

AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – March 2, 2015

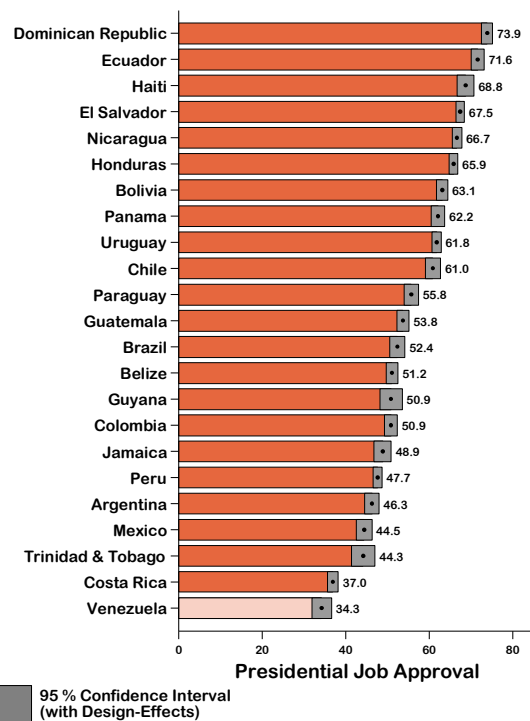
Amid Low Evaluations of Maduro's Performance, Tolerance of Regime Critics Grows in Venezuela

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Nearly one year after the arrest of opposition leader and outspoken regime critic, Leopoldo López, on charges of inciting violence during an extensive series of protests in February 2014, another leading opposition figure, Antonio Ledezma, a close ally of López and mayor of Caracas, has been arrested by the Venezuelan government on conspiracy charges in an alleged coup plot against President Maduro.

In a context marked by presidential approval ratings lower than any other head of state in the Latin America and Caribbean region (See Figure 1)¹ and looming legislative elections, concerns are mounting over repressive measures by Maduro's administration to silence regime

Figure 1. Average Presidential Approval, 2014



¹ Figure 1 shows means (not percents) on a 0-100 scale based on the following question: M1. Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of the President/Prime Minister? (100) Very good (75) Good (50) Neither good nor bad (25) Bad (0) Very bad.

critics. In this *Topical Brief*,² we assess public opinion on presidential approval and support for the political rights of

² Prior issues of the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

regime dissidents in Venezuela using data from the 2014 AmericasBarometer.³

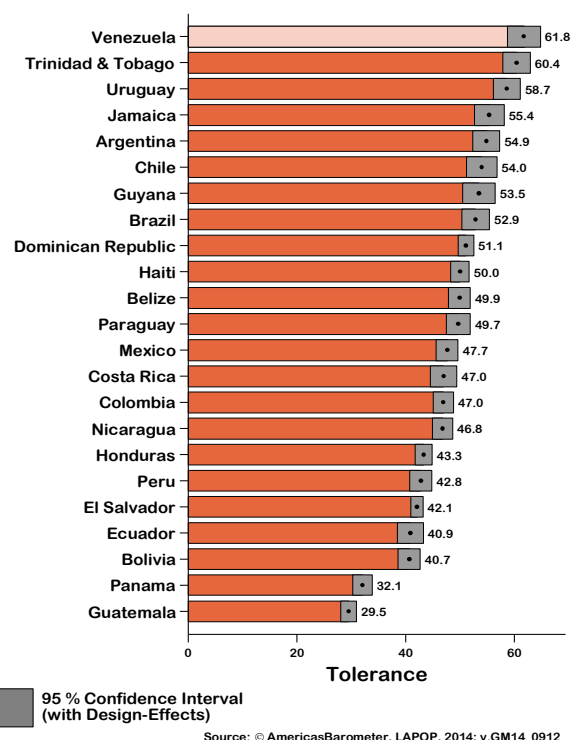
Maduro's dismal presidential approval ratings⁴ reflect public discontent with the severe political, social, and economic problems facing Venezuela, including inflation rates reaching an estimated 68% and rising (Romero and Gupta 2015), widespread scarcity of basic goods, and the second highest homicide rate in the world (Medina 2015). This problem-plagued climate has fueled a growing call by opposition leaders and activists for citizens to voice their grievances and demand change from the government.

Within this context, the embattled President Maduro's administration has taken a stern stance toward government dissidents. Violent clashes between government security forces and street demonstrators during last year's wave of protests left over 40 people dead, hundreds injured, and thousands arrested (Silva and China 2014). In addition to Ledezma's recent arrest, 33 out of 50 opposition mayors across Venezuela face legal charges related to their involvement in the February 2014 protests (Romero and Gupta

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⁴ *The Economist* (2015) reports current approval ratings for President Maduro at below 20%.

Figure 2. Average Political Tolerance, 2014



2015). Other prominent opposition leaders and activists have been accused of conspiracy, coup plotting, and other machinations. In the case of Maria Corina Machado, these accusations resulted in the removal of her seat at the National Assembly (e.g., Schaefer Muñoz and Minaya 2015).

What levels of public support exist for government efforts to silence regime critics in Venezuela? Very little, according to data from the LAPOP AmericasBarometer. In fact, *Venezuelans rank as the most supportive of regime critics' political rights* in comparison with citizens of other Latin American and Caribbean countries, as seen in Figure 2. The *Political Tolerance*

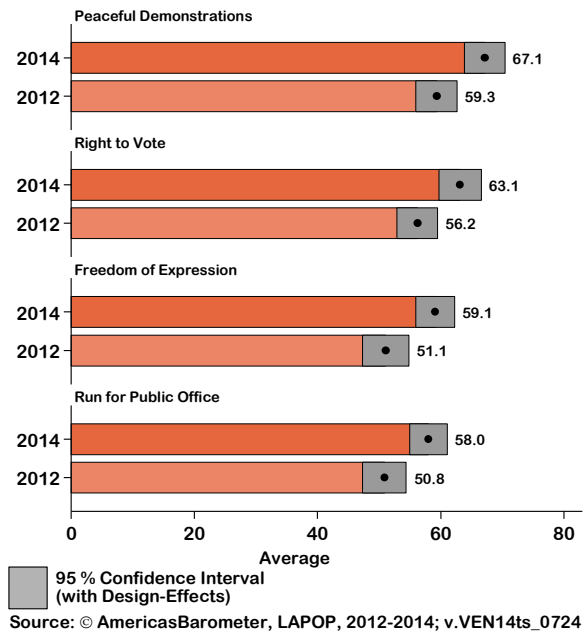
measure is an index of support for the right of regime critics to protest, vote, exercise freedom of expression, and run for public office.⁵

Moreover, *levels of political tolerance have increased*. Figure 3 displays average support for each act within the tolerance index and compares averages across 2012 and 2014. As can be observed, Venezuelans have grown more tolerant since 2012 on every dimension. In 2014, a year in which Venezuelan politics fell into a crisis marked by widespread protests against the government and by political violence, citizens expressed more support for the right of dissenters to peacefully demonstrate and voice their opinions, vote, and run for public office.

These data suggest that *strident moves against opposition leaders, to the extent that they appear to be moves designed to silence regime critics, may further undermine President Maduro's popularity*.

⁵ The political tolerance index, scaled 0 (least tolerant) to 100 (most tolerant), is based on the following questions: **D1.** 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? **D2.** How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views? **D3.** Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the (country) form of government, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office? **D4.** How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches? The index has a Cronbach's alpha score of .90.

Figure 3. Average Political Tolerance by Dimension, Venezuela 2014



As one would expect, there is a strong negative relationship between presidential approval and support for the rights of regime critics to exercise civil liberties in Venezuela. Figure 4 shows that political tolerance is highest for those who give the most negative evaluations of President Maduro's work in office (71.9 units, or degrees, of tolerance on the 0-100 scale), while it is lowest among those who rate his job performance as "very good" (41 units). This sharp difference – representing a gap that spans 1/3 of the 100-point scale, from 71.9 to 41, is illustrative of the high levels of polarization in Venezuelan public opinion. It is relevant to point out the degree of this polarization: while 54% of respondents evaluate President Maduro's job performance as "bad" or "very bad,"

only 19% think he is doing a “good” or “very good” job.

Overall, these results suggest that to the extent that President Maduro’s popularity continues to fall, so too will support for actions perceived as attacks on the right of his opponents to participate in politics. Given the platform that the impending legislative elections and continued protest calls by opposition leadership provide for critics to voice their discontent with the *Chavista* regime, President Maduro appears to be in a bind: maneuvers to silence regime opponents may be aimed at maintaining political power, but these tactics are unpopular, and likely increasingly so.

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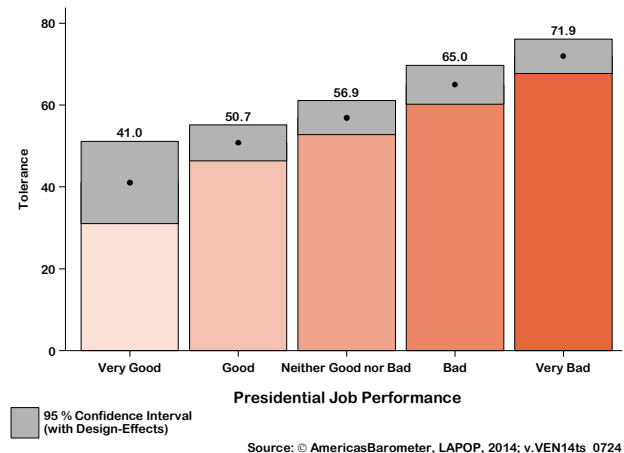
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Figure 4. Average Tolerance by Presidential Job Performance Evaluations, Venezuela 2014



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Full results of the 2014 AmericasBarometer and previous rounds 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.