

*AmericasBarometer Insights: 2010 (No.44)\**

# Support for Same-Sex Marriage in Latin America<sup>1</sup>

Germán Lodola, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella,  
University of Pittsburgh

[glodola@utdt.edu](mailto:glodola@utdt.edu)

Margarita Corral, Vanderbilt University  
[margarita.corral@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:margarita.corral@vanderbilt.edu)

Gay marriage recently has been a subject of intense discussion in many countries in the Americas. Disputes over the issue are marked by sharply conflicting opinions among citizens, social organizations, religious groups, the highly influential Catholic Church, and policy makers. In Latin America, these debates have engendered outcomes that vary sharply from country-to-country. Same-sex marriage has been constitutionally banned in Honduras (2005), El Salvador (2009), and the Dominican Republic (2009). In Bolivia, the new Constitution (2009) limits legally recognized marriage to opposite-sex unions. In Costa Rica, the Supreme Court ruled against same-sex couples seeking the right to be legally married (2006), while a

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<sup>1</sup> Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>  
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national referendum on the subject remains a possibility. Yet same-sex civil unions, which give homosexual couples some of the rights enjoyed by heterosexual ones (including social security inheritance and joint ownership of property, but excluding adoption rights), have been legalized in Uruguay (2008), Ecuador (2008), Colombia (2009), Brazil (since 2004), and in a few Mexican states.<sup>2</sup> Within this diverse regional context, and despite numerous protests organized by the Catholic Church, rightist organizations, and conservative legislators, this month Argentina became the first Latin American country to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide, granting gays and lesbians more rights than civil unions, including the right to adopt children.<sup>3</sup>

This *AmericasBarometer Insights* report looks at citizens’ opinions with respect to same-sex marriage. First, we examine levels of support for same-sex couples having the right to marry. Then, we assess both individual- and national-level determinants of variation in that level of support. To evaluate these issues, we query the 2010 round of the American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey.<sup>4</sup> In this survey, 42,238 respondents from 25 nations in North, Central,

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<sup>2</sup> In Colombia, a same-sex couples bill was defeated by the Senate in 2007 but was later legalized by a Constitutional Court decision. In Mexico, same-sex civil unions are only legal in the state of Coahuila while in Mexico City the state assembly recently recognized same sex marriage with adoption rights.

<sup>3</sup> Same-sex marriage is also legal in the Netherlands (2001), Belgium (2003), Spain (2005), Canada (2005), South Africa (2006), Norway (2009), Sweden (2009), Iceland (2010), and Portugal (2010). Israel (2006), France (2008), and Japan (2009) legally recognize same-sex marriages performed in other countries. In the U.S., the federal government is banned from recognizing marriages of same-sex couples by the Defense of Marriage Act, although courts have recently ruled parts of the law as unconstitutional. Same-sex marriage is permitted in the states of Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and the District of Columbia.

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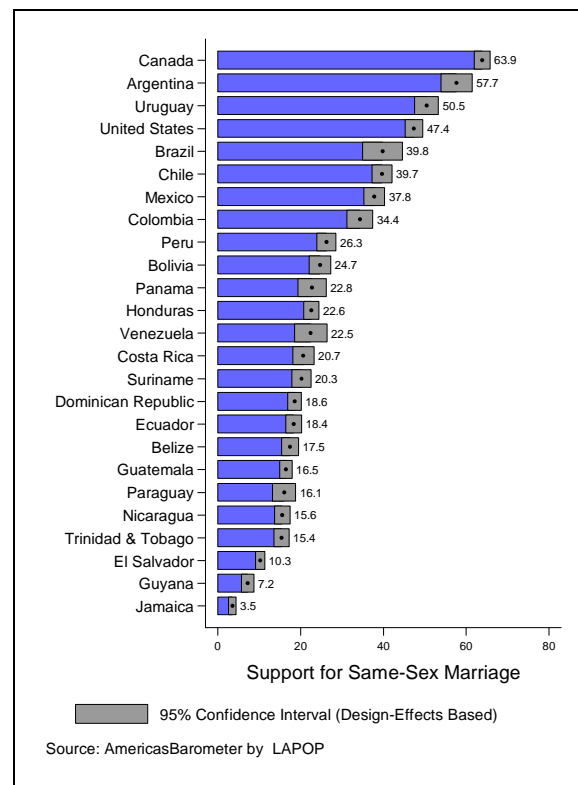
South America and the Caribbean were asked this question<sup>5</sup>:

**D6.** How strongly do you approve or disapprove of same-sex couples having the right to marry?

Responses were given based on a 1-10 scale, where '1' meant "strongly disapprove" and '10' meant "strongly approve." These responses were then recalibrated on a 0-100 basis to conform to the LAPOP standard, which facilitates comparability across questions and survey waves.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 displays each country's average score with its confidence interval. The average level of support for same-sex marriage in the Americas is only 26.8 points on a 0-100 scale. However, there is striking variation across countries. At the one extreme, citizens of Canada, Argentina, and Uruguay express relatively high levels of support and fall on the high end of the 0-100 continuum, with mean scores of 63.9, 57.7, and 50.5, and 47.7 points, respectively. At the other extreme, El Salvador, Guyana, and Jamaica (where sexual acts between men are punishable with jail) show the lowest levels of support: 10.3, 7.2, and 3.5 units, respectively. The remaining countries lie in between these extremes, with those nations in which same-sex civil union has been legalized (i.e., Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia) ranking in relatively high positions. Notably, despite the fact that the newly approved constitution grants full rights to homosexual civil unions, Ecuador is positioned well below the regional average with 18.4 points on the 0-100 scale.

**Figure 1.**  
Average Support for Same-Sex Marriage in the Americas, 2010



## Explaining Variation in Support for Same-Sex Marriage: Individual Level Factors

What factors explain variation in support for same-sex marriage? To assess this question, we first focus on the potential impact of individual-level factors by means of a linear regression model.<sup>7</sup> Following the publication of seminal research on political tolerance that examines the impact of religious values toward homosexuals (Gibson and Tedin 1988; Golebiowska 1995), we include two variables that are considered to be

<sup>5</sup>The final version of the 2010 wave will include 26 countries; at the time of this report, the survey is being implemented to a sample of 6,000 individuals in Haiti.

<sup>6</sup> Around 1,500 respondents were interviewed face-to-face in each country, except in Bolivia and Ecuador, where the samples were approximately 3,000. The Canada and the U.S. are web-based surveys. Non-response to this question was 3.23% for the sample as a whole.

<sup>7</sup> All statistical analyses in this paper were conducted using STATA v10 and results were adjusted for the complex sample designs employed. Given that levels of support for same-sex marriage vary across countries, dummy variables for each country were included. In all models, Argentina is considered as the base or reference country. Results for the whole model are presented in the Appendix, Table 1.

key: importance of religion and religious group participation. The former measures how important religion is in the respondent's life.<sup>8</sup> The latter measures the respondent's self-reported level of attendance at meetings of any religious organization.<sup>9</sup> Several scholars have found that disapproval of homosexual rights is highest among individuals with strong religious identities and who attend religious services frequently (Ellison and Musick 1993; Herek 1998; Herek and Capitanio 1995, 1996; Olsen, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Seltzer 1993; Wilcox and Wolport 2000). Therefore, we expect these variables to have a negative impact on support for same-sex marriage. Beliefs about homosexuality and support for gay rights have been found to vary substantially by religion. Therefore, we also included two dummy variables, Evangelical and Atheist, in order to capture the effect of religious affiliations. While Atheists are expected to express tolerance toward minorities' rights, membership in evangelical denominations has been found to be linked to intolerance of homosexuals in the U.S (Jelen, 1982). While this finding could be partly attributed to differences in demographic or political variables, or to general religiosity, Wilcox and Jelen (1990) demonstrated that intolerance among Evangelicals persists even after controlling for these considerations.

Also included in the regression is a variable that captures the respondent's political ideology. This variable is based on a 1-10 scale, where '1' means left or liberal and '10' means right or conservative. For obvious reasons, we expect more conservative respondents to be less prone to support same-sex marriage than liberal ones.

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<sup>8</sup> This variable is based on the following question: Q5B. Please, could you tell me how important is religion in your life? Very important; rather important; not very important; not at all important."

<sup>9</sup> This variable is based on the following question: CP6. Do you attend "Meetings of any religious organization? Do you attend them once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year or never."

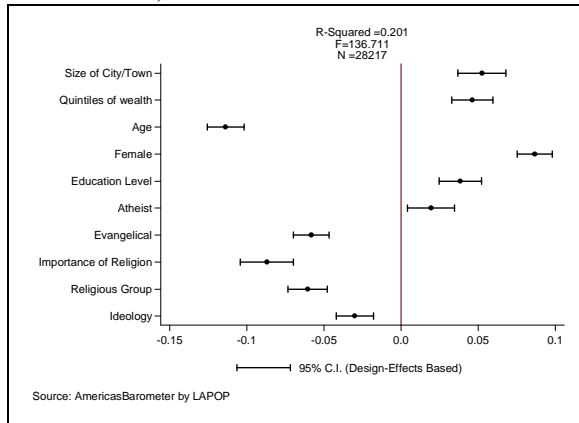
Finally, the regression model includes a number of variables measuring basic socio-economic and demographic characteristics that are thought to play a role in shaping public opinion towards homosexuality. We thus include education, age, gender, wealth, and city/town size.<sup>10</sup> We expect more educated individuals to have more liberal sexual attitudes and therefore express higher levels of support for same-sex marriage than less educated persons (Ellison and Musick 1993; Gibson and Tedin 1988; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Treas 2002). Similarly, we expect older people to be less tolerant toward gays/lesbians than younger people, due more to the eras in which the former were socialized than to the aging process itself (Davis 1992; Herek and Glunt 1993). As found in prior research, we also expect men to be more inclined to disapprove of homosexuality than women (Herek 2002; Kite 1984; Kite and Whitley 1996), and people with higher incomes to be more tolerant than people with lower incomes (Hodgess Persell, Green, and Gurevitch 2001). Following research by Stephan and McMullin (1982), we expect urbanism (in our model, individuals living in larger cities) to be positively associated with tolerance toward homosexuals and, thus, support for same-sex marriage.

The results of this regression analysis are shown in Figure 2. Each variable included in the model is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables on support for same-sex marriage is shown graphically by a dot, which if falling to the right of the vertical "0" line implies a positive contribution and if to the left of the "0" line indicates a negative impact. Only when the confidence intervals (the horizontal lines) do not overlap the vertical "0" line is the variable statistically significant (at .05 or better). The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients (i.e., "beta weights").

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<sup>10</sup> Citizens in Canada and the United States hold sharply higher levels on many socio-economic characteristics; for this and because we select to focus this report on Latin America and the Caribbean, we excluded these cases from the analysis.

**Figure 2.**  
Support for Same-Sex Marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010



We find strong empirical evidence supporting our expectations. First, even when controlling for socio-economic and demographic factors and the impact of country of residence (the “country fixed effects”), both the importance of religion and attendance at religious meetings variables have a statistically significant negative impact on support for same-sex marriage. Specifically, the more important religion is to respondents’ lives and the more frequently they attend religious meetings, the lower the support they express for same-sex couples having the right to marry. Second, we find that Evangelicals, compared to individuals who profess other religions, are significantly less likely to support for same-sex marriage, while those who say that they are Atheists or agnostic about religion are more likely to support gay marriage. Third, holding all other variables constant, respondents’ ideological self-placement works as we expected. The statistically significant negative impact of the political ideology variable indicates that the more conservative respondents are, the lower the level of support for same-sex marriage they express.

We also find that all the socio-economic and demographic variables included in the model are statistically significant in the theorized directions. First, size of the geographic area of residence is positively linked to our dependent variable, indicating that residents of large cities

express higher levels of support than those living in rural areas and small cities. Second, citizens with more years of completed education express higher support than individuals with less formal education. Third, both wealthier and younger persons express more tolerance toward homosexual marriages than poorer and older people. Fourth, the positive effect of the gender (female) dummy variable indicates that women express higher levels of support than men.

## Predicting Support for Same-Sex Marriage: The Effect of Contextual Variables

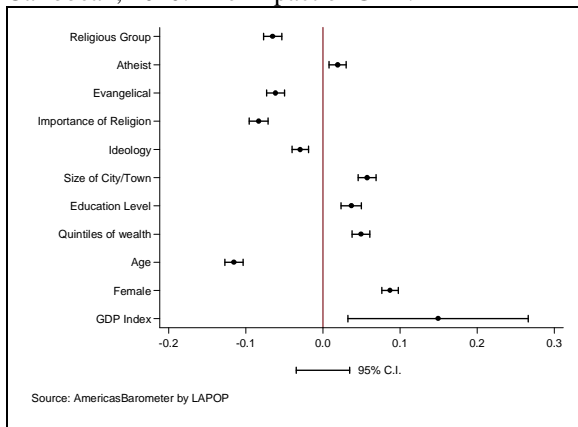
In addition to the individual-level characteristics analyzed above, other factors at the country-level of analysis may help explain variation in the degree to which citizens in the Americas support same-sex marriage. Extensive research on political tolerance in democratic regimes has underscored the important effects of economic development and education on acceptance of diversity. To empirically test these propositions, we estimated separate multi-level regression models.<sup>11</sup> The models include the respondents’ individual characteristics alongside measures of each country’s level of economic development or education, depending on the model. These variables are measured by GDP per capita and a composite index of adult literacy and gross enrollment, respectively.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> This analysis was carried out using multi-level regression techniques (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Raudenbush, *et al.* 2004) as implemented by LAPOP on STATA 10. The model simultaneously takes into account both individual and country-level (i.e., contextual) factors, and produces correct regression estimates that are impossible with standard OLS regression. We estimated separate models because national economic development and education are correlated at a moderately high level in our sample ( $r = .6, p > .05$ ).

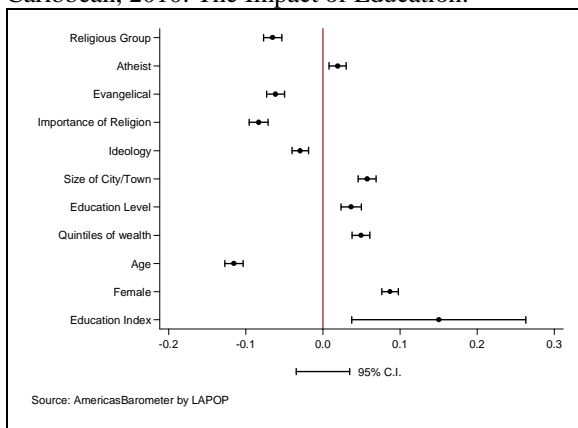
<sup>12</sup> To measure national wealth we rely on the UNDP’s GDP index. This index, which can take values between 0 and 1, is based on GDP per capita in purchasing power parity terms in US dollars. To measure national education we drew upon the UNDP’s Education index which is measured by the adult literacy rate (with two-thirds weighting) and the combined primary, secondary, and tertiary gross enrollment ratio (with

The statistical results of the multi-level models are graphically shown in Figures 3 and 4. As they show, the impact of individual characteristics remains almost unchanged when compared to our previous results, while the contextual variables have the expected positive relationships to support for same-sex marriage. More concretely, citizens who live in richer and more educated countries express significantly higher levels of support compared to those who live in poorer and less educated nations.

**Figure 3.**  
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Support for Same-Sex Marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010: The Impact of GDP.



**Figure 4.**  
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Support for Same-Sex Marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010: The Impact of Education.

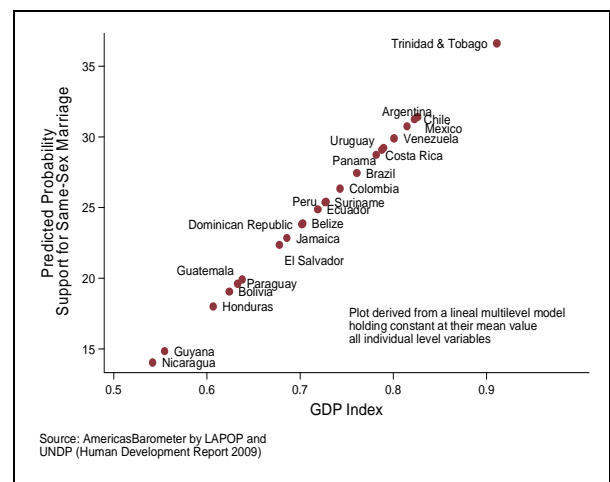


one-third weighting). For more details on how these indexes are constructed, see UNDP's 2009 Human Development Report.

The specific effects of economic development and education at the national-level on support for same-sex marriage are displayed in Figures 5 and 6 respectively. These figures show the fitted lines from the two multi-level regression models using national GDP per capita and the education index. Holding constant all the individual-level variables at their mean value, the models predict similar results compared to the ranking depicted in Figure 1. As a noteworthy exception, Trinidad and Tobago dramatically improves its position in Figure 5 compared to Figure 1. This suggests that the country is strongly influenced by other variables not included in our model.

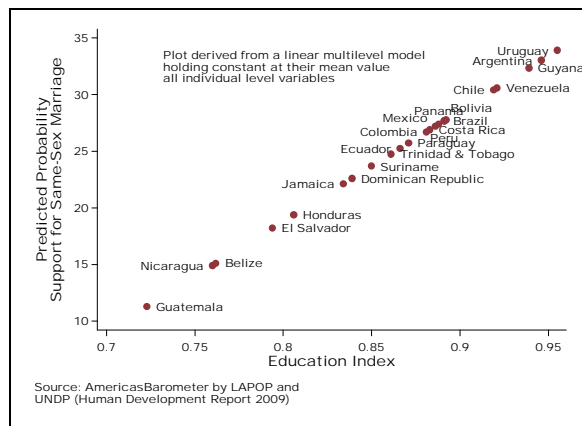
Nonetheless, the results show that higher levels of economic development and education predict substantially higher levels of support for same-sex marriage. Substantively, if a citizen from Nicaragua with a given set of socio-economic characteristics were to move to Argentina, *ceteris paribus*, and none of her personal characteristics were to change, this person would demonstrate a level of support for same-sex marriage that would be about 20 points higher on average than if this individual were to remain in Nicaragua.

**Figure 5.**  
The Impact of Economic Development on Support for Same-Sex Marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010





**Figure 6.**  
The Impact of Education on Support for Same-Sex Marriage in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010



## Conclusion

We began this short report by pointing out that citizens in the Latin American and Caribbean region, on average, express relatively low levels of support for same-sex marriage. However, we have underscored that there is also significant cross-national variation. At the individual-level of analysis, our statistical analysis indicates that strong religious values and more conservative ideologies have a significant negative impact on individual support for homosexuals having the right to marry. In addition, we found that levels of support are higher among wealthier people, individuals living in larger cities, and women. In our analyses of national-level factors, we found strong empirical evidence supporting the classic claim that both economic development and education increase tolerance for homosexual rights.

These results are consistent with those for studies of tolerance over a broad range of minority rights issues, which collectively highlight the significance of education at both the individual and national level. To promote tolerance of minority rights, policy makers and politicians should consider the importance of expanding access to education among their citizens.

Although some have argued that tolerance of diversity might have no real consequences for democracy (Mueller 1988), others have found strong evidence of its positive effects on the construction of democratic policies (Gibson 1992). An important implication of this report is that the vision offered by liberal democratic theorists of a society that accepts diversity and protects minority rights is more likely to develop to the extent that policy makers pay close attention to improving citizens' well being and education. Higher economic development and education tend to be linked with greater tolerance because they stimulate individual value priorities that are conducive to greater openness to diversity.

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**Appendix**  
**Determinants of Support for Same-Sex Marriage**

	Coefficient.	t
Ideology	-0.030*	(-4.86)
Religious Group	-0.061*	(-9.28)
Importance of Religion	-0.087*	(-9.90)
Evangelical	-0.058*	(-9.91)
Atheist	0.020*	(2.50)
Education Level	0.038*	(5.46)
Female	0.087*	(15.02)
Age	-0.114*	(-18.85)
Quintiles of wealth	0.046*	(6.80)
Size of City/Town	0.052*	(6.61)
Mexico	-0.088*	(-7.92)
Guatemala	-0.166*	(-16.27)
El Salvador	-0.213*	(-22.19)
Honduras	-0.148*	(-13.75)
Nicaragua	-0.189*	(-16.24)
Costa Rica	-0.161*	(-13.31)
Panama	-0.146*	(-10.49)
Colombia	-0.106*	(-9.38)
Ecuador	-0.253*	(-18.01)
Bolivia	-0.217*	(-13.18)
Peru	-0.148*	(-13.52)
Paraguay	-0.192*	(-16.57)
Chile	-0.104*	(-8.21)
Uruguay	-0.044*	(-4.08)
Brazil	-0.104*	(-5.50)
Venezuela	-0.172*	(-12.87)
Dominican Republic	-0.164*	(-15.67)
Jamaica	-0.238*	(-24.71)
Guyana	-0.220*	(-20.31)
Trinidad & Tobago	-0.196*	(-19.15)
Belize	-0.175*	(-14.36)
Suriname	-0.172*	(-12.53)
Constant	0.025*	(2.69)
R-Squared	0.201	
Number of Obs.	28,217	
* p<0.05		
Country of Reference: Argentina		