

# AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2015

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## Who Approves of Those Who Block Roads to Protest in the Americas?

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### Main Findings:

- Compared to those who are older, young persons are significantly more approving of those who block roads in protest.
- Those sympathetic to the executive (those who convey high executive approval) are less supportive of blocking roads as a form of protest.
- Those with high political tolerance (in terms of being sympathetic to regime critics) are more supportive of blocking roads as a form of protest.
- Higher evaluations of government efforts against corruption are associated with more approval of those who block roads in protest.

Tensions ran high in late February of 2015 outside the port city of Paranagua, Brazil, where truck drivers blocked roads to protest high fuel costs and tolls. Despite attempts by the police to subdue the demonstration, the movement spread, and several rural areas in inland Brazil experienced fuel shortages, while farmers reported being unable to transport soy and other products out of overly-replete silos. In a move that testifies to the power of the roadblock tactics, government officials agreed to enter into negotiations with the protestors (BBCa 2015).

Across countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region, it is not uncommon for citizens to block roads as a means of participating in the political process (Machado et al. 2011). For example, in the same month that truck drivers in Brazil occupied the streets, protestors in Haiti were blocking avenues in the capital in protest of rising prices of fuel (BBCb 2015). Further, roadblocks became so ubiquitous in Argentina in the late 1990s to today that there is a name for this specialized form of protest, the *piqueteo* (see Moseley 2014).

Blocking roads as a form of protest is a complex issue that is of high importance in today's global society. On the one hand, it has proven effective for protestors; on the other hand, it entails costs that range from inconvenience to economic loss. In this *Insights* report, we use data from the AmericasBarometer to examine public approval for blocking roads as a form of protest. Specifically, we analyze responses to the following question:

**E15:** Of people participating in the blocking of roads for protest how much do you approve or disapprove?

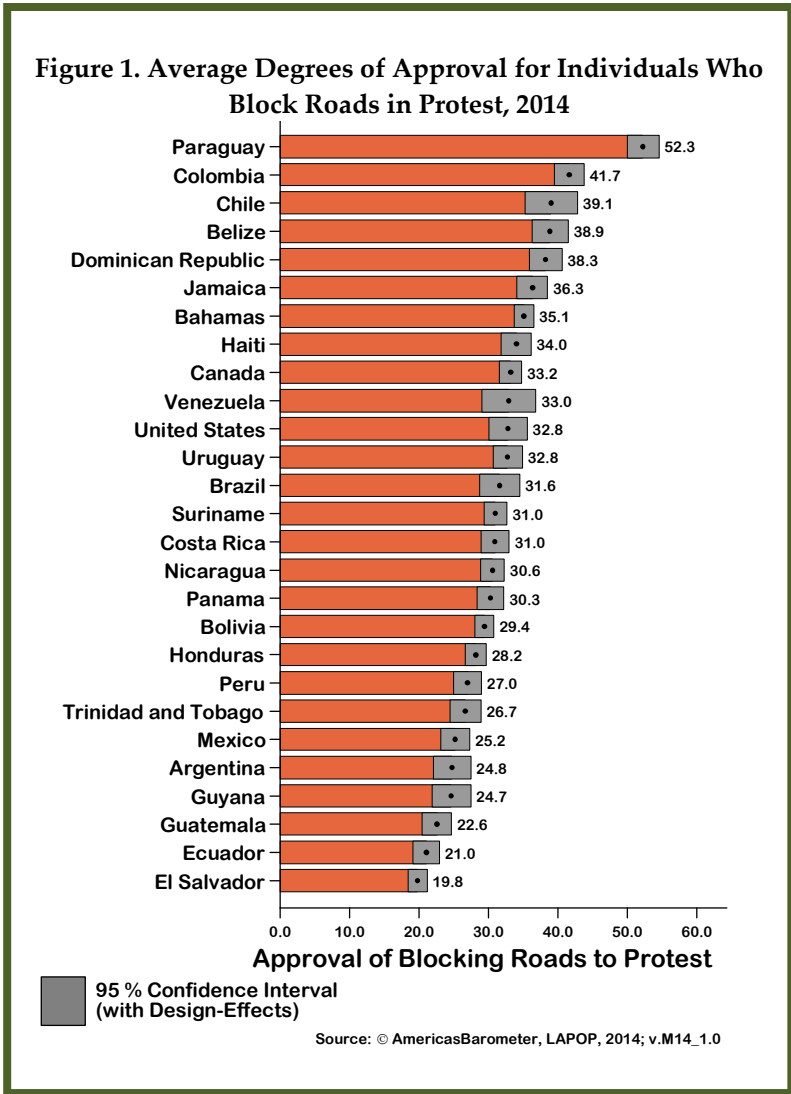


Figure 1 shows mean responses by country to this question. The responses (originally on a 1-7 scale) have been recoded to run from 0 to 100 with 0 being “strongly disapprove” and 100 being “strongly approve” of people participating in the blocking of roads in protest.

Average approval is not exceptionally high in any country. Only one country, Paraguay, is above the midpoint, 50 degrees, on the scale. The rest fall below that neutral value. We further see only a moderate level of cross-national variation, with most countries falling within a range between 20 and 40 degrees of approval on the scale. It may be a surprise that Argentina has a relatively low average approval for the blocking of roads for protests, given the prevalence of this type of protest in the country

(Machado, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2011; Moseley 2014); in fact, Costa Rica, which has tended to resolve fewer issues through protest (Machado, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2011), has a higher mean approval rating for the blocking of roads as a form of protest than Argentina. This leads us to believe that country-level factors may not exert a straightforward influence on respondents' approval. Therefore, in this report we focus on individual-level predictors of approval of the blocking of roads for protest.

## Which Socioeconomic and Demographic Variables Predict Approval of Those Who Block Roads as a Form of Protest?

To begin, we consider how approval for blocking roads as a form of protest varies as socioeconomic and demographic profiles change. Specifically, we consider how place of residence (urban or rural), gender, level of education, income, and age predict support for blocking roads in protest.

The average person living in an urban area seems more likely to be inconvenienced by blocked roads that cause traffic snarls, and thus one could hypothesize that urban residence would be associated with lower approval levels of this type of protest. Some research suggests that men are more likely to support protest actions (Olsen 1968; Safa 1990); however, women have nonetheless "constantly influenced politics" because of their role in society and as parents (Labao 1990, 183).

*Compared to those who are older, young persons are significantly more approving of those who block roads in protest.*

This leaves us agnostic over whether gender will predict support for blocking roads as a form of protest. Similarly, some scholars have found that higher levels of education are linked to lower levels of support for disruptive protests, and others have, instead, found a positive relationship between the two (Hall, Rodeghier, and Useem 1986; Olsen 1968). If education has counter-veiling effects, the impact of education could be negligible, or statistically insignificant. With respect to one's financial status, some scholars show that wealth predicts lower levels of support for disorder and protest, which would suggest a negative relationship between wealth and approval of blocking roads as a form of protest (Olsen 1968). Finally, liberalness decreases with age (Olsen 1968), so tolerance of blocking roads as a form of protest may similarly decrease with age.

Keeping in mind these expectations, we used a multivariable linear regression model to examine the relationship between the aforementioned socioeconomic and demographic factors (place of residence, gender, education, wealth, and age<sup>1</sup>) and the dependent variable of approval of blocking roads as a form of protest.<sup>2</sup> The results are presented in Figure 2, which displays the non-standardized coefficients from the analysis. Each of the points represents the change in the dependent variable on its 0-100 scale when the independent variable is changed from its minimum value (0) to its maximum

<sup>1</sup> Urban is a dummy variable, coded as 1 if the respondent lives in an urban region, and 0 if the respondent lives in a rural area. The gender dummy variable takes the 1 value if the respondent is female. The wealth measure is a five-category variable that is generated using a series of items about household possessions; for more information see Córdova 2009 (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0806en.pdf>). Age is

divided by cohort, with respondents grouped into the following categories: 16-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-65, and 65+.

<sup>2</sup> Country fixed effects are included but not shown; of the countries shown in Figure 1, the U.S. and Canada are omitted because the wealth measure is not available for these cases.

value (1). If the point's confidence interval does not include zero, we can say that the variable is statistically significant at a 95% confidence level.

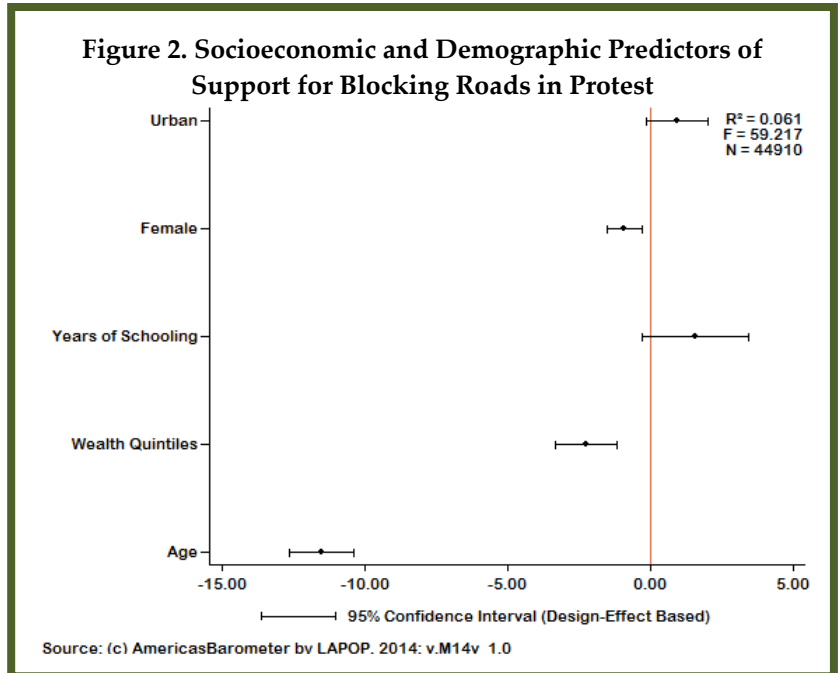
Looking at the figure, the results show that urban residence does not have a statistically significant effect on approval of blocking roads as a form of protest in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Moreover, gender plays only a small role in determining support for this variable: women are *slightly* less likely to report approval of roadblock protestors. Education also matters at the margins: an increase in years of schooling implies a small increase in approval for blocking roads for protest. On the other hand, wealth and age are negatively related to the dependent variable. Age has the strongest predicted maximum effect on approval of those who block roads in protest, as the value for the coefficient of this independent variable is the largest relative to the others.<sup>3</sup> As we move from the youngest to the oldest individuals surveyed in the AmericasBarometer, tolerance toward those who block roads in protest drops by over 10 degrees, all else equal.

## Attitudes and Experiences as Predictors of Approval for Blocking Roads as a Form of Protest

In an attempt to increase our understanding of who expresses greater approval of those who block roads in protest, we focus on three sets of factors: executive approval,<sup>4</sup> political tolerance, and corruption. One perspective that we offer is that those who are more supportive of the sitting

<sup>3</sup> In robustness checks not presented here, we checked for non-linear relationships between these demographic variables and our dependent variable. We found no evidence to suggest nonlinear effects, so we have collapsed all variables to represent the linear relationships here.

<sup>4</sup> While most countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region are presidential systems, some (such as Jamaica) have parliamentary rules. In these cases, the approval question asks about approval of the prime minister.



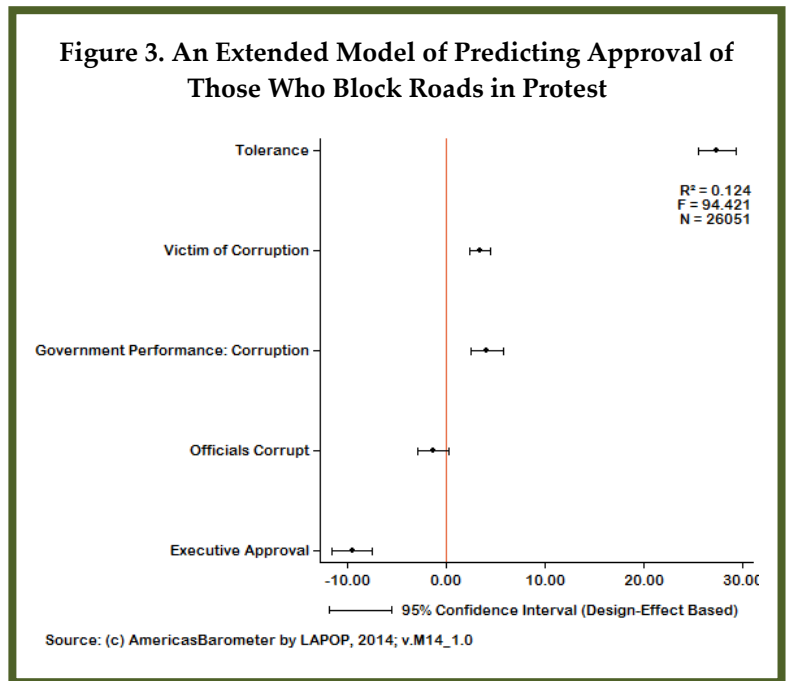
executive will be less supportive of this type of protest, while those more sympathetic to the rights of regime opponents will be more supportive of blocking roads in protest.

Assuming that people associate their reverence for the current executive in power with the appropriateness of mobilizing in protest under his or her administration, we expect that an individual will be more likely to consider protesting as inappropriate if he or she supports the government currently in power (as represented by the incumbent executive) (see Anderson and Mendes 2006; Machado, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2011). On the other hand, those who are more tolerant of dissidents or critics are more likely to see blocking roads to protest as legitimate exercises of civil rights (Guerin 2004).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Executive approval is measured using item M1, which reads "Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President/Prime Minister NAME CURRENT EXECUTIVE? [Read the options] (1) Very good (2) Good (3) Neither good nor bad (fair) (4) Bad (5) Very bad" All responses were recorded so that higher values mean "more of" – e.g., higher approval.

We also consider a series of variables related to corruption, given the importance of this issue in fueling protest in recent times in the region.<sup>6</sup> Our expectations are nuanced. On the one hand, we expect that those who perceive high levels of corruption and those who are victimized by corruption will be motivated by dissatisfaction with government institutions to support protestors. In particular, we expect individual experiences with corruption to positively predict approval of those who block roads in protest, under the assumption that experiencing injustice on a personal level may motivate support for protest in general. We suspect that actual victimization matters more than perceptions of government corruption, since concrete experiences are likely to resonate much more strongly with an individual than if he or she hears of some nebulous corruption occurring (Seligson 2006; Gingerich 2009; Machado, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2011).

On the other hand, we also consider evaluations of government performance on corruption. We see two potential ways this factor could matter. First, this variable could be negatively correlated, in the sense that if the government is doing a poor job of addressing corruption, then people might feel that protesting is justified. Yet, on the other hand, a second relationship is possible, which is that those who see the government as competent may also believe that the government will actually respond to the



demands of the protestors, and thus not object to protestors expressing their demands (for more on this general topic, see Andersen and Mendes 2006; Machado, Scartascini, and Tommasi 2011).

Figure 3 presents our analysis of these additional factors – executive approval, political tolerance, perceptions of political corruption, corruption victimization, and evaluations of the government’s management of corruption – which are included alongside the same measures included in the analysis presented in Figure 2.<sup>7,8</sup> We find that tolerance and executive approval both predict support for blocking roads as a form of protest, but in opposite

corruption, and more perceived corruption, respectively, for the three variables.

<sup>7</sup> Tolerance is an additive measure generated using items D1 to D4, which read: “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? / to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views?/ being permitted to run for public office? / appearing on television to make speeches?”

<sup>8</sup> Figure 3 has fewer cases than prior model because item EXC7 (which asks whether the respondent believes that public officials are corrupt) was not asked in the Bahamas, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Trinidad & Tobago, or Suriname in the 2014 round.

<sup>6</sup> Corruption victimization is a measure generated from a series of survey items (EXC2 to EXC16) which ask respondents if they have ever been asked to pay a bribe in a variety of circumstances, including school, to be seen at the hospital, or by the police. Individuals who answered yes to at least one of these items were coded as corruption victims; all others were coded as non-victims. Government performance with respect to corruption is measured using N9: “To what extent would you say the current administration combats (fights) government corruption?”, and whether officials are corrupt is measured using item EXC7: “Taking into account your own experience or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is: [Read] (1) Very common (2) Common (3) Uncommon or (4) Very uncommon?” The set has been recoded so that higher values mean (more) corruption experienced, better management of

directions: as expected, higher executive approval leads to lower support, while higher tolerance leads to significantly more support for those who block roads as a form of protest.

The results support our predictions about the effects of corruption victimization and approval of the incumbent executive, and, as well, demonstrate what for some might be considered counterintuitive results with respect to the impact of evaluations of the government's performance with regard to combating corruption.<sup>9</sup>

We find that the effect of perceived political corruption is statistically insignificant. Yet, corruption victimization is positively correlated with the dependent variable. In other words, those who have been asked for a bribe show stronger support for blocking roads as a form of protest, while perceiving politicians as being more corrupt does not directly affect this attitude.

At the same time, evaluation of the government's action taken toward corruption is positively correlated with the dependent variable; specifically, we find that a change from the minimum to the maximum on that independent variable results in a 3.5 unit increase in the approval of those who block roads in protest. We speculate that corruption evaluations are positively correlated with the dependent variable because those who perceive that the government is performing well also perceive the government as receptive to their complaints.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> We also included political interest in a different version of this model (results not presented here). Political interest has a positive predicted effect on the approval for blocking roads as a form of protest.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, when we consider a similar measure from the survey, this one related to individuals' evaluations of how the government is handling crime (which is excluded from

## Conclusions

From our analyses, we found that approval for blocking roads as a form of protest is positively correlated with corruption victimization, tolerance, and evaluations of how the government manages corruption.<sup>11</sup> Executive approval, on the other hand, predicts low levels of support for blocking roads to protest.

The findings are significant for public policy as they suggest that the protests represent more than just dissatisfaction with the government. Rather, protest activity and attitudes supportive of this type of behavior may be a reflection of a

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well-functioning democracy and respect for democratic values. We see this in this report through the strong correlation between political tolerance (a core democratic value) and

support for those who block roads in protest. With this in mind, we would certainly suggest that opponents of protests focus more on regulating them rather than precluding them entirely.

Our findings also suggest that effective anticorruption measures that reduce corruption victimization may have significant implications for attitudes about protests, and in interesting ways. On the one hand, the more a government is seen as effectively handling corruption (and other key issues, per footnote 10), the more individuals may be inclined to support the rights of those who block roads or protest in other ways. Yet, on the other hand, to the degree that the government's efforts succeed in decreasing corruption victimization levels,

this current figure), we find it is also positively correlated with the dependent variable.

<sup>11</sup> In analyses not presented here, we also found that external political efficacy is positively correlated to support for those who block roads to protest, perhaps because people who see the government as responsive also think of protests as being a legitimately effective form of expression.

tolerance for such protests – all else equal – will decline. These counter-veiling influences suggest that successful efforts to reduce corruption, while having the potential to significantly and positively affect democratic governance in that realm, are unlikely to result in a strong increase, or a strong decrease, in support for the right of those who block roads in protest.

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## Appendix

Complete regression outputs

VARIABLES	Figure 2	Figure 3
Presidential Approval		-9.483*** (1.015)
Officials Corrupt		-1.253 (0.788)
Government Performance: Corruption		4.156*** (0.831)
Tolerance		27.42*** (0.977)
Corruption Victim		3.445*** (0.521)
Age	-11.53*** (0.570)	-11.35*** (0.654)
Wealth	-0.562*** (0.137)	-2.149*** (0.618)
Education	1.563* (0.940)	-2.764** (1.096)
Female	-0.926*** (0.309)	0.289 (0.357)
Urban	0.910* (0.549)	1.183* (0.605)
Guatemala	-2.947* (1.515)	2.078 (1.419)
El Salvador	-5.617*** (1.262)	-2.019 (1.278)
Honduras	2.416* (1.286)	4.455*** (1.293)
Nicaragua	5.192*** (1.367)	7.093*** (1.387)
Costa Rica	5.992*** (1.447)	
Panama	4.294*** (1.451)	10.95*** (1.402)
Colombia	15.87*** (1.501)	17.76*** (1.533)
Ecuador	-4.676*** (1.391)	-0.210 (1.426)
Bolivia	3.812*** (1.242)	7.022*** (1.355)
Peru	1.643 (1.451)	3.944*** (1.491)
Paraguay	26.19***	27.31***

## Approval of Blocking Roads as a Form of Protest

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	(1.570)	(1.737)
Chile	14.84***	
	(2.214)	
Uruguay	8.943***	8.233***
	(1.489)	(1.558)
Brazil	6.293***	
	(1.798)	
Venezuela	7.879***	5.041**
	(2.300)	(2.353)
Argentina	0.183	0.148
	(1.788)	(1.764)
Dominican Republic	12.96***	14.99***
	(1.568)	(1.629)
Haiti	8.103***	8.259***
	(1.549)	(1.666)
Jamaica	10.51***	9.792***
	(1.526)	(1.617)
Guyana	-1.312	-2.088
	(1.786)	(1.710)
Trinidad and Tobago	1.095	
	(1.550)	
Belize	13.45***	13.42***
	(1.696)	(1.678)
Suriname	5.155***	
	(1.325)	
Bahamas	9.680***	
	(1.294)	
Constant	30.95***	21.19***
	(1.247)	(1.509)
Observations	44,910	26,051
R-squared	0.061	0.124

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Standard Errors in parentheses. \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.10

Note: For the country fixed effects in the model, the comparison (baseline) category is Mexico.