

Topical Brief #035

Tolerance of Executive “Coups” in Peru

Mariana V. Ramírez Bustamante and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister

Vanderbilt University

mariana.v.ramirez.bustamante@vanderbilt.edu

liz.zechmeister@vanderbilt.edu

October 8, 2019

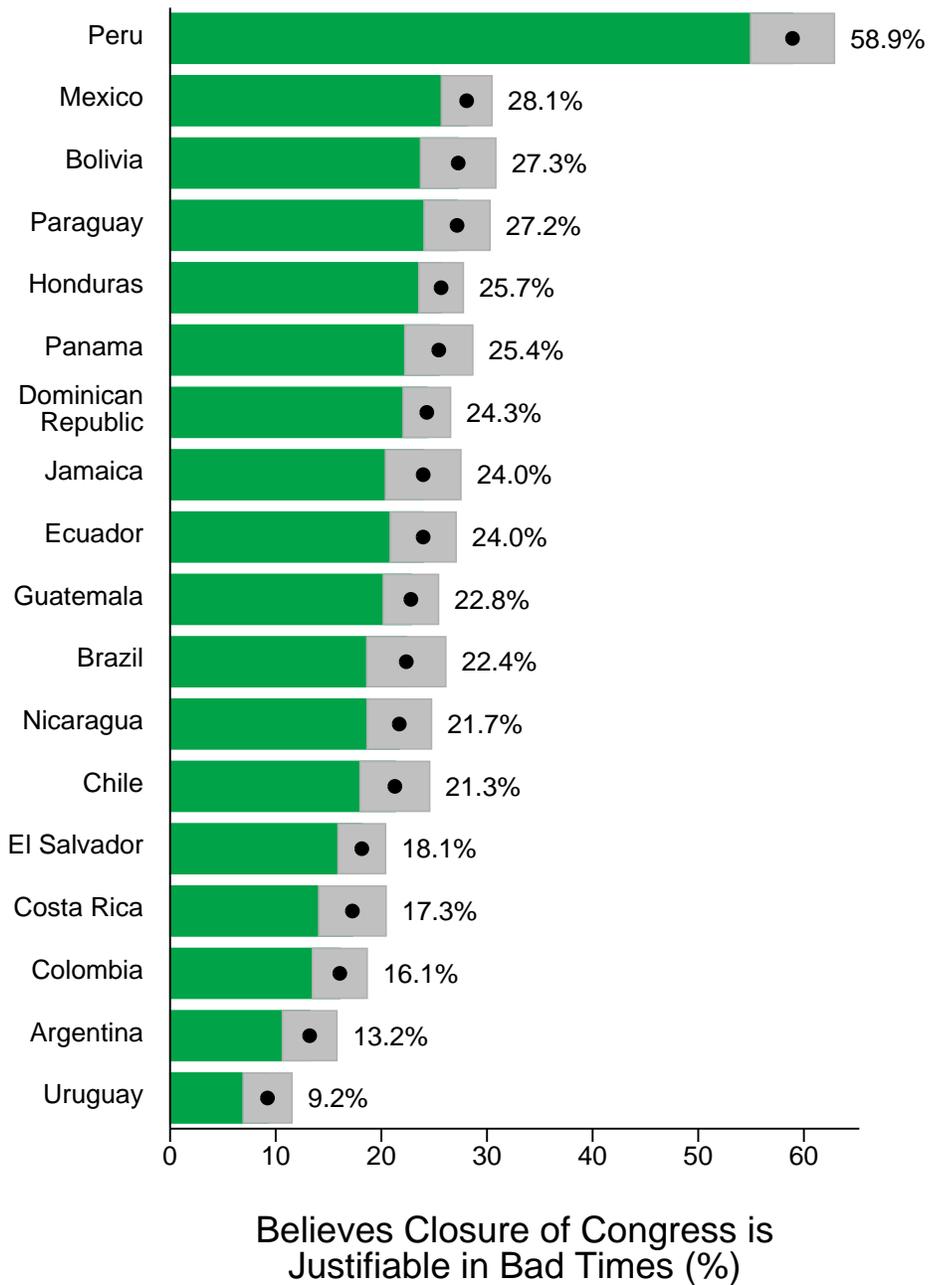
Key Findings:

- Nearly 3 in 5 Peruvians (58.9%) believe that it is justifiable for the president of the country to close Congress in times of crisis.
- Tolerance for executive “coups” in Peru increased by 21.1 percentage points between 2017 to 2019.
- In 2019, trust in Peru’s Congress dropped to 8.8%.
- In 2019, 85% of Peruvians report that more than half or all politicians are corrupt.



Peru’s President Martín Vizcarra issued a decision to dissolve congress on September 30, a maneuver he defended as a “democratic solution” to address legislative impasse while fighting against corruption.¹ The opposition-controlled congress, on the other hand, referred to it as a “*coup d’etat*.”² The extraordinary move by the president to shutter congress is controversial and raises concerns about the stability of Peru’s political system. To understand why Vizcarra gambled that his administration could fend off congressional backlash and withstand a constitutional crisis, it is illuminating to consider public opinion on the topic.³ This *Topical Report* presents data from LAPOP’s AmericasBarometer survey, which shows high public tolerance for “presidential coups” (that is, the dissolution of congress, also known as a “self-coups”, or *autogolpe*). Public opinion may have provided Vizcarra the policy space for last week’s actions and, as well, may be key to whether Vizcarra is able to weather the resulting political storm.

According to the 2019 AmericasBarometer national survey of Peru, nearly 3 in 5 Peruvians (58.9%) believe that it is justifiable for the president of the country to close Congress and govern without this institution in times of crisis.⁴ In short, a clear majority of citizens expresses tolerance for what are often referred to as executive “coups” (though we note that the question wording refers to a hypothetical situation and does not use this politicized term). Figure 1 puts this level of tolerance in comparative perspective, by showing this attitude across the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region. By far, Peru is the country with the highest level of tolerance in the region. It ranks almost 30 percentage points above Mexico (at 28.1%), which has the second highest proportion of citizens reporting that it is justifiable for the president to close congress when the country is facing difficult times.

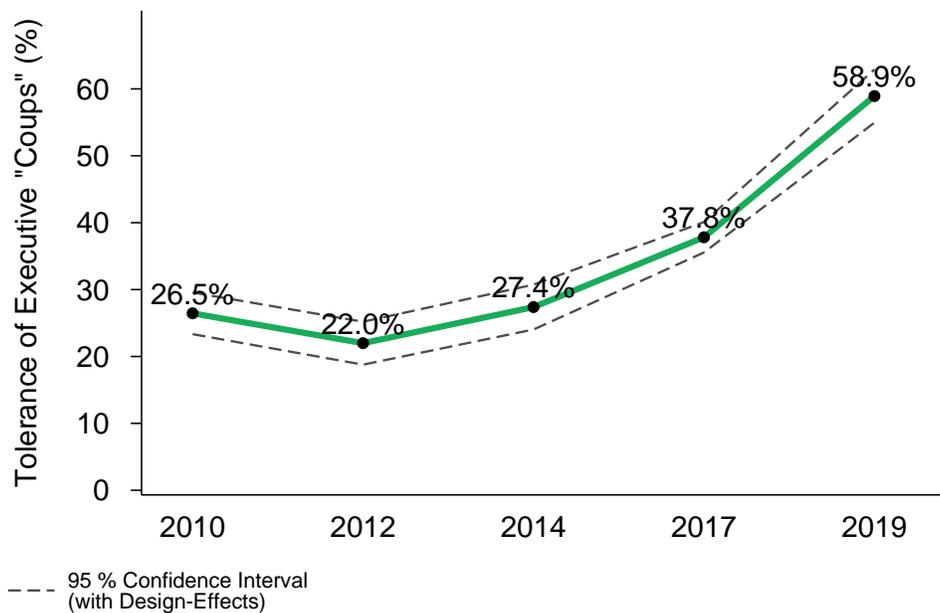


95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2018/19; v.GM20190821_E

Figure 1: Tolerance of Executive “Coups” in the LAC Region, 2018/19

The AmericasBarometer database also provides cross-time data on tolerance for executive maneuvers to close congress. According to our analysis of these data, tolerance for executive “coups” has increased in the average LAC country, with that attitude steadily increasing from 2012 forward (see also Cohen (2017)). Peru’s cross-time trajectory reflects with this region-wide trend, but to a comparatively striking degree. Figure 2 shows that in Peru this attitude has been on the rise since 2012, and from 2017 to 2019 affirmative answers to the executive coup question increased by 21.1 percentage points.



Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2010-2018/19; v.GM20190821_E

Figure 2: Tolerance of Executive “Coups” in Peru, 2010-2019

Who is more likely to justify an executive closure during times of crisis? In the rest of the LAC region, our analyses of the AmericasBarometer data indicate that the poor (vs. the wealthier) and those who are in the youngest and oldest age cohorts (vs. the middle age cohorts) are more tolerant of hypothetical executive coups. Notably, public opinion in Peru trends in the opposite direction. Our analyses of the 2019 Peru AmericasBarometer data reveal that those in the poorest wealth quintile

are less likely to express tolerance of executive coups. Further, individuals in the youngest (18-25) and oldest (66 or above) age cohorts are less likely to perceive executive coups as justifiable, compared to those aged 26 to 65.

According to the Peruvian Constitution (Art. 134), the president can dissolve Congress if the latter censures or rejects the “vote of confidence” of two Cabinet Councils. In other words, the president has the legal authority to close Congress in some cases, so invoking this procedure is not necessarily at odds with democratic processes. In fact, in a multiple regression analysis that controls for socioeconomic and demographic factors, neither satisfaction with nor support for democracy predicts tolerance for an executive-led closure of congress in Peru. Interestingly, approval of the president also does not predict tolerance for such an action.

However, those Peruvians who have low levels of trust in Congress are nearly twice as likely to express tolerance for executive decisions to shutter Congress.⁵ This finding is important because trust in Congress in Peru is low and has been declining over time. In the period between 2006 and 2017, on average, 15.9% of Peruvians expressed trust in Congress. From 2017 to 2019 alone, that figure has dropped to 8.8%. One contributing factor may be increased perceptions of corruption in politics. Between 2017 and 2019, the proportion of Peruvians who report that more than half or all politicians to be corrupt increased from 77 to 85%. The data also show that those who perceive more corruption trust Congress less and are more tolerant of executive coups. Combating corruption and restoring confidence in Congress are two important and related paths toward decreasing the Peruvian public’s appetite for executive-led moves aimed at the dissolution of Congress.

Notes

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/americas/peru-vizcarra-congress.html>.

2. *Ibid.*
3. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/andres-oppenheimer/article235793842.html>.
4. The AmericasBarometer Peru survey was conducted between February 16 and March 25, 2019. Tolerance of executive “coups” is measured with the following AmericasBarometer survey question: **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.
5. The AmericasBarometer asks about trust in the national congress on a 7-point scale; for this analysis, we coded responses 1, 2, and 3 as low trust and responses 5, 6, and 7 as high trust. Among those with low trust in congress, 63.4% indicate that an executive coup can be justifiable, while that rate is 35.9% among those with high trust in congress.

References

- Cohen, Mollie J. 2017. “Chapter One: Support for Electoral Democracy in the Americas.” In *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas 2016/17*, edited by Noam Lupu Mollie J. Cohen and Elizabeth Zechmeister, 1–26. https://www.vanderbilt.edu/%20lapop/ab2016/AB2016-17_Comparative_Report_English_V2_%20FINAL_090117_W.pdf.



Mariana V. Ramírez Bustamante is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University and LAPOP-affiliated researcher.

Elizabeth J. Zechmeister is Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University and Director of LAPOP.

This report was translated by Mariana V. Ramírez Bustamante and Rubí Arana. Formatting, production, copy editing, graphics, and report distribution were handled by Rubí Arana, Maita Schade, Laura Sellers, and Lindsey Thomas. 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.

The contents of this *Topical Brief* are the sole responsibility of the authors and LAPOP and do not necessarily reflect the views of any supporting organization. LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys are supported predominantly by USAID and Vanderbilt University. The 2018/19 round also had support from the IADB, the UNDP, the Open Society Foundations, and academic partners and researchers across the Americas.

vanderbilt.edu/lapop
@lapop_barometro
@LatinAmericanPublicOpinionProject
lapop@vanderbilt.edu
+1-615-322-4033



230 Appleton Place, PMB 505, Suite 304, Nashville, TN 37203, USA