

AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – October 21, 2013

Legislators and the President Clash in Ecuador over Abortion Issue:

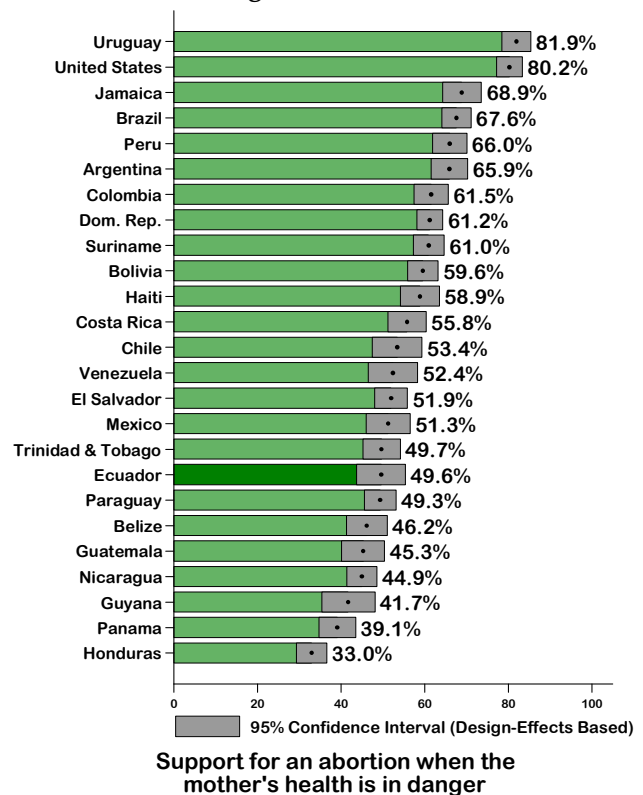
Who has the support of the people? By Diana Orcés, Vanderbilt University

On October 13, 2013, seventy-seven changes to the Ecuadorian Penal Code were approved by the unicameral National Assembly, the country's legislature, and now wait to be signed by President Rafael Correa (El Comercio, 2013). Included among these reforms was a proposal—by legislators of the President's ruling party, Alianza País—to decriminalize abortion in all cases of rape. The current law allows the procedure when the victim is mentally incapacitated, or when the mother's health is in danger due to the pregnancy. During a short legislative stand-off with President Correa, the entire judicial reform package was jeopardized by this single proposed modification to the country's abortion law, with President Correa taking the following stance against abortion:¹

"If these betrayals and disloyalty continue... I will present my resignation ... they can do whatever they want, I will never approve the decriminalization of abortion" (El Comercio 2013, El Universo, 2013).

¹ Funding for the 2012 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. This *Topical Brief* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.

Figure 1. Support for Abortion when the Mother's Health is in Danger across the Americas, 2012



In the face of Correa's immense popularity, legislators from his own party backed down and removed the proposal from the reform package. In this *Topical Brief* I explore Ecuadorians' views on the issue of allowing abortion cases where the health of the mother is threatened in an effort to understand the extent to which President Correa's position reflects those of his supporters and the Ecuadorian public more generally.

I analyze a question asked in the 2012 round of the AmericasBarometer survey, which interviewed over 42,000 people in 26 countries in the Americas, including a nationally representative sample of 1,500 of voting age Ecuadorians. Respondents were asked about their support for an abortion with the following yes/no question:²

W14A. Do you think it's justified to interrupt a pregnancy, that is, to have an abortion, when the mother's health is in danger?

Figure 1 shows the percentages of citizens in the Americas who would allow an abortion when the mother's health is in danger. Ecuadorians express among the lowest level of support for abortion in the Americas and also exhibit a highly polarized public opinion landscape, with an even split of Ecuadorian respondents supporting and opposing abortion in cases where the mother's health is in danger. Only Panamanians (39%) and Hondurans (33%) are significantly less supportive of an abortion than Ecuadorians, with Paraguay, Belize, Nicaragua, and Guyana all falling in the same statistical range as Ecuador. Conversely, more than 80% of Uruguayans and U.S. citizens support the right to an abortion when the mother's health is in danger.³

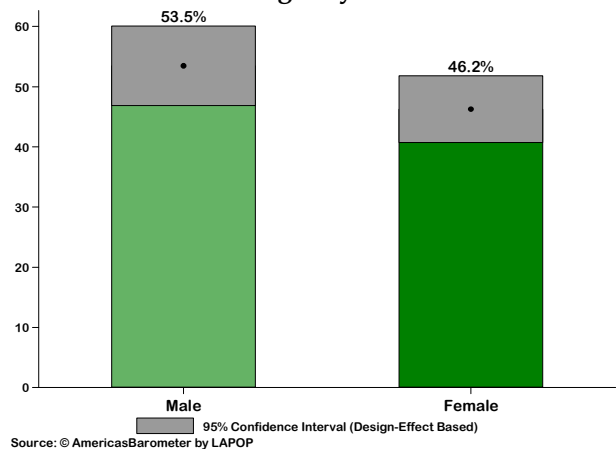
What these initial results suggest is that both Correa and legislative proponents of even limited abortion rights have a strong base of popular support among the Ecuadorian public, but also face a significant percentage of the population who oppose their respective positions. In sum, the legislative push to decriminalize abortion in certain situations reveals a stark and divisive split running through Ecuadorian society.

² 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>.

³ Item nonresponse was 7%; those who did not answer are not analyzed in this short report.

Figure 2. Support for abortion when the mother's health is in danger by sex in Ecuador



In order to better understand the contours of this issue among the Ecuadorian public, I now turn to an analysis of the characteristics of those who support expanded abortion rights in Ecuador. In another recent LAPOP *Topical Brief*, Boidi and Corrales (2013) find that support for abortion rights across Latin American and Caribbean publics is lower among those who feel religion is important in their lives while support is higher among women, wealthier citizens, those with higher levels of education, and those living in urban areas. I take these findings as a point of departure for an analysis of the socioeconomic and attitudinal profiles of abortion opponents and supporters in Ecuador in an effort to identify the competing bases of popular support on which Correa and his legislative opponents have staked their positions on this hotly contested issue.

Beginning with a breakdown of supporters of expanded abortion rights by sex, Figure 2 reveals, perhaps surprisingly, no statistically significant differences between Ecuadorian males (53.5%) and Ecuadorian females (46.2%) in their support for an abortion when the mother's health is in danger. For a more complete assessment of supporters and opponents of this provision, though, I turn to a multivariate analysis in which various factors

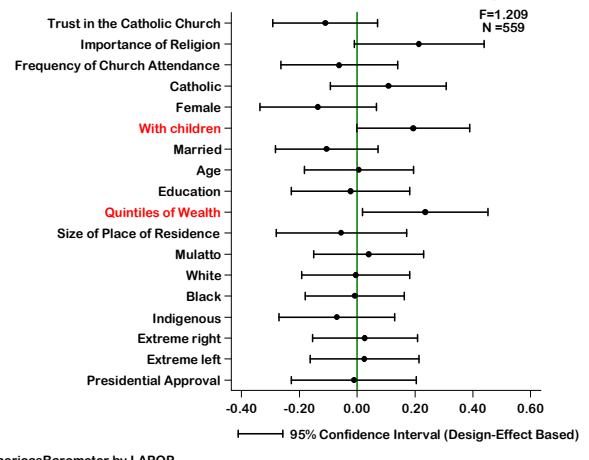
related to Ecuadorians' views on abortion are considered.

Figure 3 shows a graphical representation of a logistic regression model that seeks to identify the main socio-economic and attitudinal characteristics of abortion rights supporters. When the dot falls to the right of the green axis (0.0), that variable is *positively* related to support for abortion; when it falls to the left, it is *negatively* related to this support. The horizontal lines surrounding each dot represent 95% confidence interval for the estimate. When the confidence intervals do not overlap the green axis, we can be 95% confident that the variable is statistically significant related to support for abortion (for the sake of clarity, these variables are highlighted in red).

The results in Figure 3 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences across various socio-demographic indicators as sex, religion, civil status, age, education, area of residency and ethnic self-identification. Nor are there differences among those who approve of President Correa's performance, those who locate themselves to the right or left of the ideological spectrum, those who trust the Catholic Church, think that religion is important in their lives or attend church frequently. The only statistically significant differences are wealth, which echoes results found by Boidi and Corrales (2013) for the general population in the Americas, and marginally for those respondents with children. Wealthy individuals and those with kids are significantly *more* likely to support the right for an abortion when the mother's health is in danger compared to those with lower incomes and those without kids.

It remains to be seen how the debate over the decriminalization of abortion unfolds in Ecuador. What the above analysis suggests, given the relative absence of many significant correlates of Ecuadorians' views of the abortion debate, is that President Correa may risk very little in making his stance against abortion because the issue does not cut one way or

Figure 3. Determinants of Ecuadorians' support for abortion when the mother's health is in danger



another across subgroups in the population. Further, he is not taking a position significantly at odds with his supporters but neither is he taking a position that is in line with his supporters. At the time of the writing of this *Topical Brief*, various women's organizations have expressed their views opposing President Correa's efforts to halt the liberalization of the current criminalization of abortion laws, this in a country where one in every four women has suffered some kind of sexual violence (El Comercio, 2013, line 7). It remains to be seen whether Ecuador will remain a country with one of the most restrictive abortion rights laws in Latin America or will eventually follow the path of countries like Uruguay, where the right to an abortion is protected by law and where more than 80% of the population supports such rights.

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Full results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer - survey and the AmericasBarometer 2012 comparative study can be consulted on-line at www.LapopSurveys.org. The full data set is available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.