a wide gap between the positions of citizens and elites, indicating the ideological distance between the two groups.

Among these countries, it is possible to distinguish at least three different patterns. First, there are countries where the ideological gap appears on the left side of the spectrum (Bolivia and Ecuador). In these countries, the preferences of elites do not coincide with those of citizens, since a larger percentage of the former are located on the left and the majority preferences of the latter are significantly more towards the center. The second pattern appears in countries (Panama) where a similar gap between citizens and elites occurs on the right side of the scale, with elites on the right, but no citizens. Third, in some countries the pattern is reversed (Dominican Republic and Colombia); we observe a strong citizen presence on the extreme right (10) but elites are absent from this ideological space. This indicates that these ideological preferences have little or no representation at the parliamentary level.

The study also highlights that in various countries (Ecuador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Paraguay and Guatemala) more than 25 percent of citizens do not know how or do not want to position themselves on the ideological scale. This finding could pose a challenge to the use of the “left-right” categorization in Latin America, as it calls into question claims brought forward by various authors regarding citizens’ capacity to position themselves on the scale.<sup>15</sup> For these cases, more complex studies and research with more respondents would be needed.

Finally, El Salvador and Nicaragua are among the countries where the greatest ideological dispersion has been found among both citizens and elites, whereas the largest gap in ideological preferences between citizens and their representatives is found in the case of the Dominican Republic, mainly on the right side of the spectrum.

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<sup>15</sup> This partially contradicts the conclusions of some experts (Freidenberg, García Diez and Llamazares 2006; Colomer 2005) who claim that citizens know how to position themselves on the ideological scale.

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