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Political Tolerance Declines in Panama

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Executive Summary. As Panama marks 25 years since the United States military invaded the country, this AmericasBarometer *Insights* report explores the levels and determinants of political tolerance. Tolerance—in theory and in practice—is an important democratic value. Our analysis indicates that political tolerance in Panama has declined significantly since 2004, and that partisanship and system support are the key determinants. While the country has made positive advances toward democratic rule, the evidence presented here reflects a worrying erosion in the political culture of democracy in Panama.

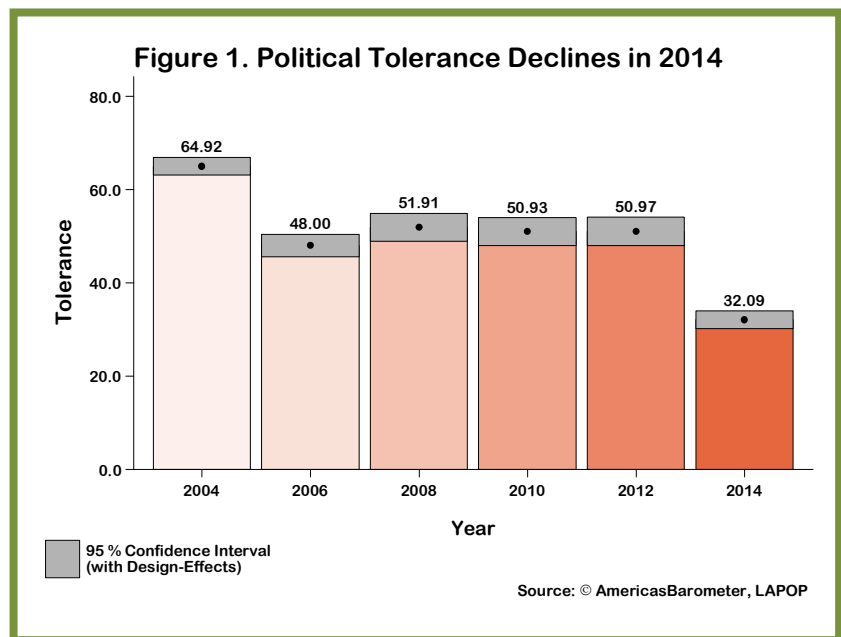
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On December 20, 1989 United States military forces invaded Panama with the stated goal of removing General Manuel Antonio Noriega from power and establishing a democratic regime. Twenty five years later, Panama's political system has made significant strides toward democracy. Five free and competitive national elections, all won by a candidate representing a party out of power, have solidified the country's electoral system. A successful demilitarization process transformed the politicized and powerful Panamanian Defense Forces into a civilian-controlled national police force. The transfer of the Panama Canal and its successful management by Panamanians established sovereignty over the country's most important asset. Furthermore, investment in infrastructure projects such as the expansion of the Panama Canal has led to a decade of extraordinary economic growth (see Pérez, 2011). However, problems such as corruption, weak and inefficient judicial institutions, and unequal distribution of economic growth remain as significant impediments to democratic consolidation. In addition, evidence from the *AmericasBarometer*¹ indicates that the political culture of democracy in Panama has deteriorated since the invasion.

The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) has been conducting surveys in Panama since the early 1990s. The first survey, conducted through an urban sample of 500 Panama City residents in 1991, showed significant levels of political tolerance and support for democracy among elites and the mass public. For example, the average level of political tolerance in 1991 among the mass

¹ Funding for the 2014 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.



public was a mean of 71 as measured by the LAPOP 0-100 tolerance scale (see Pérez, 1996).² Panama remained a part of the LAPOP surveys when the *AmericasBarometer* began in 2004. This *Insights* report³ shows a precipitous decline in political tolerance as the country marks 25 years since the United States military invasion of Panama.

² Tolerance is measured by an index based on the following questions: D1. There are people who always speak badly of Panama's form of government, not only the current administration, but the kind of government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of these peoples' right to vote? D2. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that these people can conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their points of view? D3. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that these people can run for public office? D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that these people appear on television to give speeches? Individuals respond to each question on a 1-10 scale; the questions are combined into a composite scale that is coded to run from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates the lowest level of tolerance and 100 indicates the highest.

³ 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/survey-data.php>

Tolerance, both in the abstract and in practice, is fundamental to democracy. A key distinction that sets democracy apart from totalitarian regimes is that it requires tolerance of political diversity from its citizens and leaders.

Without tolerance majority rule degenerates into a tyranny that imposes on citizens an oppressive yoke of uniformity in opinion and action. Therefore, tolerance—defined as the willingness to extend democratic rights and privileges to those whom we find most objectionable—is a critical component of democratic values and belief systems.

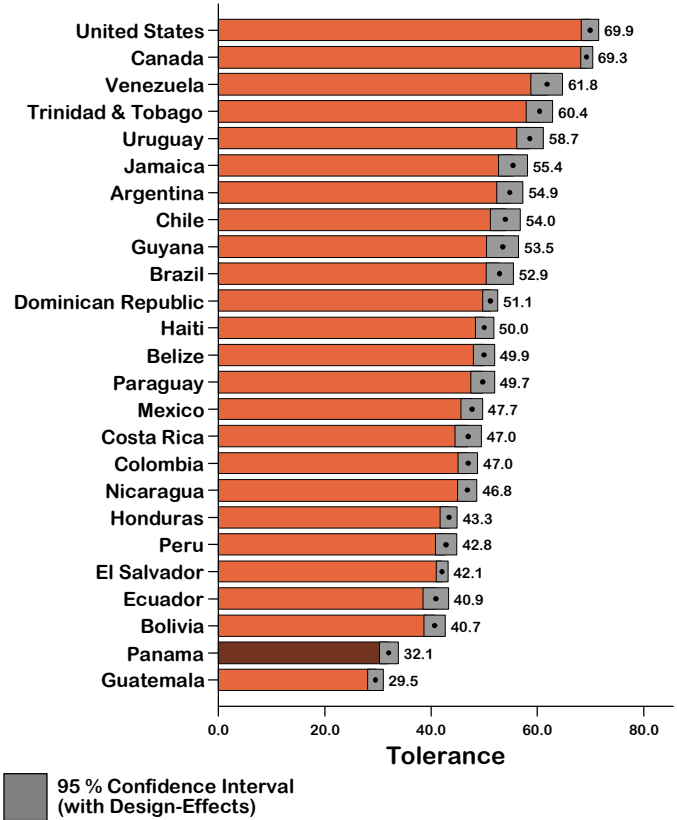
LAPOP measures political tolerance with a composite indicator, based on a set of questions that ask survey respondents to indicate the extent to which they support extending basic political rights to regime dissidents – that is, to those who criticize the [Panamanian] political system itself, not simply its incumbent government.⁴ Figure 1 shows mean levels of political tolerance since 2004. Tolerance levels have declined by 50% from a high of 65 points in 2004 to a low of 32 in 2014. Particularly concerning is the decline of nearly 20 points between 2012 and 2014.

Figure 2 shows the comparative results for political tolerance among the countries of the 2014 *AmericasBarometer*. The recent decline in tolerance places Panamanians next to last among all countries surveyed in 2014. The score for Panama is less than half of those for the United States and Canada, the countries at the top of the rankings. Only Guatemala exhibits levels of political tolerance lower than Panama in 2014.

These results raise the question of why Panamanians express such low levels of tolerance. While a definitive answer to that question is beyond this *Topical Brief*, we are able to explore empirically the factors that statistically impact the levels of tolerance in

⁴ See footnote 2 for details on the tolerance series.

Figure 2. Political Tolerance Comparative Perspective, 2014



Source: © AmericasBarometer. LAPOP

2014. Figure 3 shows graphically⁵ the results of a regression analysis with the index of political tolerance as the dependent variable, and a number of socio-demographic and attitudinal factors as independent variables. None of the demographic variables, including education,⁶ gender,⁷ and wealth,⁸ are statistically

⁵ The independent variables are shown on the vertical axis. Statistical significance is graphically represented by the confidence intervals that do not overlap the vertical line "0" (within the 95% confidence level). When the point, which represents the expected impact of this variable, is situated to the right of the vertical line "0", this indicates a positive relationship while if it is located on the left, this indicates a negative contribution (See Appendix for table with regression coefficients).

⁶ Education is measured as the last year of formal schooling.

⁷ Gender is classified 0 = men, 1 = women.

⁸ Wealth is measured as quintiles of wealth based on possession of capital goods.

significant.⁹ Support for political parties and the political system are significant factors.

Support for political parties is measured by a series of dummy variables¹⁰ that distinguish among respondents who express support for the three major political parties in Panama: *Cambio Democrático* (CD), *Panameñista*, and *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD).¹¹ Non-identifiers are excluded from the analysis, but a robustness check affirms that the results reported here remain the same than if non-identifiers are included as a separate category in the analysis. CD was the governing party under former President Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014). The *Panameñista* party won the May 4th, 2014 presidential elections, and thus currently governs Panama. The PRD is the party founded in the 1970s by the military-led regime, which governed the country from 1994-1999 and 2004-2009.

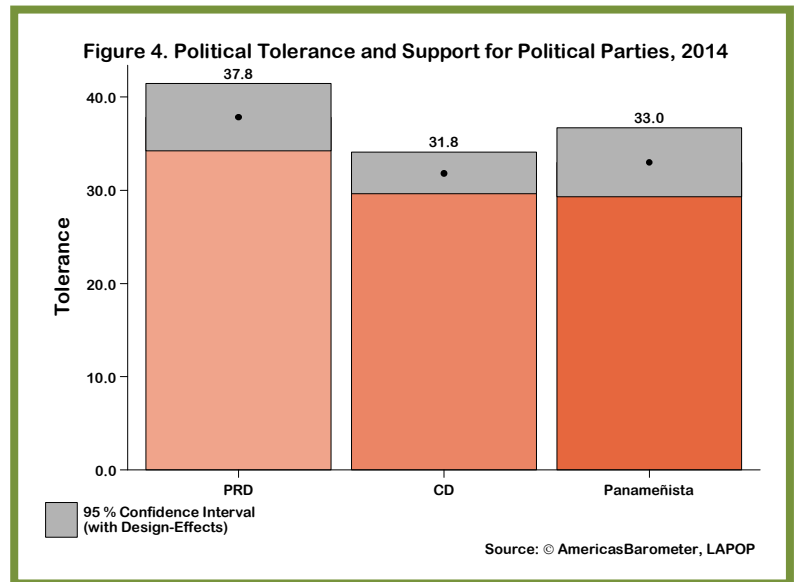
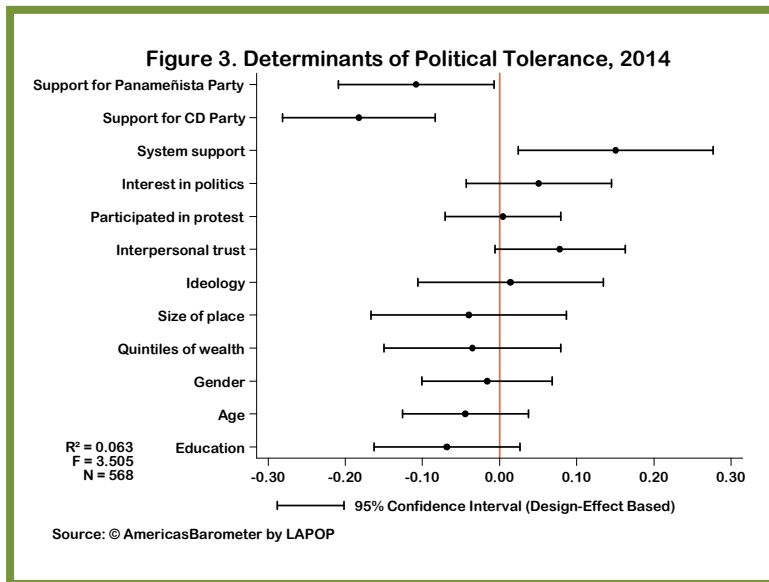


Figure 4 shows the relationship between support for a political party and political tolerance. Supporters of the CD and *Panameñista* parties express less political tolerance than those of the PRD. The national average is 32.1 on a scale of 0-100. PRD supporters are 6 points above the national average and the difference with supporters of the other two parties is statistically significant.

The regression analysis also shows that citizens who support the political system¹² are more likely to express higher levels of political tolerance; figure 5 shows the relationship between support for the political system and tolerance levels.



⁹ If we run a basic model with only size of place, wealth, gender, age, and level of education, we also find that none of these variables are significant predictors.

¹⁰ When using dummy variables we must assign one as the reference category. In this case the PRD is the reference category.

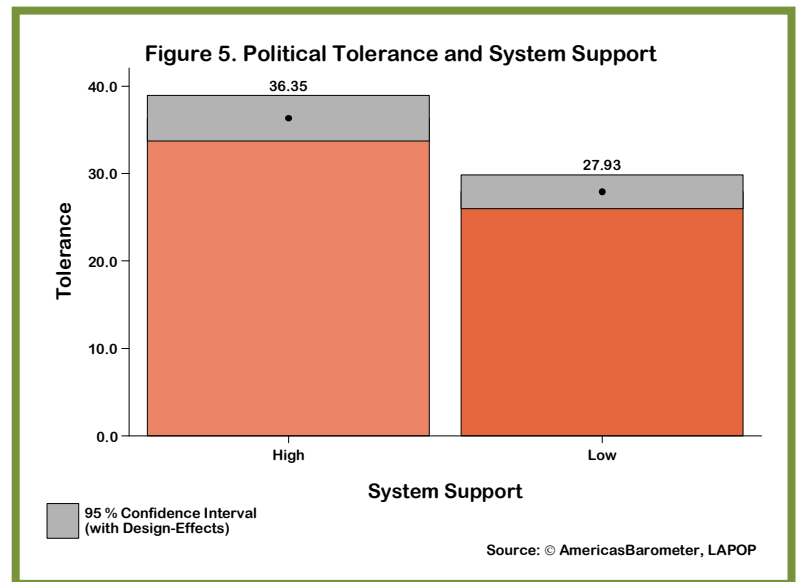
¹¹ The number of respondents who report that they support other parties is sufficiently small that one cannot draw reliable conclusions.

¹² System legitimacy is measured by a scale of support using five questions measured initially by a 1-7 scale, which was transformed to a 0-100 scale for purposes of the analysis. The questions are the following: B1. To what extent do you trust that the courts in [country] guarantee a just trial? B2. To what extent do you respect the political institutions of [country]? B3. To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are protected by the political system in [country]? B4. To what extent are you proud to live under the political system of [country]? B6. To what extent do you think the political system of [country] should be supported?

Panamanians who express high levels of system support express higher levels of political tolerance by 8 points, and the difference is statistically significant. Thus, an attitude of system support is associated with a high level of political tolerance, a key democratic value, which is encouraging for democratic development in Panama.

However, the overall low levels of political tolerance, and particularly the steep decline over time, are signs of trouble for Panama's democratic political culture. Education and other demographic variables do not appear to influence levels of tolerance. The fact that higher levels of education are not conducive to higher levels of tolerance is particularly troubling for the future of democracy in Panama. The results presented here indicate that partisan affiliation is a key factor in determining levels of political tolerance. Supporters of CD and the *Panameñista* parties are significantly less tolerant of those who express opposition to the political system exercising basic democratic rights. Intolerance toward opponents of the system undermines a fundamental prerequisite for democratic governance. Support for the ability of the opposition to express and exercise basic democratic rights is essential for a democracy to thrive.

Twenty-five years after the United States invaded Panama, the country has made significant strides toward establishing democratic governance. However, the results of the 2014 *AmericasBarometer* provide evidence that the political culture of democracy has eroded in at least one important way over the past ten years, as seen in the significant decline of political tolerance.



References:

- Pérez, Orlando J. (1996) "Elites, Power and Ideology: The Struggle for Democracy in Panama." PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, Ann Arbor: UMI (#9728689).
- Pérez, Orlando J. (2011) *Political Culture in Panama: Democracy after Invasion*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.

Appendix

Table 1. Determinants of Political Tolerance, 2014

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Education	-0.068	(-1.45)
Age	-0.044	(-1.08)
Gender	-0.016	(-0.38)
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.035	(-0.62)
Size of Place	-0.040	(-0.63)
Ideology	0.014	(0.24)
Interpersonal Confidence	0.078	(1.86)
Participated in Protests	0.004	(0.12)
Interest in Politics	0.051	(1.08)
Support for the System	0.150*	(2.38)
Support for CD Party	-0.182*	(-3.69)
Support for Panameñista Party	-0.108*	(-2.15)
Constant	-0.000	(-0.00)
Number of Observations	568	

* $p < 0.05$

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at * $p < 0.05$ two-tail