

[Monkey Cage](#)

Analysis

Hondurans are in the streets because they don't believe their election results

By Orlando J. Pérez and Mitchell A. Seligson December 19 at 5:00 AM



masked protester stands by a burning barricade in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Monday, Dec. 18, 2017. (AP Photo/Fernando Antonio)

Honduras' presidential election Nov. 26 has set off a political crisis. So far, 22 people have been killed during protests; the [Organization of American States](#) is calling for a new election.

Even before the vote count began, Honduras' national elections were controversial. The president, Juan Orlando Hernández of the National Party, was seeking reelection — which had been prohibited by the Honduran constitution until 2015. That year the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a petition by Rafael Callejas, president from 1990-94, that the prohibition on reelection had been a violation of his human rights. Hernández was the first beneficiary of the ruling.

The first results posted on the website of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) eight hours after the polls closed showed the opposition ahead with 45 percent, compared with 40 percent for the incumbent president. But the count then slowed to a trickle — before the electronic system crashed for several hours. When the count resumed, the results displayed on the TSE’s website showed Hernández had taken the lead with 81 percent of the vote counted. Opposition supporters took to the streets — first to protest the count’s slowdown, and then to question Hernández’s purported surge. In trying to suppress the protests, the government ordered a curfew from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Nonetheless, protests continued — and in an escalation of violence, the police allegedly killed several protesters.

According to [the New York Times](#), a Honduran human rights lawyer said, “Nobody has any confidence [in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal]. It has no legitimacy. How can they be counting under a curfew?” Is it true that no one in Honduras trusts elections? The resolution of the disputed election and political stability in this Central American nation could depend on the answer.

Here’s how we did our research

Data from the 2016-17 round of the [AmericasBarometer](#), a widely respected poll, show that Hondurans say they have relatively little trust in their elections. The AmericasBarometer, carried out by Vanderbilt University’s [Latin American Public Opinion Project](#) (LAPOP), does face-to-face interviews with nationally representative probability samples of approximately 1,500 voting-age adults in each country. In Honduras, the sample size was 1,560 in a survey conducted in October 2016.

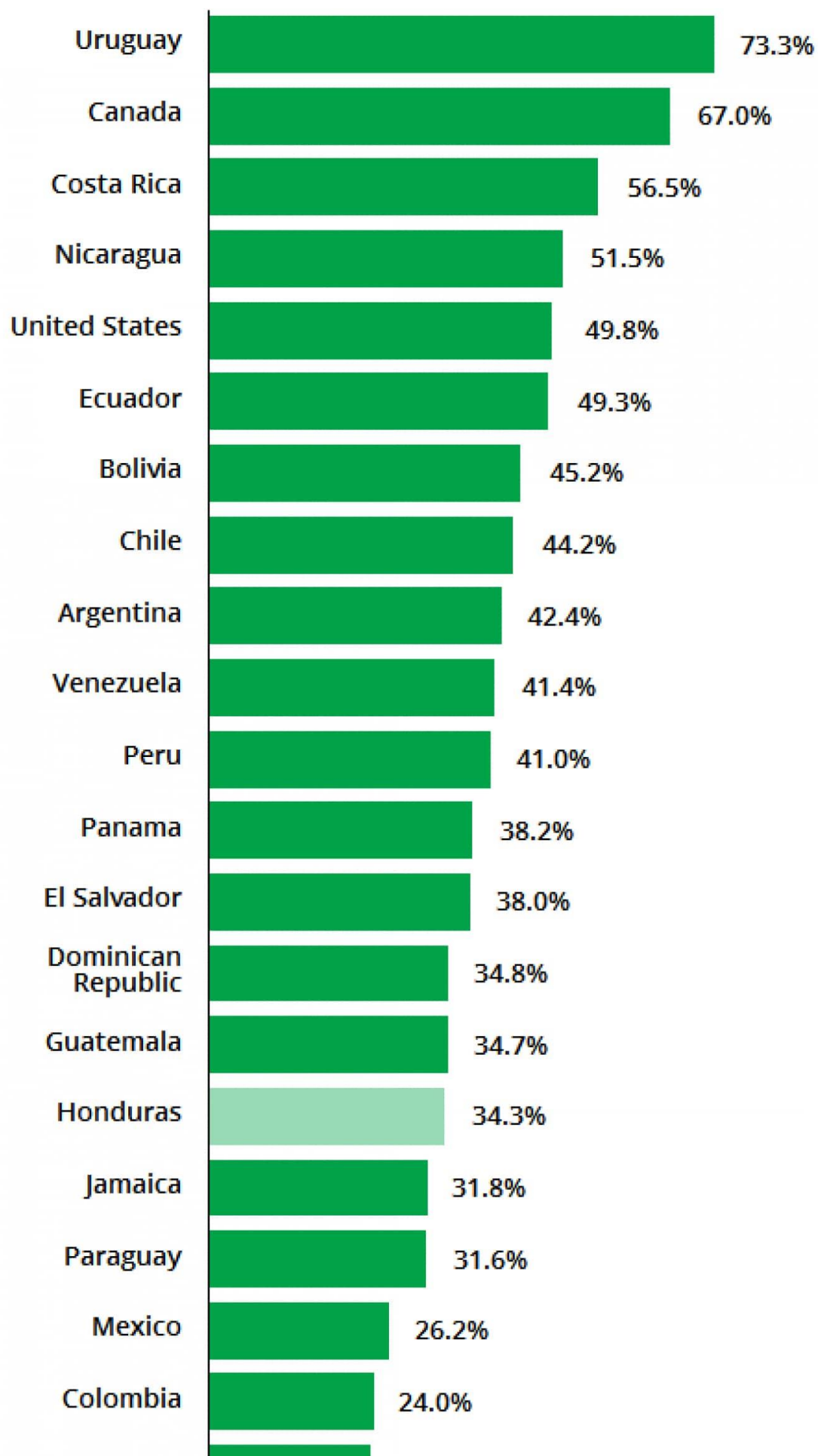
Respondents were asked, “To what extent do you trust the elections in this country?” In the figure below, you can see the percentage of individuals in each country who said they trust their elections.

On average, Hondurans don’t trust their election system

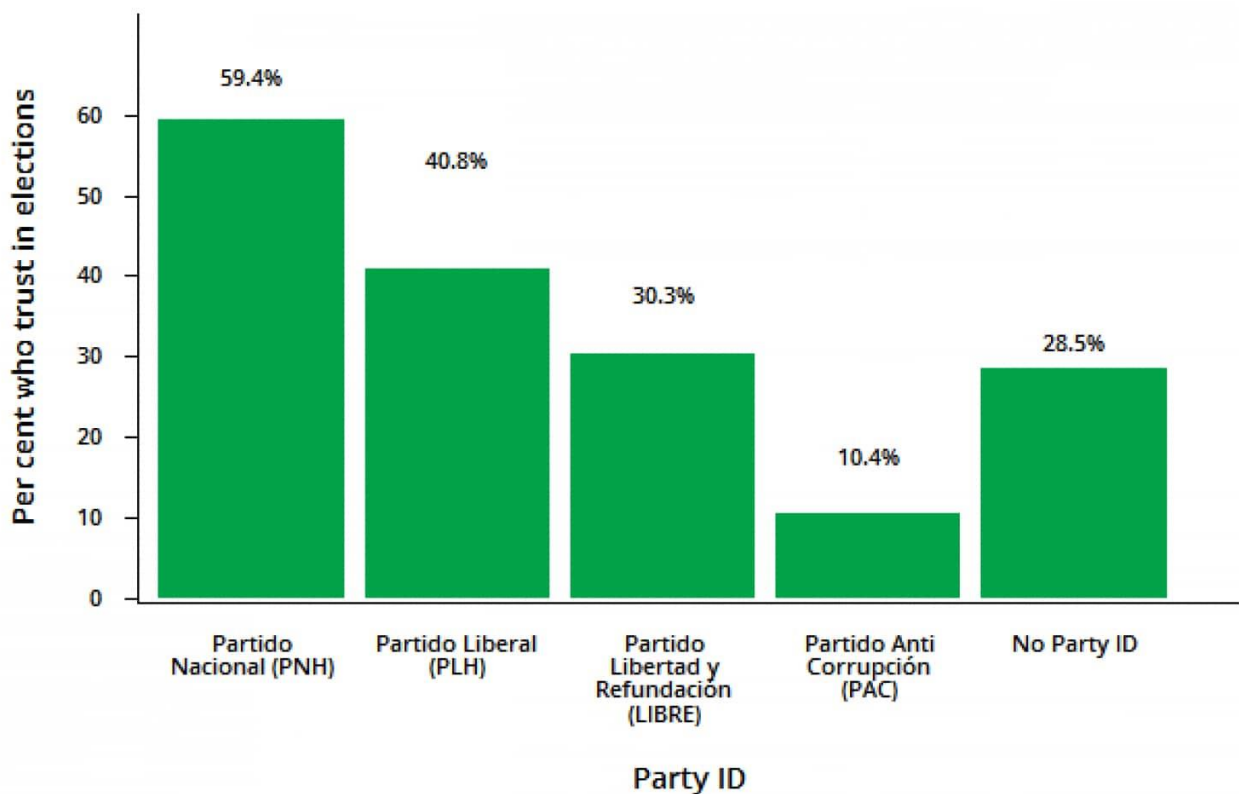
Hondurans score at the low end in the Americas: 34.3 percent of Hondurans say they trust their elections, placing them 16 out of the 22 countries in which this question was asked in the last round. That’s well below that of comparatively highly trust systems such as those in Uruguay, Canada, Costa Rica and the United States.

That’s even below the trust expressed in countries whose elections have been questioned by international observers in the past few years, such as Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

Country



But not all Hondurans distrust their elections; there's a wide partisan gap. About one-third, or 535, of survey respondents identified with a political party and were willing to state a specific preference. The remaining 941 respondents did not identify with a political party. In the figure below, you can see the direct relationship between partisan identification and trust in elections, without accounting for additional control variables.



Trust in elections by party identification in Honduras

Hondurans view their elections through party-colored glasses

As you can see, supporters of Honduras' traditional National and Liberal parties are far more likely to trust elections than those of the newer anti-system parties. On average, 59.4 percent of National Party

sympathizers and 40.8 percent of Liberal Party sympathizers say they trust elections — well above the national average. On the other hand, only 30.3 percent of LIBRE supporters and 10.4 percent of PAC sympathizers say they trust elections, which is closer to the 28.5 percent of independents (including those who did not disclose their party identification) who say they do.

These findings hold up even when we include control variables in a regression analysis. Age, gender, and wealth have no statistically significant effect; education and urban/rural residence have a slight impact but do not materially change the results.

Most Hondurans indeed lack confidence in elections, but some do not. Supporters of the ruling National Party are far more confident than those of other political parties, particularly those who formed the opposition alliance, and those who do not identify with any party. This evidence suggests Hondurans view their elections through party-colored glasses.

Just eight years ago, Honduras endured a traumatic political crisis over reelection, when former president Manuel Zelaya's (2006-09) attempt to change the constitution to allow for reelection [led to his removal from office by the military](#).

Now another reelection is boiling over into a crisis. The survey results reveal how deep the challenges are facing Honduran officials who wish to persuade citizens to trust the vote count. Given their lack of trust and the closeness of the vote, and the fact that the early count showed them comfortably ahead, it's hard to see how the opposition would accept defeat.

What does this mean for other Latin American nations' upcoming elections?

These findings have weighty implications for some critical presidential elections coming up in 2018. Mexicans and Brazilians trust their elections even less than Hondurans do, as you can see in the AmericasBarometer results above. In Mexico, a [leftist populist candidate is ahead](#) in the polls for an election scheduled for July. [Brazil's economic and political woes](#) suggest that the October 2018 election will be hard fought.

If the results are as close as they were in Honduras, the apparent losers might not accept the outcome, precipitating crises that could destabilize these two major regional powers — with significant consequences for the entire region.

Orlando J. Pérez is an associate dean of the College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences at the Millersville University of Pennsylvania. Follow him on Twitter at @perez10j.

Mitchell A. Seligson is the Centennial Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University.