

Insights Series #147

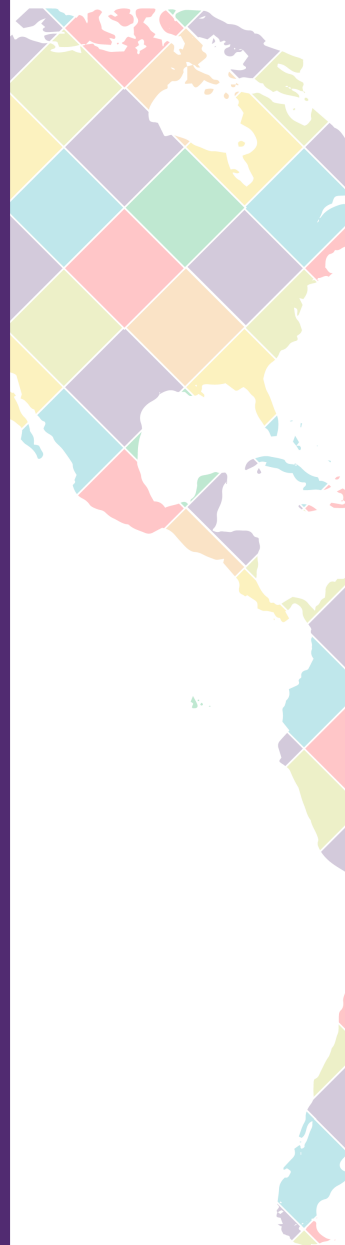
Pandemic Concern, Democratic Stress, and Methodological Innovation in LAPOP's 2020 "Off-Cycle" Studies: An Executive Summary Report

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April 13, 2021

Key Findings:

- LAPOP Lab executed six novel surveys in 2020 with two core objectives: collect policy-relevant data and advance innovations in opinion research. These telephone- and web-based studies were conducted in four countries: Ecuador (phone), Haiti (phone), Mexico (phone, online), and Peru (phone, online)
- Data from these studies reveal widespread concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on personal well-being, including access to health care and basic goods
- People had mixed views on their tolerance for military coups but consistent support for postponing elections in times of crisis
- Views of democracy improved in Peru and Mexico, while they continued to deteriorate in Haiti and Ecuador. At the same time, there is widespread distrust in the rule of law across these countries, particularly regarding the prevention of gender-based violence
- Experimental evidence from these studies shows that starting surveys with questions about salient issues keeps respondents engaged
- Face-to-face questionnaire design practices translate well to phone-based surveys



LAPOP Lab executed six novel surveys in 2020, with two core objectives: collect policy-relevant data and advance innovations in opinion research. These studies are labeled "off-cycle" (OC) because they take place between rounds of data collection for the AmericasBarometer, our flagship survey of public opinion across the Americas. The telephone- and web-based OC studies were conducted in four countries: Ecuador (phone), Haiti (phone), Mexico (phone, online), and Peru (phone, online). Results from these studies informed the design of the 2021 AmericasBarometer, and key findings were disseminated in briefings to USAID, to local program beneficiaries, to other regional barometers (Arab Barometer and Afrobarometer), to LAPOP's advisory board, and to attendees of LAPOP's 2020 *The Public and Democracy in the Americas* conference.

Data from the OC studies show that concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic are high across the region; in particular, many are worried about access to adequate health care. The studies also reveal some important stress lines in democratic attitudes. For example, sizable minorities are willing to tolerate deviations from regular democratic practices, especially when framed as a measure to contain the coronavirus. There are some positive trends in general confidence in institutions. Yet, evaluations of the judicial system are poor: many believe that the courts are unfair and that perpetrators of gender-based violence are not properly disciplined.

With respect to innovation, the OC studies provide experimental evidence that questionnaires should lead with questions about the most pressing issues of the day to maximize respondent engagement. An additional set of experiments provides insight into how to improve the efficiency and clarity of public opinion questionnaires.

This report presents only a selection of data and discoveries from these studies. More detailed individual country results are available from the [LAPOP Lab website](#).¹

Key Substantive Results

LAPOP Lab conducted four phone-based and two internet-based surveys² in 2020, interviewing 11,167 individuals across four countries: Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, and Peru.³ In analyses presented here, each dataset is weighted to more closely reflect the distributions of age, gender, region of residence, and education level in the national population. Full question wordings for all items presented here can be found in the appendix. The insights from these studies have implications for a number of timely issues, including the pandemic and democratic attitudes.

Widespread Concerns about the Pandemic and Its Impact on Personal Well-Being

A main questionnaire topic was the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Results from the surveys reveal that worry is widespread. In each survey, over three in five respondents said the outbreak in their country is “very serious”. As Table 1 shows, worry is spread across multiple dimensions, including someone in the household getting sick with the virus and a lack of access to health care or basic goods.⁴ Differences across phone and internet surveys in Mexico and Peru could be due to variation in timing or to the fact that the internet samples skew toward higher socioeconomic status individuals even after weights are applied.

Table 1: Percentage “Very Worried” About...

	Someone in Household Contracting COVID-19		Lack of Access to Health Care		Lack of Access to Basic Goods
	Phone	Internet	Phone	Internet	Phone
Haiti	55%				49%
Mexico	49%	58%	64%	70%	
Peru	68%	57%	78%	69%	
Ecuador					68%

Opinions about proper measures to contain the virus are mixed. That is, in Mexico and Peru, where such questions were asked, people hold seemingly contradictory views: a majority believes both that individuals should be left to make their own decisions about how to protect themselves from the virus and that the government should arrest those who violate social distancing guidelines.

Mixed Views on Tolerance for Coups, Consistent Support for Postponing Elections in Times of Crisis

To consider the impact of the pandemic from the perspective of democratic governance, the OC studies included two experiments that gauge support for security force-led *coup d'etats* or postponement of elections. Using a split sample approach, one group of respondents was asked if such undemocratic maneuvers would be appropriate under a health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic, while another group of was asked about that type of undemocratic action when there are either high levels of corruption, crime, or violence.

The results shown in Table 2 reveal that respondents are less tolerant of coups under health emergencies compared to corruption (with the exception of the internet study in Mexico). On the contrary, Table 3 shows that respondents are consistently more willing to embrace the postponement of elections during a public health crisis compared to circumstances of violence. In each country, we find that more than half the adult population is willing to accept that the president postpones elections in the case of a public health emergency like the pandemic. In an alternative scenario where there is widespread violence, tolerance for postponing elections is likewise high (at or above 50% in most cases), though lower than in the public health scenario. These findings demonstrate that certain attitudes about democracy vary based on within-country conditions and/or the framing used to justify changes in democratic processes.

Table 2: Is Coup Justified Under...

	Phone Survey		Internet Survey	
	Health Emergency	Corruption	Health Emergency	Corruption
Haiti	41%	43%		
Mexico	33%	33%	37%	32%
Peru	37%	38%	30%	36%
Ecuador	34%	47%		

Table 3: Postponing Elections Justified Under...

	Phone Survey		Internet Survey	
	Health Emergency	Violence	Health Emergency	Violence
Haiti	84%	77%		
Mexico	66%	51%	70%	50%
Peru	65%	59%	58%	43%
Ecuador	60%	50%		

Few Improvements in Views of Democracy, Yet Widespread Distrust in the Rule of Law

The OC data reveal important changes and patterns in core democratic attitudes. Figure 1 shows that, after an extended period of decline in support for democracy, views of democracy⁵ improved in Peru and Mexico, while they continued to deteriorate in Haiti and Ecuador. Greater support for democracy in Mexico is combined with improved evaluations of democratic governance. For the first time since 2009, a majority of Mexicans said that they are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country.⁶ We see the opposite trend in Ecuador, where a further drop in support for democracy is accompanied by poor satisfaction with how democracy is functioning. Only 24% of Ecuadorians stated that they are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, down nearly

15 percentage points from 2019 and 45 percentage points from 2014.

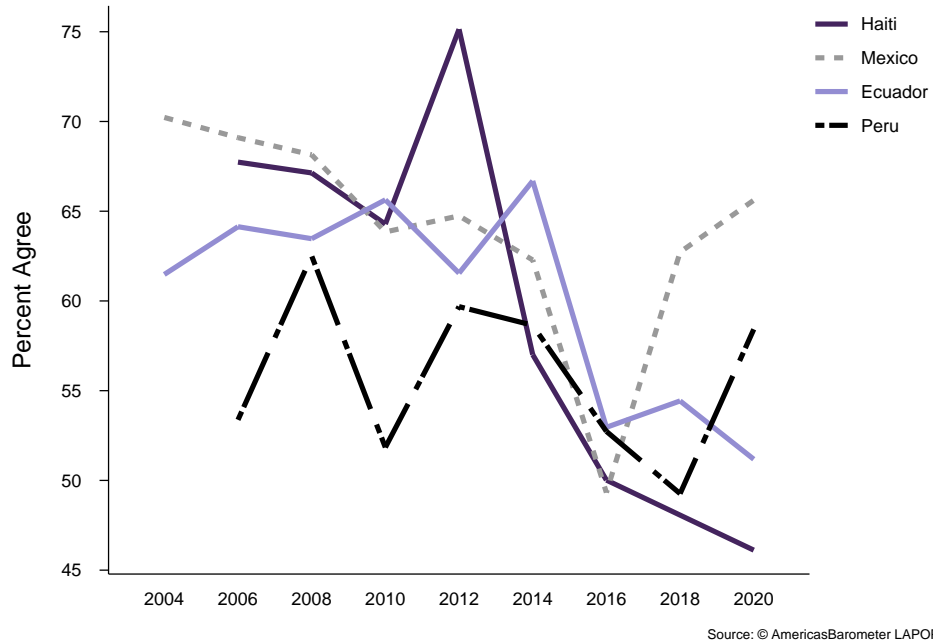


Figure 1: “Democracy is the Best Form of Government” Over Time

Despite divergent trends in views of democracy across the countries included in these OC studies, citizens of all countries, except Haiti, express comparatively more respect for political institutions overall. Figure 2 shows that general respect for political institutions is at or near its maximum in all countries since the AmericasBarometer began in 2004. However, not all institutions are evaluated equally. Difficult challenges remain as people express little confidence in institutions in charge of upholding the rule of law. For example, a near majority (a majority in the case of Haiti) believe that courts do not guarantee a fair trial and that basic rights are not protected in their country. Figure 3 shows changes over time in the belief that “citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system of [country]”. In 2020, only in Mexico do more than a third of citizens agree with this statement.

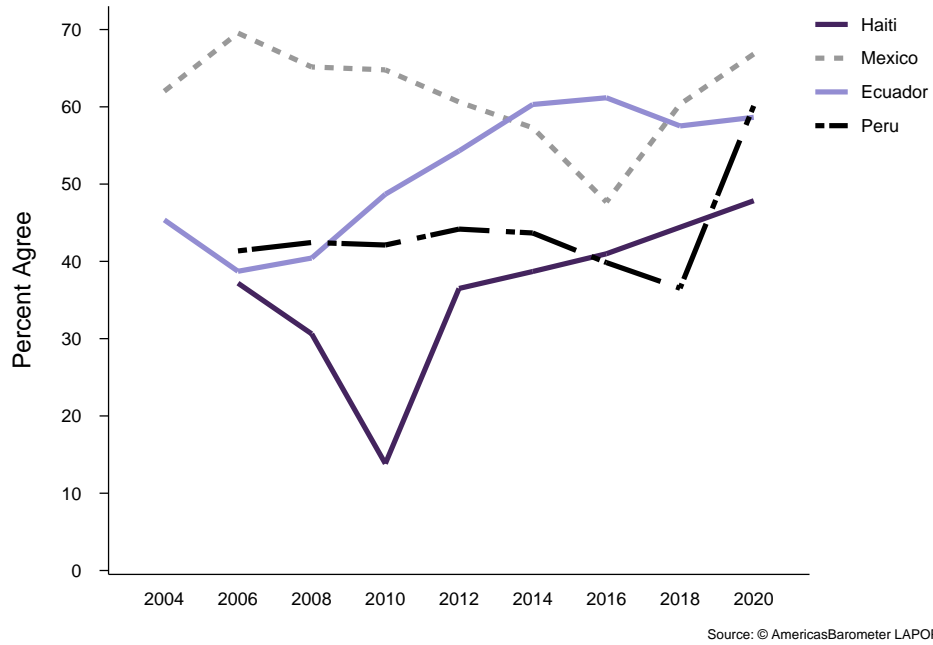


Figure 2: "Should Respect Political Institutions" Over Time

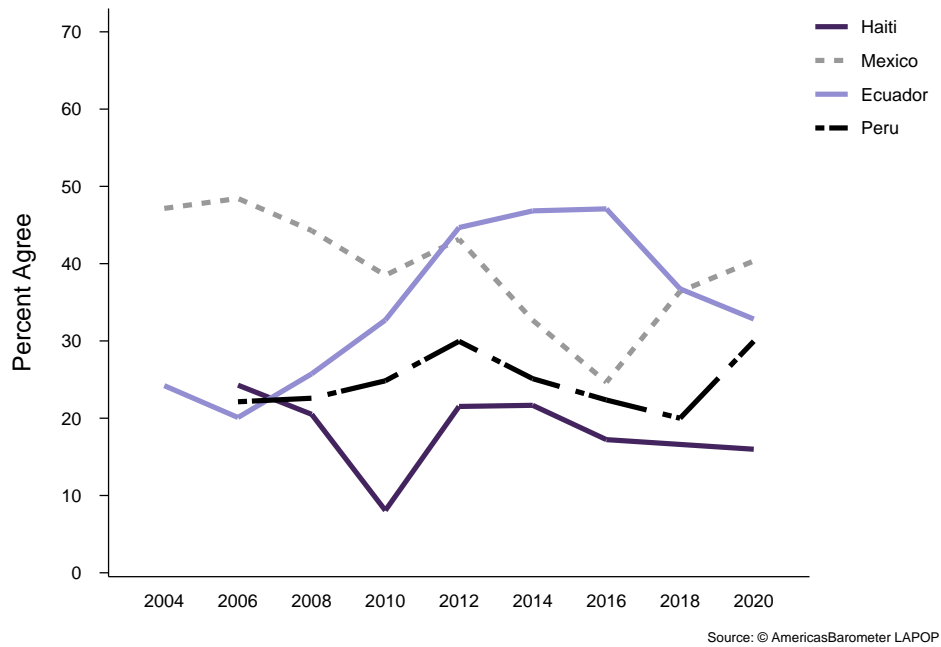


Figure 3: "Citizens' Rights Are Protected" Over Time

Some Positive Trends in Democratic Attitudes in Peru, Yet Low Confidence in Elections

The 2020 Peru OC survey contained additional questions about attitudes toward democracy and elections. Support for democracy has increased in Peru, as seen in Figure 1. Moreover, the OC Peru data reveal that only 44% of the population believes that the President is justified in closing Congress in difficult times, a significant decline since 2019. Yet, we find that 48% of Peruvians prefer a strong leader with no accountability to a leader whose power is limited by Congress. In addition, the study reveals that Peruvians doubt the fairness of elections: only 35% believe votes are “always” counted correctly, 46% believe the wealthy “always” buy results, and 75% believe the politicians can “always” or “sometimes” identify find out how someone voted.

Widespread Concerns about Gender-Based Violence Impunity

The OC surveys also included a focus on attitudes related to gender-based violence. We find that people lack faith in the ability of their countries' institutions to prevent gender-based violence. While virtually all agree that incidents of violence against women should be reported to the police, few (e.g., around a third in Mexico and Peru phone studies) believe such reports are taken “very seriously” by police or that the perpetrator is “very likely” to be punished. In the internet studies, fewer than 1 in 10 respondents in both Mexico and Peru believes that the perpetrator is “very likely” to be punished. An extended module of questions on gender-based violence in Mexico show that societal norms that place the locus of responsibility in the home, and not with the state, may hinder state-enacted solutions to minimize gender-based violence. The study indicates that 49% of Mexican citizens believe that physical violence between members of a couple is a private matter and should be handled

within the couple or close family.

Key Methodological Insights

LAPOP Lab experimented with several different questionnaire designs in the OC studies. These experiments allowed us to improve the clarity and efficiency of the AmericasBarometer questionnaire and to make discoveries that contribute to the cutting edge of survey methodology.

Starting Surveys with Questions about Salient Issues Keeps Respondents Engaged

Survey research practitioners had suggested that respondents could be turned off by surveys that are not about COVID-19, given the issue's salience during the pandemic. We tested this idea in the OC study in Haiti. Half of the respondents received questions about the coronavirus first, while the other half answered the same questions at the end of the questionnaire. The ordering experiment confirms that preoccupation with COVID-19 has effects on the ways that participants respond to surveys. As shown in Table 4, people who were asked about COVID first were much more engaged, as measured by the rate of "drop outs" (purposefully terminating the survey early), the number of questions answered before dropping out, and the frequency of question non-response. In general, the results suggest that survey researchers should begin their questionnaires with salient or topical issues. In designing the 2021 AmericasBarometer, we incorporated this discovery by placing a small set of COVID-19 questions at the beginning of the survey.

Table 4: COVID Order Experiment Results

	Drop out rate (%)	Questions answered before drop out	Non-response frequency (%)
COVID Questions Asked First	8.7	24.5	10.3
COVID Questions Asked Last	11.8	20.8	12.6
Net Difference	3.1	-3.7	2.3
p-value	0.03	0.24	0.01

Asking about Neighbors is a Reliable Approach for Measuring Interpersonal Trust

Other experiments produced statistically insignificant but equally informative results. The AmericasBarometer typically includes a question asking the extent to which the respondent trusts other members of their community. Following input received during our January 2020 Learning Summit on Public Opinion in Haiti, we considered altering the wording of this question to ask instead about trust in other *citizens of the country*, since participants in the summit proposed that Haitians may be more trusting of their neighbors than the average compatriot. To investigate, in all OC studies, we randomly assigned respondents to one of two versions of a trust question (“members of your community” vs. “people of [country]”). While we did find support in Haiti for the idea that people are relatively more trusting of their neighbors, the differences in other countries were inconsistent and minimal. Given that the new question did not provide consistently different results, we determined that there was not enough evidence to justify a change to the original trust item in the 2021 AmericasBarometer.

Face-to-Face Questionnaire Design Practices Translate Well to Phone-Based Surveys

Within the OC studies, we tested several other questionnaire alterations, all of which showed insignificant changes from their original formulations in face-to-face surveys. These experiments included:

- **“Branching” of answer choices:** Instead of a 5-point scale that goes from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, we broke the question into two parts by first asking whether respondent agrees or disagrees, then whether their belief is strong or weak.
- **Simplifying response scales:** We reduced the number of possible responses from 7 possible responses to 5.
- **Reversing response scales:** Instead of a scale from “strongly disagree to strongly agree”, we swapped the wording to “strongly agree to strongly disagree”.
- **Question order experiments:** We manipulated the order of two modules about electoral fairness.

The null results still shed light on the psychology of survey-takers and inform our design and interpretation of results. For instance, we are able to rule out possible reasons that participants in phone surveys give different answers than face-to-face respondents: The scale experiments show that simplifying the range of possible responses on the phone does not account for differences across modes and therefore there is little justification for changing the presentation of scales in the ways tested here.

Full reports on each of the off-cycle studies are available at www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop. Data collection for the 2021 AmericasBarometer, which builds off the findings from these studies, began in January 2021 and will continue through mid-2021. Reports on key findings will be released in

the form of reports in the LAPOP *Insights* series, and as Topline Briefs, country reports, and a regional report for the 2021 AmericasBarometer.

Appendix: Full Question Wordings (In order of appearance in text)

Widespread Concerns about the Pandemic and Its Impact on Personal Well-Being

COVID1. How serious of a problem do you think the coronavirus outbreak is for (country)? (1) Very serious (2) Somewhat serious (3) Not so serious (4) Not serious at all (5) Have not thought much about this

COVID2A. How worried are you about the possibility that you or someone in your household will become sick with the coronavirus? (1) Very worried (2) Somewhat worried (3) A little worried (4) Not at all worried

COVID2C. How worried are you about the possibility that your **household** will have difficulty accessing basic goods, such as food or medicine, due to the coronavirus? (1) Very worried (2) Somewhat worried (3) A little worried (4) Not at all worried

COVID2ET. If you or someone in your household became sick with the coronavirus in the next three months, how worried would you be about being able to access adequate medical care to treat the disease? (1) Very worried (2) Somewhat worried (3) A little worried (4) Not at all worried

People can have different ideas about what the government and citizens should do to confront the health crisis. I am going to read some phrases and ask you to tell me to what point you agree or disagree with them.

COVID20. Instead of the government imposing restrictions to confront the coronavirus, we should leave it to individuals to make decisions about how to protect themselves. Do you... (1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Disagree (5) Strongly disagree

COVID21. To confront the coronavirus, the government should arrest those found violating social distancing rules. Do you... (1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Disagree (5) Strongly disagree

Mixed Results on Tolerance for Coups, Consistent Support for Postponing Elections in Crisis

Some people say that under some circumstances it would be justified for the military of this country to take power by a coup d'état (military coup). In your opinion would a military coup be justified...

JC10. When there is a lot of crime. (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified (2) A military take-over of the state would not be justified

JC13. When there is a lot of corruption. (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified (2) A military take-over of the state would not be justified

JC13COVID. When there is a public health emergency like the coronavirus. (1) A military take-over of the state would be justified (2) A military take-over of the state would not be justified

JCCOV1. Do you believe that when there is a public health emergency like the coronavirus it is justifiable for the president of the country to postpone elections? (1) Yes, it is justified (2) No, it is not justified

JCCOV2. Do you believe that when there is a lot of violence it is justifiable for the president of the country to postpone elections? (1) Yes, it is justified (2) No, it is not justified

A Few Improvements in Views of Democracy, Yet Widespread Distrust in the Rule of Law

For the next question I will ask you again to give me a response with a number. We will now use a scale that goes from 1, which means "strongly disagree" to 7 which means "strongly agree." A number in between 1 and 7 represents an intermediate score.

ING4. 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?

PN4. In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, **dissatisfied** or very **dissatisfied** with the way democracy works in (country)? (1) Very satisfied (2) Satisfied (3) Dissatisfied (4) Very dissatisfied

I will ask you to answer the forthcoming questions using a number from a scale that goes from 1 to 7, where 1 is the lowest value, means NOT AT ALL and 7 the highest and means A LOT. If your opinion is between not at all and a lot, you would choose an intermediate score.

B2. To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)?

B3. To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are well protected by the political system of (country)?

B1. To what extent do you think the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial?

Some Positive Trends in Democratic Attitudes in Peru, Yet Low Confidence in Elections

JC15A. Do you believe that when the country is facing very difficult times it is justifiable for the president of the country to close the Congress/Parliament and govern without Congress/Parliament? (1) Yes, it is justified (2) No, it is not justified

WVSI4. In deciding what laws to make, what do you think is best for (country): a strong leader who is not accountable to Congress/Assembly or a leader with limited powers by a Congress/Assembly? (1) Strong leader who does not have to report to Congress/Assembly (2) Leader with limited powers by Congress/Assembly

I will mention some things that can happen during elections, and ask you to indicate if they always, sometimes or never happen in [country]...

COUNTFAIR1. Votes are counted correctly and fairly. (1) Always (2) Sometimes (3) Never

COUNTFAIR2. The rich buy the election results. (1) Always (2) Sometimes (3) Never

COUNTFAIR3. Politicians can find out who each person voted for. (1) Always (2) Sometimes (3) Never

Widespread Concerns about Gender-Based Violence Impunity

AOJG1. If a woman in your community or neighborhood was beaten by their partner. Do you think this incident should be reported to the police? (1) Yes (2) No

AOJG2N. If the incident was reported, how likely would it be that the police would take it seriously? (1) Very (2) Somewhat (3) A little (4) Not at all

AOJG3N1. If the case were brought to justice, how likely would the judicial system be to punish the culprit? (1) Very (2) Somewhat (3) A little (4) Not at all

GENOR4. Physical violence between members of a couple is a private matter and should be handled within the couple or close family. Do you (1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Disagree (5) Strongly disagree

Asking about Neighbors is a Reliable Approach for Measuring Interpersonal Trust

IT1. And speaking of the people from your neighborhood/area/community, would you say that people in your neighborhood/area/community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy? (1) Very trustworthy (2) Somewhat trustworthy (3) Not very trustworthy (4) Untrustworthy

IT1N2. And speaking of (country demonym), would you say that peo-

ple in your country are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy? (1) Very trustworthy (2) Somewhat trustworthy (3) Not very trustworthy (4) Untrustworthy

Notes

1. Interested readers are welcome to contact LAPOP@vanderbilt.edu for more information.
2. Phone-based studies generally reach a more nationally representative group of individuals. The two internet studies, conducted in Mexico and Peru, allowed for more complex experimentation with questionnaire design.
3. Interviews took place between the second and fourth quarter of 2020: Haiti (April-June), Peru (July [phone], October [online]), Mexico (July-August [phone], October [online]), Ecuador (December 2020, three interviews in January 2021).
4. Dark gray boxes on the table indicate that a question was not asked in that survey.
5. This is measured by agreement with the statement that democracy, despite its problems, is better than any other form of government (answer choices 5-7 on 1-7 scale).
6. This question was not asked in Haiti or Peru.



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This report was edited by Dr. Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Dr. Mariana Rodríguez. This report was translated by Dr. Juan Camilo Plata, Facundo Salles Kobilanski, Dr. J. Daniel Montalvo, and Rubí Arana. This report was audited by Adam Wolsky. Formatting, production, copy editing, graphics, and report distribution were handled by Rubí Arana and Laura Sellers. Our data and reports are available for free download on the project website. Please follow us on Twitter or Facebook to stay in touch.

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.

This *Insights* report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Vanderbilt University. The contents of this *Insights* report are the sole responsibility of its author and LAPOP and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government or any other supporting organization. LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys are supported predominantly by USAID and Vanderbilt University.

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