due partly to the fact that they were instigated by government officials responding to social movements pushing for social justice. Indeed, when 500 of the largest private employers in Brazil were surveyed in 2010, the vast majority indicated that they had no affirmative action policies in place.19

Regardless of whether affirmative action expands to include private-sector employment in Latin America, state-supported affirmative action policies will continue to flourish. Much of this stems from the acceptance of a constitutional and legal justification that has emphasized broad-based democratic concern with social inclusion and established the basis for these policies in human rights law. As a result, today affirmative action in Latin America not only has a stronger legal foundation and broader support than in the U.S.; the policies have also led to clearer guidelines for implementation with specifically articulated numerical quotas. These results may be worth considering by U.S. policymakers and educational authorities. At a time when affirmative action is under direct assault at a federal level in the U.S., Afro-descendants across the Americas share similar struggles for meaningful racial equality. Perhaps shifting the legal justification for affirmative action in the U.S. to fundamental human rights and democratic deepening will help renew the popular and political commitment to expand racial equality, much as it is starting to do across Latin America.

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Affirmative Action and Public Opinion

While affirmative action policies have been in place for decades in Canada and the U.S., it wasn’t until August last year that the Brazilian Senate passed a law requiring the nation’s public universities to establish admissions quotas based on family income and ethnic background.

The Brazilian law and recent efforts in other countries point to a growing public recognition of inequality based on race and gender. But does public opinion in the hemisphere support affirmative action? According to a 2012 AmericasBarometer survey conducted by Vanderbilt University’s Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 23 Western Hemisphere countries, support for affirmative action is mixed.1

The survey revealed that a majority of respondents supported policies that would remove barriers to inequality, such as race-based affirmative action. LAPOP asked respondents to state how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement that “universities ought to set aside openings for students with darker skin, even if that means excluding other students.” High percentages of those who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” were found in Paraguay (69.8 percent), Honduras (62.7 percent) and Argentina (62.6 percent), with Canada and U.S. respondents expressing the lowest levels of support, at 28.8 percent and 25.7 percent, respectively. Brazil, at 47.3 percent, also fell in the lower end of the spectrum. In over half the countries surveyed—13 out of 23—a majority of respondents expressed support for affirmative action policies.

Yet, a significant minority of the region’s citizens still harbor prejudice. Across the hemisphere, 25.7 percent of respondents supported the view that men make better leaders than women. And when asked if individuals with darker skin color are not good political leaders, 12 percent of respondents agreed.

Latin America lacks the decades-long histories of affirmative action in Canada and the U.S. Yet significant support for affirmative action exists—despite discriminatory attitudes—and passing affirmative action laws is not impeded by lower levels of popular support.

1 Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Vanderbilt University. HTTP://WWW.VANDERBILT.EDU/LAPOP/