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Explaining Tolerance for Anti-System Protest in the United States

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Key Findings:

- Overall tolerance of regime critics' rights to demonstrate is high in the United States.
- Based on a variety of individual-level characteristics, theories of political socialization best explain U.S. respondents' attitudes toward anti-system protest.
- Women are more skeptical of system contestation, while increased education levels and support for democracy predict greater tolerance.
- Conservative ideology and support for the executive are associated with lower tolerance.



Protests have held lasting significance in the United States in part because they illustrate the power of the public to challenge the status quo. Notable examples include demonstrations by organized labor, the Civil Rights Movement, and marches against the Vietnam War. Recent protest events, such those connected to Black Lives Matter and the Women’s Marches, have garnered media and political attention, elevating a new set of voices that demand systemic changes to the extant political order.¹

The freedom to protest has evolved as a core democratic right thought to be deeply internalized among citizens in longstanding democracies.² Core values are classically believed to be internalized through political socialization.³ That said, recent survey research on the U.S. case indicates that views on who has the right to protest, and when and how, are increasingly polarized along partisan lines.⁴ Others suggest that attitudes toward protest rights depend on individual support for the existing system, which can lead citizens to either justify the status quo or support the protesters.⁵

This *Insights* report explores this topic via analysis of responses to a question that taps into approval for one type of protest: demonstrations critical of the country’s system of government. The 2017 AmericasBarometer asked 1,500 respondents in the United States the following question, to which they responded on a 1-10 scale:

D2. “There are people who only say bad things about the American form of government, not just the current (incumbent) government but the system of government... *How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views?*”

To summarize the opinion captured by this question, I will use phrases such as “support for the right to protest by those critical of the system,” “tolerance of anti-system protest” and “condoning system-critiquing protest”, interchangeably.

In analyzing views on this topic, first, I find that tolerance of anti-system protest is high in the U.S., though there is variation. Second, I consider

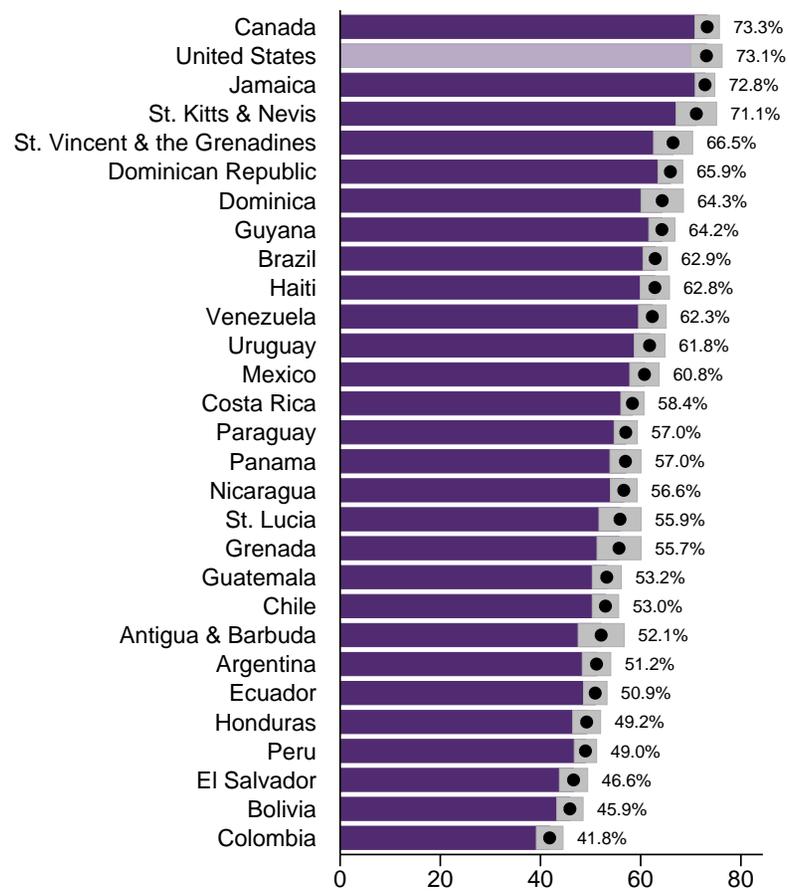
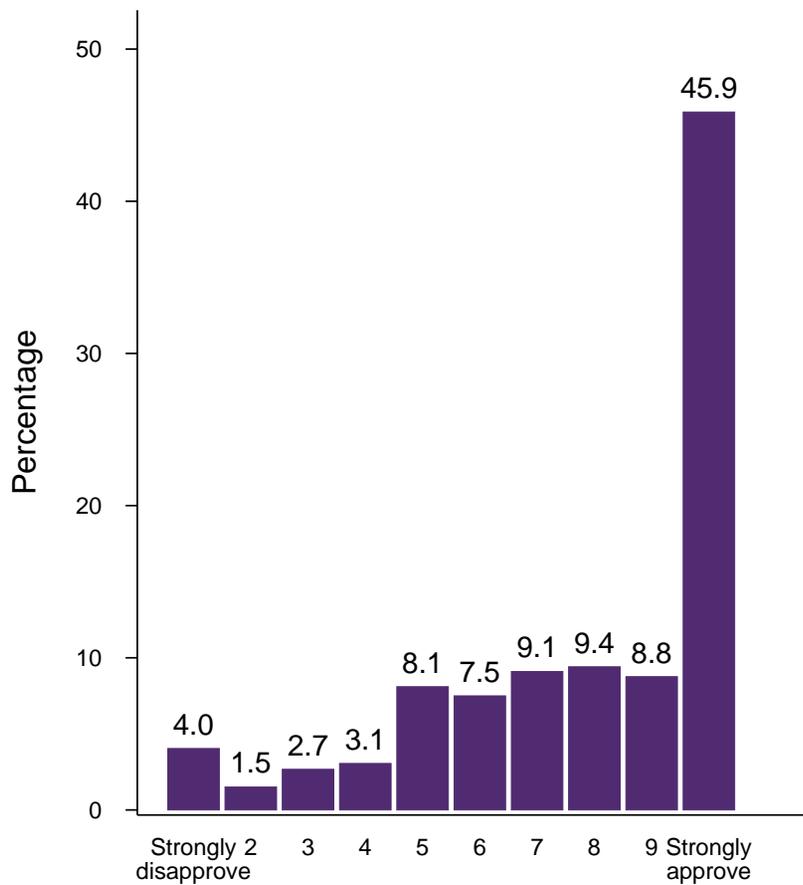
the relevance of various demographic, socio-economic, and attitudinal measures as they predict tolerance of anti-system protest in the United States. In particular, I focus on attitudes related to democratic norms into which individuals may be socialized, liberal-conservative ideological identities that capture relevant social identities, and several measures of system support. These sets of factors allow me to assess how well tolerance of anti-system protest is explained by factors that are highlighted by socialization, social identity, and system justification theories. I find that education, gender, support for democracy, liberal-conservative identities, trust in the executive, and system support predict a respondent's level of approval of regime critics' rights to protest.

Tolerance of Anti-System Protest is High in the U.S.

The AmericasBarometer data reveal high levels of support in the U.S. for the right to protest by those critical of the system. The left-side panel of Figure 1 shows that tolerance of protest by regime critics is comparatively very high in the U.S., yet such approval is not universal: a quarter of the population provides a response that indicates weak support (6 or lower). The right-side panel of Figure 1 shows the percentage of U.S. respondents who answered 7 or greater on the scale compared to other nations in the region.

Who Condones System-Critiquing Protests in the United States?

I begin by considering how support for the right of regime critics to protest is related to age, gender, level of education, income, and race. Studies on protest support, including an earlier *Insights* report on views of roadblock protests, find that younger individuals and men are more likely to condone protest.⁶ However, older individuals are often more supportive of a variety of democratic norms,⁷ which makes it difficult



95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016-17; v.GM16_07172017

Figure 1: Tolerance of Anti-System Protest

to predict how age may influence views on this form of protest. Higher levels of education are associated with greater tolerance in the U.S. and in other world regions,⁸ which in this case would predict greater support for the rights of regime critics. Higher socioeconomic status tends to predict political tolerance of the exercise of political rights.⁹ To test these factors together, I create a model with variables for an individual's age, gender, level of education, and income from the AmericasBarometer U.S. data set.¹⁰ In addition, I include indicators of black and white identity as dummy variables to capture respondents' racial identities (the baseline is all other racial identifications).¹¹ The inclusion of these measures allows us to determine whether approval of anti-regime protest is polarized by race, as have been many significant social protests in U.S. history.¹²

Figure 2 presents the results of a linear regression analysis predicting tolerance of anti-system protest.¹³ In line with past findings on gender gaps in political tolerance,¹⁴ women are less supportive of anti-system protest rights, perhaps due to greater distrust or distaste for political contestation. The predicted effect of gender is a shift of 0.8 units on the ten-point scale. As with other forms of political contestation, higher educational attainment predicts tolerance. Education is the strongest demographic predictor in the model: moving from the lowest to highest education level leads to a 1.4-point increase on the question's 10-point scale.

Income, age and race fail to reach standard thresholds for statistical significance. The lack of a finding for age is especially noteworthy because, even as there are minimal age differences on the importance of fair elections and media freedom in the United States, others have found significant age differences in the perceived normative importance of nonviolent protest and the protection of minority rights.¹⁵ Finally, the insignificance of racial identity may mean that many respondents do not directly connect anti-regime protest with Black Lives Matter and similar protests that have proven polarizing on racial lines.¹⁶ Overall, these results may be taken to suggest that tolerance of anti-regime protest more closely resembles the less divisive norms of electoral fairness rather than the more polarizing norms of social protest tolerance. Collectively,

these findings on demographic factors, especially those for education and gender, provide some support for notion that socialization matters.

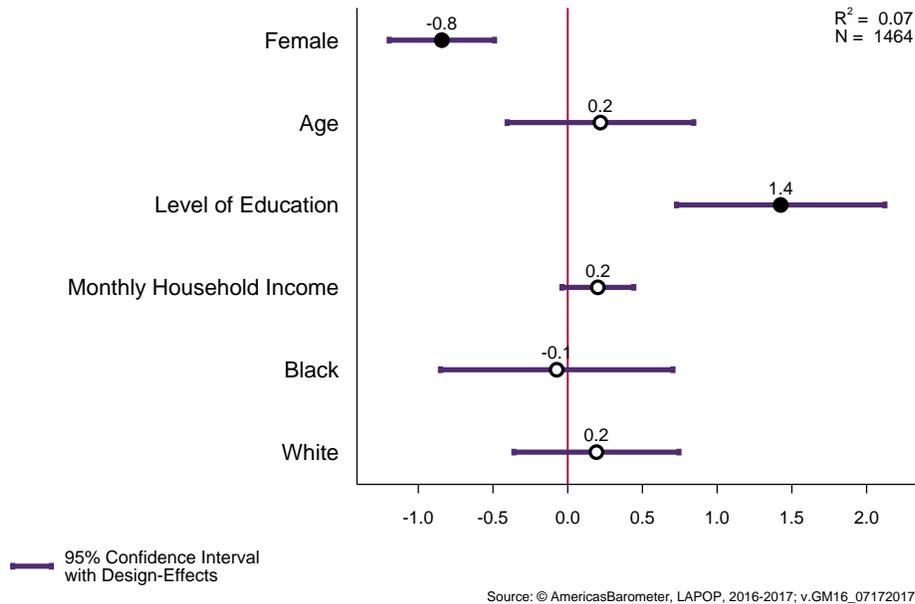


Figure 2: Demographic and Socioeconomic Predictors of Tolerance for Anti-System Protest in the United States

Democratic Norms, Ideological Identities, and System Support

Some scholars have found that internalization of democratic norms, such as those supporting freedom of speech or association, is a strong predictor of tolerance.¹⁷ At the same time, survey research on social protests¹⁸ points to polarization by ideology, such that conservatives can tend to be less supportive of protest than liberals. Thus, in addition to socialization, polarization by political attitudes could prove useful in explaining the U.S. public’s views on the rights of regime critics. Ideology is a vague concept that can be “unpacked” in a number of different ways; the next section

offers some perspective on theories relevant to individuals' support of norms and system arrangements.

Social Identity Theory and System Justification Theory

Two schools of thought, social identity theory (SIT) and system justification theory (SJT), provide frameworks for understanding how members of different groups develop opposing views on political issues. SIT argues that individuals possess multiple identities that they attempt to bolster depending on a given identity's overall importance to the individual and its salience in a given context.¹⁹ When facing coverage of protests like the Take a Knee protests among NFL players, "high-identifiers" of minority and majority groups are likely to interpret the protests as welcome activism and as offensive to their identity, respectively.²⁰ Social identity theorists would predict that, as major protest movements become increasingly identified with the advancement of a given set of identities, such as race or partisanship, members of out-groups will become less supportive of those movements.²¹ Given the recent prominence of identity-based protests, the question arises as to whether respondents of socially dominant identities are less supportive of the public's right to conduct anti-regime protests, which could indicate that those social protests have influenced how they consider anti-system protest when asked about it more generally.

SJT goes beyond SIT in showing that the desire to uphold and rationalize the status quo strongly influences individuals' responses to political phenomena, such as protests,²² foreign affairs,²³ and campaign developments.²⁴ While "system justification" generally is the act of rationalizing an existing set of relationships in a system (i.e. "inequality is inevitable in our society"), scholars measure individual disposition to system justification with several psychological variables, such as need for certainty.²⁵ These individual dispositions become most salient when there is a threat to the system, such as protest or changes in administration. In analyzing collective action, Jost et al. (2017) find that greater system justification at

the individual level decreases support for political mobilization.

The AmericasBarometer asks about system support in general, but does not include direct measures of SJT disposition. Yet, system justification theorists find that conservatism, religiosity, and opposition to redistributive policies are generally associated with defensive responses to threats to the status quo,²⁶ which in this case would translate into opposition to protest by regime critics. Perhaps particularly relevant to recent protests in the United States, scholars have suggested that participants in different protests report differing levels and types of system justification. For example, Hennes et al. (2012) find that support for the Occupy Wall Street and Tea Party movements was motivated by low and high levels of economic system justification, respectively.

In light of theories on democratic norms, identity, and system justification, I analyze eight attitudinal variables as possible antecedents for tolerance of anti-system protest: support for democracy, ideological self-placement, system support, trust in the executive, evaluation of the country's economic situation, support for policies to reduce income inequality, importance of religion, and attendance at religious services. The support for democracy variable asks respondents the extent to which they agree that "democracy is the best form of government," while the "system support" variable averages five survey items concerning respondents' evaluations of the political system.²⁷ High values on these variables would indicate that respondents have internalized democratic norms and have positive evaluations of the extant political system.

Ideological self-placement and trust in the executive capture a respondent's political identities. Conservatives are more likely to express high system justification as an expression of a reduced desire for change to economic, political, and social structures.²⁸ Trust in the executive is associated with conservatism in the survey data (Figure 4 in the Appendix). This may reflect short-term ideological interests, in that conservatives would trust the president more when it a conservative president is in office, as well as a respondent's preference for executive decision-making, which is positively associated with system justification.²⁹

Evaluation of the nation's economic situation is a temporal judgement of system performance, while support levels for policies to reduce income inequality approximates respondents' "economic system justification."³⁰ Finally, religiosity represents an attitude that is distinct from ideology, and constitutes a social identity that often is associated with greater system justification. Finding that the religiosity variables predict support for regime critics' right to protest, but that ideology does not, would indicate that support for critics' rights is not polarized by ideology but is instead a product of religious identity³¹ or epistemic concerns for order.³²

Findings – Greater Approval among Pro-Democracy, Liberal, and Pro-System Individuals

Figure 3 shows the results of a multivariate regression analysis that predicts approval of the right of regime critics to protest. The demographic and sociodemographic variables from Figure 2 are included as controls, but are not shown.^{33,34} The results reveal that support for democracy is the strongest attitudinal predictor of protest tolerance. This finding supports the notion that the internalization of political values holds a primary explanatory power.

Turning to the next few variables, identifying as more conservative and expressing a greater trust in the executive predict lower protest tolerance. Moving from the left-most to the right-most ideological position is associated with a 1.4 unit decrease in one's tolerance for anti-system protest. These findings may suggest that conservative respondents associate criticism of the political system with major progressive protests and threats to their ideological positions. Support for a given political candidate and/or party amounts to a salient social identity for many citizens.³⁵

The other variable tapping into a respondent's political ideology is trust in the executive. As with liberal-conservative placement, executive trust

has a statistically significant negative effect. Moving from not trusting the executive at all to trusting a lot is associated with a 1.8 unit decrease in anti-system protest tolerance. One might interpret this as consistent with findings from the Pew Research Center (2017) that, after the 2016 election, Democrats (those less likely to trust the current sitting president) became less supportive of giving the President more power, and the reverse for Republicans. However, an alternative interpretation is that, particularly in light of pivotal campaign rhetoric regarding the maintenance of America’s social order, conservative respondents view existing sociocultural systems as being under threat.³⁶ In short, from the perspective offered by system justification theory, the survey item on executive trust may be capturing epistemic and existential motivations for supporting the status quo, which are typically stronger among conservatives.³⁷

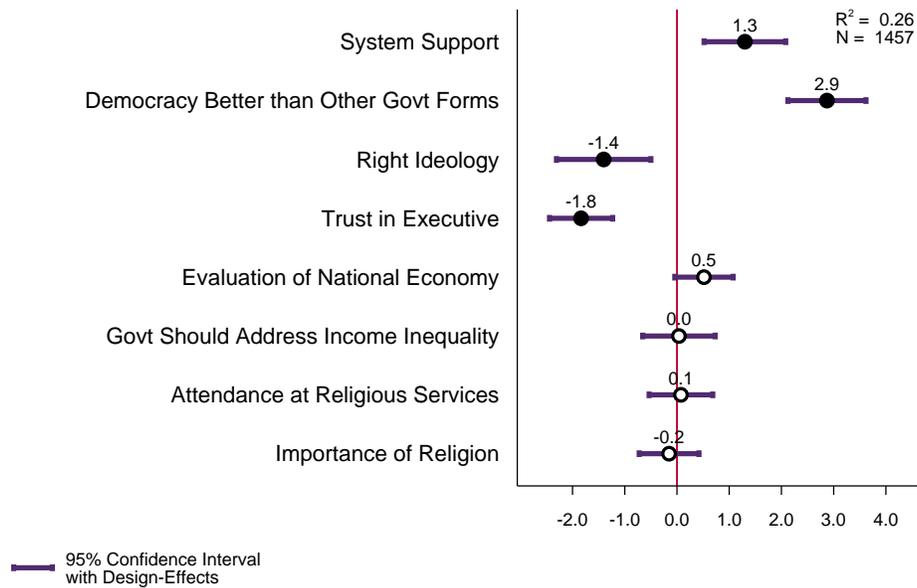


Figure 3: Attitudinal Predictors of Support for Protest by Regime Critics

System support exerts a significant positive effect, with a respondent moving from the lowest to highest level of system support moving 1.3-

points upward in tolerance. The inverse implication is that those with lower support for the extant system are less tolerant of protests against it. Given that the variables that make up the system support metric include “pride in the political system” and the belief that others should support the system, one possible interpretation is that this relationship is consistent with scholarship showing that perceived systemic unfairness undermines political efficacy.³⁸ An expectation based on system justification theory predicted that higher levels of system support would predict lower support for protest, yet the result is the reverse. Taken jointly, the positive findings for preference for democracy and system support indicate that democratic socialization is a key factor in predicting tolerance for protest in the United States.

Neither satisfaction with the economic system nor desire for redistributive policy significantly predicts tolerance levels, although economic system satisfaction nearly meets the threshold for significance. At least so far as this model is concerned, this indicates that evaluating the political rights of regime critics does not activate the economic system justification that Hennes et al. (2012) observe for Occupy Wall Street and Tea Party supporters. Finally, neither measure of religiosity is significant, implying that the importance of religion as a social identity does not carry over to shape attitudes regarding regime critics’ right to protest.³⁹ This likewise fails to affirm research from the system justification school, which suggests that religiosity is associated with greater need for order and reduction of system threat.⁴⁰ On the whole, I conclude that there is only limited support for system justification theory as a driving factor in explaining tolerance toward system-critiquing protests. Democracy, political ideology, and system support all matter and, while these might tap system justification, especially the latter measure, they might just as easily tap norms that individuals acquire via political socialization.

Conclusions

In seeking to uncover the determinants of support for regime critics' right to protest in the United States, I found that six individual-level characteristics were predictive: (1) gender, (2) education level, (3) support for democracy as a form of government, (4) ideological self-placement, (5) support for the executive, and (6) political system support. In general, I conclude that the findings are consistent with expectations from the literature on political socialization. Scholars have shown evidence that, on average, women tend to be more skeptical in their views on system contestation,⁴¹ while increased education levels predict tolerance even with the inclusion of socialized democratic values. The irony of the system support findings is that regime critics are those least likely to tolerate protests by regime critics.

The negative associations between tolerance of regime critic protest and, respectively, conservative ideology and support for the executive do not clearly demonstrate support for one theoretical camp or another. On the one hand, each of these variables represents social identities that could be activated when encountering the threat of anti-regime protest, to the extent that these protests would be associated with progressives. However, system justification theorists may note that trust in the executive also indicates support for more authoritative power and that conservatives often oppose threats to the status quo out of greater epistemic needs (i.e. need for certainty), rather than just inter-group threat.⁴²

The lack of racial, age, or income differences in the models indicates that these social identities are not influential for this topic. They may be relevant to other indicators of support for protest in the U.S., but there are no clear racial, generational, or wealth divides when it comes to approval of regime critics' rights to protest.

One avenue for future research on this topic would include more precise measures to test the predictions of SIT and SJT. Another opportunity for

future research could be to determine whether the relationship between regime critic tolerance and trust in the executive reverses with a change in partisan control of the presidency. Limitations to the current approach notwithstanding, I confirm that tolerance of regime critics' rights to demonstrate is high in the U.S. Further, to the extent there is variation in support for this basic civil liberty, it is shaped by individuals' democratic socialization and the particular political attitudes they come to possess.

Notes

1. Leopold and Bell (2017); Coombs et al. (2017).
2. Dahl (1971).
3. Jennings (2009); Miklikowska and Hurme (2011).
4. Pew Research Center (2017).
5. Jost et al. (2017).
6. Olsen (1968); Huang et al. (2015).
7. Helwig (1997).
8. Wike and Simmons (2015).
9. Katnik (2002).
10. To facilitate interpretation of the coefficients, all independent variables have been re-coded to range from zero to one. Thus, the regression shows the predicted effect of moving from the lowest to the highest value on any given independent variable. Age is measured with the question **q2** which asks respondents, "How old are you?" The coding includes 6 categories (18-25, 26-35, ..., 66+). Gender is a binary measure (**q1**). Education is measured with **edr**, which has the three levels: primary, secondary, or post-secondary. Income is measured with **q10new_16** which asks respondents "And into which of the

following ranges does the total monthly income of your household fit, including remittances from abroad and the income of all the working adults and children?"; respondents categorize their total monthly household into one of 17 levels ranging from no income to more than \$15,500.

11. These black (**black**) and white (**white**) dummy variables have been recoded from the variable **etid** which asks respondents "What racial or ethnic group best describes you?" The response category options are: White; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; Asian or Asian American; Native American; Mixed race; Middle Eastern; and Other (please specify). The reference category for these dummy variables is all non-white and non-black racial identities.
12. Bobo (1988).
13. Each independent variable is listed on the vertical axis. Black dots represent the change in the 1-10 scale for approval of protest by regime critics for a maximum change in each of the individual independent variables. Horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals around these estimates. Dots to the right of the red "0" line indicate a positive relationship, while dots to the left of the line signal that individuals with a particular characteristic are likely to express lower levels of approval of protest by regime critics. Hollow dots with lines that cross the line at 0 are not considered statistically significant.
14. Golebiowska (1999).
15. Pew Research Center (2017); Jennings (2002).
16. Leopold and Bell (2017); Coombs et al. (2017).
17. Lawrence (1976); Doorn (2014).
18. Pew Research Center (2017).
19. Tajfel and Turner (1979).
20. Klandermans (2014); Leopold and Bell (2017).
21. Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013).

22. Hennes et al. (2012).
23. Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg (2003).
24. Kay, Jimenez, and Jost (2002).
25. Jost and Hunyady (2005).
26. Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004); Jost and Hunyady (2005).
27. These variables in the system support index are: **b1** “To what extent do you think the courts in the United States guarantee a fair trial?”; **b2** “To what extent do you respect the political institutions of the United States?”; **b3** “To what extent do you think that citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system of the United States?”; **b4** “To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of the United States?”; and **b6** “To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of the United States?”. The questions were originally asked on a 1 (“Not at all”) to 7 (“A lot”) scale. The index has values of 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100. As noted earlier, for this report the system support index has been rescaled to range from 0 to 1.
28. Jost, Banaji, and Nosek (2004).
29. Jost and Hunyady (2005). The field dates for data collection for the United States were May 12, 2017 through May 22, 2017, several months into President Trump’s term.
30. Hennes et al. (2012).
31. Huddy (2001); Hayes (1995).
32. Berger and Luckmann (1966); Jost et al. (2017).
33. Again, all of the independent variables have been rescaled from 0 to 1. For the system support measure, see Note 27. The “Democracy Better than Other Govt Forms” variable is measured by the question **ing4** which asks respondents on a 1 (“Not at all”) to 7 (“A lot”) scale “Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?” The “Ideology” variable is a rescaled version of **ideology**, which is a renamed version of the variable **lib**, which asks respondents on a 1 (“Liberal”) to 10 (“Conservative)

scale “Now, to change the subject.... On this card there is a 1-10 scale that goes from liberal to conservative. One means liberal and 10 means conservative. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of liberals and conservatives. In other words, some people sympathize more with the liberals and others with the conservatives. According to the meaning that the terms “liberals” and “conservatives” have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?” The “Trust in Executive” variable is measured by the question **b21a**, which asks respondents on a 1 (“Not at all”) to 7 (“A lot”) scale “To what extent do you trust the President?” The “Evaluation of National Economy” variable is a rescaled version of the **soct2** variable which asks respondents “Do you think that **the country’s** current economic situation is better than, the same as or worse than it was **12 months ago?**” and has the response categories of “better,” “same,” and “worse.” The “Govt Should Address Income Inequality” variable is a rescaled version of the **ros4** variable which asks respondents on a 1 (“Not at all”) to 7 (“A lot”) scale “The United States government should implement **strong** policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and the poor. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?” The “Attendance at Religious Services” variable is measured from the question **q5a** which asks, “How often do you attend religious services?” Respondents can choose from the following response categories: “More than once per week;” “Once per week;” “Once a month;” “Once or twice a year;” and “Never or almost never.” The “Importance of Religion” variable is measured from the question **q5b** which asks, “Could you please tell us: how important is religion in your life?” and respondents can choose from the following response categories: “Very important;” “Somewhat important;” “Not very important;” and “Not at all important.”

34. Although not shown in the figure, the effects of variables included in Figure 2 are essentially unchanged, with the exception of education, the effect size of which is reduced from +1.4 to +0.8.
35. Hetherington and Rudolph (2015).
36. Inglehart and Norris (2016); Azevedo, Jost, and Rothmund (2017)
37. Berger and Luckmann (1966); Jost et al. (2017).
38. Kane (1987); Weaver and Lerman (2010). See Figure 5 in the Appendix.
39. Huddy (2001); Hayes (1995).
40. Jost and Hunyady (2005).

41. Golebiowska (1999).
42. Jost and Hunyady (2005).

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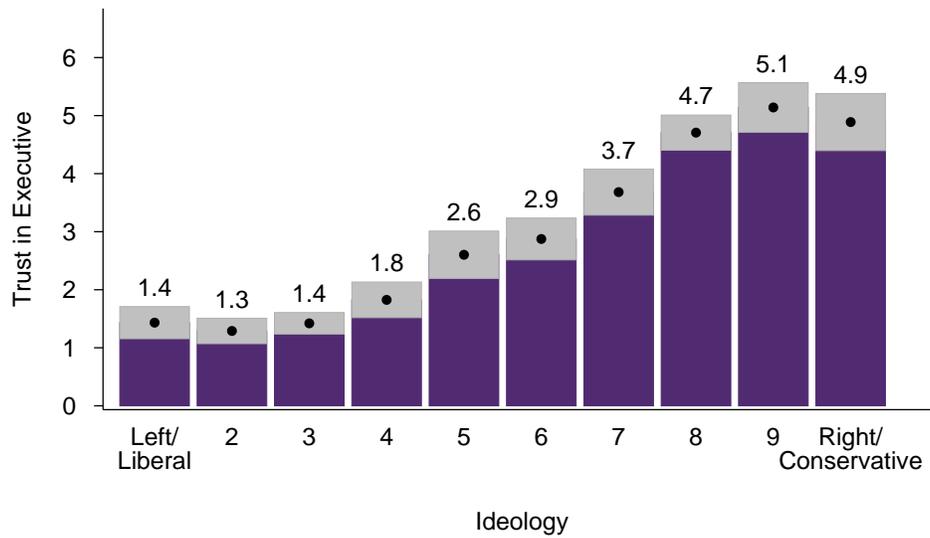
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Appendix



95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016-2017; v.GM16_07172017

Figure 4: Conservatives Express Greater Trust in the Executive (U.S. 2017)

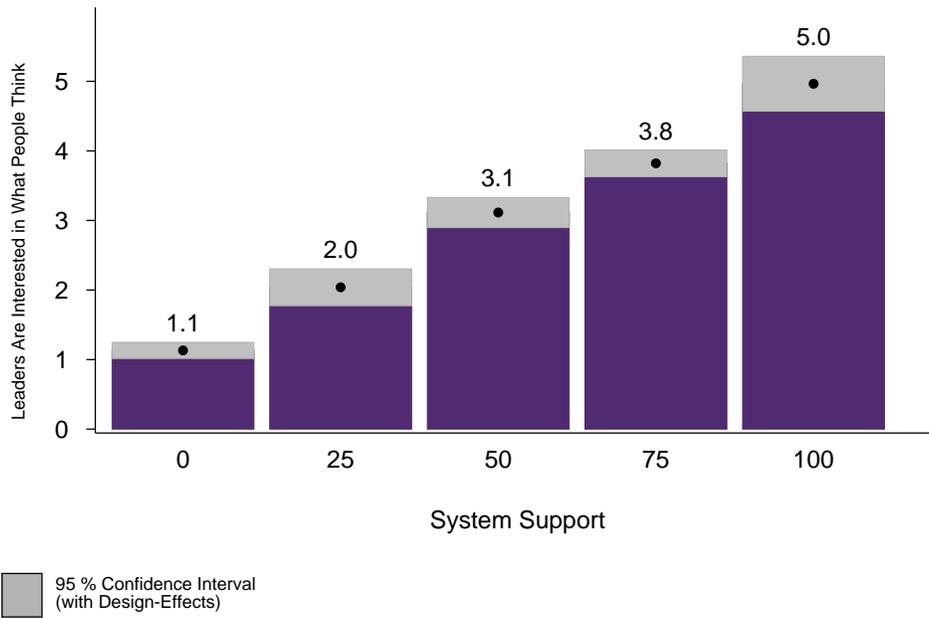


Figure 5: System Support is Robustly Associated with Political Efficacy (U.S. 2017)



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As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.

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