

Insights Series #153

Who Is Willing to Trade Away Elections for Material Guarantees?

Katherine Oung
Vanderbilt University

September 13, 2022

Key Findings:

- In most Latin American and Caribbean countries, more than 50% prefer a system that guarantees material assistance over one that guarantees elections
- Age is the most significant predictor; on average, younger adults are more likely to trade away elections for material guarantees
- There does not seem to be a connection between country-level, expert assessments of election malpractice and willingness to trade away elections, but trust in elections is negatively correlated with willingness to do away with elections
- Political attitudes—support for democracy, trust in China—are stronger predictors of willingness to trade away elections than personal experience with food or economic insecurity



Deficits in election integrity have long challenged democratization efforts in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region. Electoral malpractice in the region includes but is not limited to the detainment of opposition candidates, ballot stuffing, vote bribing, and fraud in campaign funding.¹ Scholars warn that public discontent with election integrity can weaken support for democracy and even mobilize citizens to seek regime change.² Others argue more generally that while democracy is a popular concept globally, commitment to democratic principles is not very strong.³ With these ideas as a backdrop, it is worthwhile to investigate how committed citizens across the Americas are to the most fundamental of democratic processes, elections.

This *Insights* report evaluates the country, sociodemographic, and political predictors of an individual's willingness to trade elections for material guarantees of basic income and services. The report utilizes responses from the 2021 round of LAPOP's AmericasBarometer survey. In all, 14,651 survey participants across the Americas answered the question:⁴

CHM1BN. Which political system seems best for (country): a system that guarantees access to a basic income and services for all citizens, even if the authorities cannot be elected, or to be able to vote to elect the authorities, even if some people do not have access to a basic income and services?

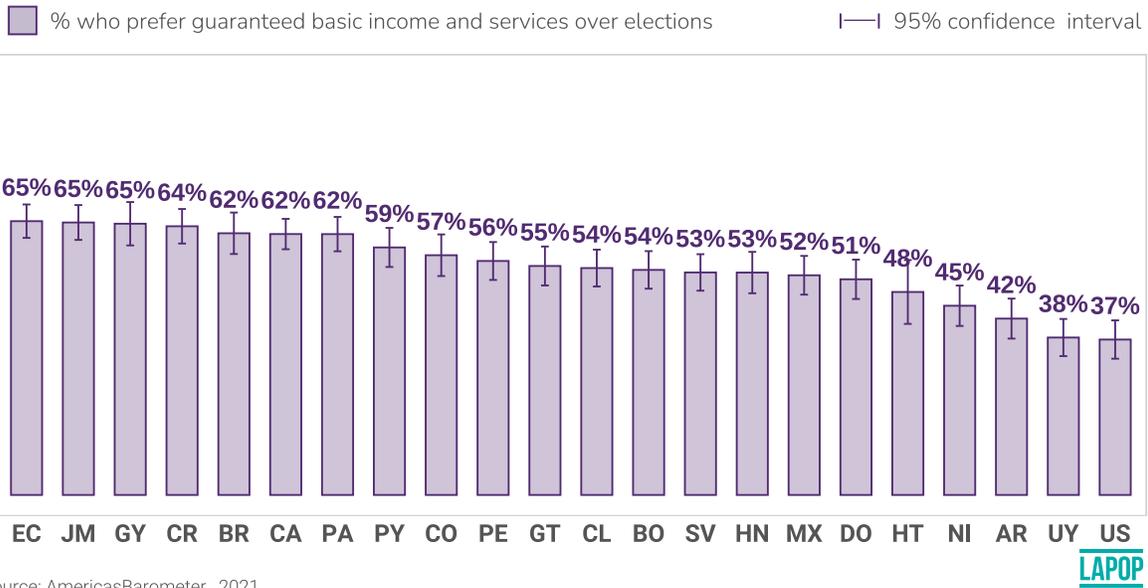
For the purposes of this report, I code those who express a preference for elections over guaranteed access to a basic income and services, as 0 and those who prefer guaranteed basic income and services over elections, as 1. This approach facilitates an assessment of who is willing to trade away elections for material guarantees.⁵

In Most Countries, More than Half are Willing to Trade Away Elections

Figure 1⁶ displays rates of willingness to trade off elections across the 22 countries surveyed. The bars show the 95% confidence interval for each country, and the number indicates the percentage of people in each country who stated that they would be willing to trade elections for basic income and services. There is a 28-percentage point difference between the country with the highest percentage of individuals willing to trade elections, Ecuador (65%), and the country with the lowest percentage, the United States (37%). In 17 out of 22 countries, more than 50% of adults prefer a system that guarantees material assistance over one that guarantees elections.

Figure 1.

Willingness to Trade Elections for Economic Guarantees, 2021



Interestingly, there seems to be little connection between measured levels of election integrity in a country, as reported by Freedom House, and the public’s commitment to elections. Most of the seven countries with the highest percentage of individuals willing to trade away elections⁷ as well as the three countries with the lowest percentage of individuals willing to trade away elections⁸ feature rather competitive elections relative to the region—that is, despite falling on opposite ends of Figure 1. These countries are generally led by a head of government and national legislature selected through free and fair elections, and generally feature robust electoral laws and election management bodies.⁹ Countries that are currently experiencing high-profile cases of electoral malpractice, such as Guatemala¹⁰ (55%) and Nicaragua¹¹ (45%), vary in their placement on the graph. While Guatemala ranks towards the middle, Nicaragua falls among the lowest ranked countries in Figure 1. It may be that other factors—beyond a country’s measured electoral integrity—help explain variation in willingness to trade away elections; the rest of the report focuses on individual-level predictors of this attitude.

Education, Wealth, and Age are Among Factors that Predict Commitment to Elections

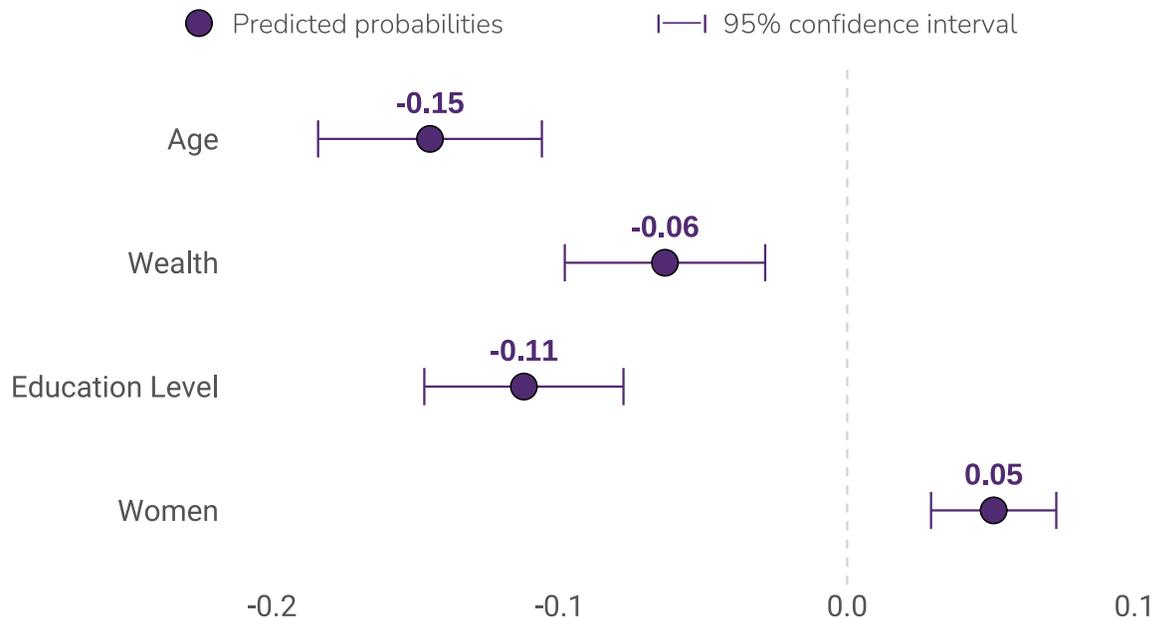
In this section, I consider which demographic and socioeconomic characteristics shape a person's likelihood to trade away elections for material guarantees (versus preferring elections despite no guarantee of basic income or services). I begin with expectations of a negative correlation between willingness to trade off elections and age, education level, and wealth. With respect to age, previous scholarship asserts that younger adults worldwide express the most skepticism about the ability of democratic systems in their countries to address issues such as wealth inequality, economic insecurity, and corruption.¹² Young people are also more likely than their older counterparts to support left- or right-wing populists.¹³ I, therefore, expect those who are younger will be more willing to trade elections away.

With respect to education, various studies find that individuals with more formal education generally are more active civic participants,¹⁴ including in electoral activity specifically,¹⁵ and are more supportive of democracy in principle.¹⁶ I, therefore, expect there to be a negative correlation for education level. Finally, I similarly expect a negative correlation for wealth because those who are wealthy are less likely to be in dire need of economic or other basic assistance from the government; they should, then, be less attracted to the idea of trading away elections for material guarantees.

Figure 2 shows the results of a logistic regression in which willingness to trade away elections is predicted by age, wealth, education level, and gender.¹⁷ The dots represent the predicted change in the likelihood of preferring material guarantees given a minimum-to-maximum change in each independent variable while controlling for country fixed effects. The horizontal bars represent the 95% confidence interval of each estimate. The error bars for all the independent variables fall completely left or right of the dotted vertical line, meaning they all have a significant correlation with the dependent variable.

The most substantial correlation is between age and willingness to trade elections. The correlation is negative, as expected: those in the oldest of the six age cohorts are 15 percentage points less likely to be willing to trade away elections compared to the youngest age group.

Also in line with my expectations, wealth and education are negatively correlated with a preference for material guarantees. Those in the highest of the five wealth categories are 6 percentage points less likely to be willing to trade elections, compared to the lowest wealth category. Those with the highest level of education (tertiary, university) are predicted to be 11 percentage points less likely to be willing to trade elections, compared to those who have primary or no education.

Figure 2.**Demographic and Socioeconomic Predictors of Willingness to Trade Elections for Economic Guarantees**

Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



I did not have expectations for gender but included it in the model. The results show that people who self-identify as women are more likely to be willing to trade elections for material guarantees than those who self-identify as men, with a predicted effect size of 5 percentage points.

Views on Democracy and China are Connected to Willingness to Trade Away Elections

In this section, I evaluate additional predictors of whether individuals will prioritize being able to participate in elections or receive basic services from the government. I first consider perceptions of election integrity.¹⁸ I predict that if individuals trust elections in their country, they will value them more. These persons may view voting as an effective tool for implementing societal change, perhaps even with respect to expanding access to basic income and services, while those who do not trust elections will not value them as much nor are they as likely to associate voting with the acquisition of material outcomes.¹⁹

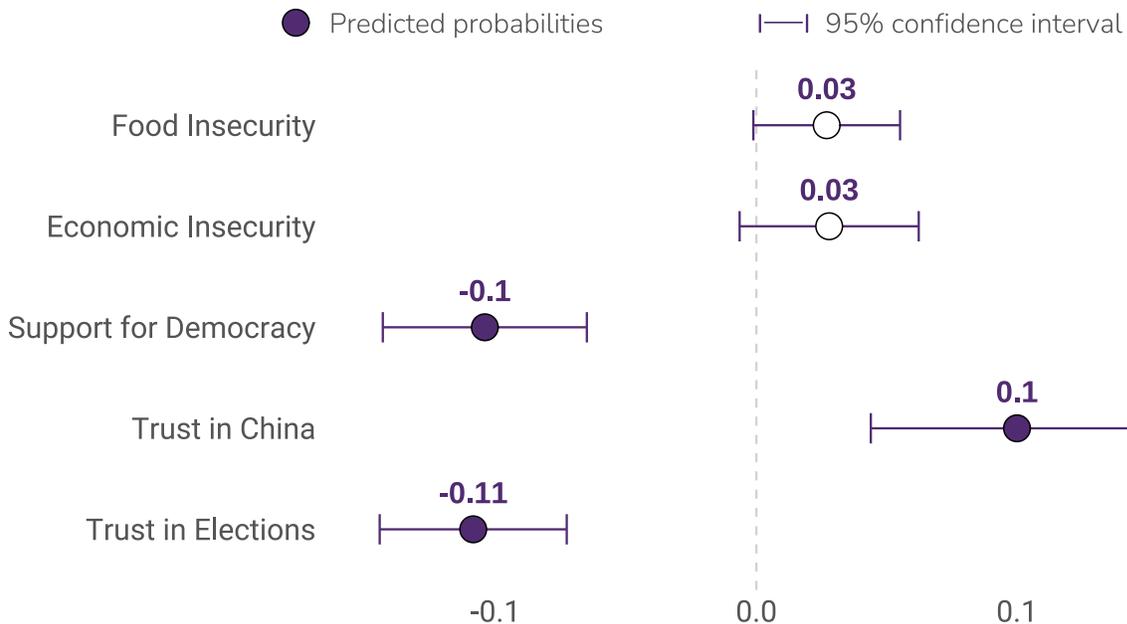
I also assess the relevance of political opinions and personal experiences, given that scholarship suggests that ideological beliefs and firsthand experience both influence individuals' attitudes about policy.²⁰ The first political predictor that I test is generalized support for democracy.²¹ I aim to understand whether people's support for democratic principles in the abstract translates to support for elections.

The second political predictor that I test is trust in China.²² China is one of the most economically and politically prominent nondemocratic regimes on the world stage.²³ Li (2015) explains that China's developmental model emphasizes dramatic increases in living standards and economic growth while limiting freedom of expression and avenues of representative democracy, mirroring the trade-off posed in the question.²⁴ China's engagement with the LAC region includes direct foreign investment, the selling of commodities, and targeted political influence.²⁵ Although it is impossible to know respondents' reasoning for answering that they trust or do not trust China—such as whether they associate the Chinese government with economic policies or autocratic principles—this predictor can be a starting point for analyzing variation in peoples' openness to alternative forms of government. I predict that people who believe that democracy is the best form of government despite its flaws will be less willing to trade away elections, while people who trust China will be more willing to trade away elections.

To test the influence of personal experience, I consider food insecurity and economic insecurity.²⁶ I expect that if personal experience does have a significant effect on political opinion, individuals who have recently experienced food or economic insecurity will be more likely to trade elections for material guarantees, since this hypothetical policy change would deliver a much-needed benefit to their personal lives.

Figure 3 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis that includes the five additional variables while controlling for the same variables included in the analysis for Figure 2. As expected, individuals who trust elections in their country "a lot" are 11 percentage points less likely to be willing to trade elections for material guarantees than those who lack trust in elections. This is interesting because it shows that—even though there does not seem to be a clearcut connection between country-level measures of electoral integrity and overall views among the public (see the above discussion around Figure 1)—there is a connection at the individual level: those who are more distrustful of elections are more willing to trade them away.

Furthermore, the two other political attitude predictors are significant and have a similar effect size. Individuals who believe democracy is the best form of government are 10 percentage points less likely to be willing to trade away elections. Conversely, individuals who consider China "very trustworthy" are 10 percentage points more likely to be willing to trade off elections than those who considered China "not at all trustworthy."²⁷ Interestingly, and against expectations, food insecurity and economic insecurity are not significantly correlated with willingness to trade elections.

Figure 3.**Political Views and Experiential Predictors of Willingness to Trade Elections for Economic Guarantees**

Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

LAPOP

Conclusion

Across the Americas, levels of willingness to trade elections for material guarantees vary significantly. Although no clear connection appears to exist between a country's actual frequency of election malpractice (as measured by the Freedom House) and the public's average willingness to trade elections, individuals' perception that elections are clean—as operationalized by their level of trust in elections—is negatively correlated with willingness to trade away elections. In brief, electoral integrity matters, at the level of individual perception, in explaining commitment to elections.

Of the demographic and socioeconomic factors considered in this report, age is the strongest predictor. Younger individuals are substantially more likely to be willing to trade off elections, which is in line with scholarship noted earlier. In the LAC region, young people may feel disconnected from past autocratic shortcomings but have first-hand experience observing issues faced under developing democratic regimes.²⁸

More analysis needs to be done to discern why gender is a significant predictor of willingness to trade away elections. Future research might consider analyzing women

respondents in subsets by marital or parental status. Since women in the region generally serve as the primary domestic caretakers,²⁹ they may be more likely to prioritize the acquisition of basic services such as food, water, housing, and sanitation over elections.³⁰ In a previous *Insights* report, women were found to be significantly less trusting of elections, possibly due to the “systematic underrepresentation of women in politics,” which could be another factor responsible for this result.³¹

I find that wealthier and more educated individuals are less likely to be willing to trade away elections. Interestingly, though, the experiential variables of food and economic insecurity are not significant predictors, suggesting that opinions on trading away elections are less influenced by short-term needs than broader dynamics around education and wealth. I also find that political opinions are significant predictors of people’s willingness to trade elections, with abstract support for democracy having a negative relationship and trust in China having a positive relationship. These results reveal the interconnected nature of people’s various political opinions.

More work on this topic remains to be done. In addition to deeper investigations into the gender effect discussed earlier, future research should consider the relevance of incumbent support. For example, Cantu and Hernández-Huerta (2021) argue that one of the strongest predictors of a person’s trust in an election is whether they voted for the winner.³² To that extent, whether voting for the winner of an election affects peoples’ willingness to hypothetically trade off elections for material guarantees merits further study.

Taken as a whole, the findings in this report emphasize the importance of ensuring election integrity, which is important on its own, but also for its spillover into citizens’ commitment to elections. Furthermore, this report suggests that commitment to elections is likely to be greater to the extent countries invest in robust civic education that informs citizens about past experiences with authoritarianism and strengthens support for democratic principles.

Notes

1. Pring and Vrushi 2019.
2. See, e.g., Norris 2014.
3. Fetterolf and Wilke 2021.
4. Of those who were asked the question, 936 responded “don’t know” and another 1,562 gave no response, for a total item non-response rate of 14.6%. This comparatively elevated non-response rate should be taken into consideration when interpreting findings from this report.
5. CHM1BN is part of a set of two questions. CHM1BN tests respondents’ willingness to trade off elections for material guarantees while the other, CHM2BN, tests respondents’ willingness to trade off freedom of speech for material guarantees. Both were asked for the first time in the 2021 round. CHM1BN is featured in Questionnaire A in Core A, where due to the dual split-design structure of the questionnaire it was asked to about a quarter of all respondents.
6. All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: 2021 v.1.2.
7. Ecuador, Jamaica, Guyana, Costa Rica, Brazil, Canada, and Panama; apart from Guyana, all of these countries ranked 4/4 in the Electoral Process sections of their respective Freedom House country narrative reports (Aaron et al. 2022).
8. Argentina, Uruguay, United States; all of these countries ranked 4/4 in the Electoral Process sections of their respective Freedom House country narrative reports (Aaron et al. 2022).
9. Aaron et al. 2022.
10. The Organization of American States (OAS) has observed unclean election practices in Guatemala such as ballot burning, voter intimidation and violence (Aaron et al. 2022). Illegal campaign financing, notably by criminal organizations, also occurs (Congressional Research Service 2019).
11. Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega, who was reelected in 2021, has often engaged in the coercion of voters and arbitrary arrests of opposition candidates (Tucker 2021). The Supreme Court has been accused of manipulating election results (Stuenkel 2021).
12. Collins et al. 2021; the authors focus on millennials, who they define as born between 1981 and 1996.
13. Seligson 2007; Collins et al. 2021.
14. Campbell 2009.
15. Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Shleifer 200; Gillis and Perrin 2019.
16. Meyer 1977.

17. The demographic variables were coded as follows: EDAD (categorical variable created from sorted responses to Q2: How old are you?): coded from youngest to oldest with the categories of <=25 (0), 26-35 (0.2), 36-45 (0.4), 46-55 (0.6), 56-65 (0.8), and 66+ (1); WEALTH (categorical variable sorting wealth into five quantiles with 1 as least wealthy and 5 as most wealthy, using a series of questions R3-R27 about whether possessions such as a refrigerator, landline/residential telephone, washing machine, microwave oven, computer/laptop/tablet/iPad, broadband Internet, home internet, flat panel TV, or Cable/satellite television service are present in a respondent's home): coded as 1 (0), 2 (0.25), 3 (0.5), 4 (0.75), 5 (1); EDR (responses to What is the highest level of education you have reached?): coded as None (0) and Primary (incomplete or complete) (0), Secondary (incomplete or complete) (0.5) Tertiary or University or higher (incomplete or complete) (1); GENDER (categorical variable created from responses to Q1TB: For statistical purposes, could you please tell me what your gender is? (with female and other coded jointly into one category): male (0) female/non-binary (1).
18. B47A (To what extent do you trust elections in this country? Using any number on the scale from 1, 'not at all' to 7, 'a lot'): rescaled to 0-1 from 'not at all' (0) to 'a lot' (1).
19. Agranov et al. 2018.
20. See Sears and Citrin 1985; Grafstein 2005; Egan and Mullin 2012; Collins et al. 2021. I note that some argue that ideological beliefs, shaped by childhood socialization or the acquisition of a left-right ideology, have a far stronger effect. Unfortunately, I am unable to test traditional liberal-conservative, or left-right, ideological stances because those questions were not included in the 2021 AmericasBarometer.
21. ING4 (Please tell me your opinion using a scale from 1, which means "strongly disagree" to 7, which means "strongly agree". You can use any number between 1 and 7. Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?): rescaled to 0-1 from 1 (0) to 7 (1).
22. MIL10A (The government of China. In your opinion, is it very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy, or not at all trustworthy, or do you not have an opinion?): reversed and rescaled to 0-1 from "Not at all trustworthy" (0) to "Very trustworthy" (1). The responses "Don't know/No opinion" and "No response" were included and coded 0.5 to represent a neutral opinion on China's trustworthiness; see footnote 26 for more detail.
23. Kaiser 2019.
24. Li 2015.
25. Nugent and Campbell 2021.
26. The experiential variables were coded as follows: FS2 (In the past three months, because of a lack of money or other resources, did your household ever run out of food?): coded as No (0) and Yes (1); IDIO2 (Do you think that your current economic situation is better, the same or worse than it was twelve months ago?): coded as Better (0) Same (0.5) and Worse (1).
27. One aspect of the data that is important to note is that a high number of respondents did not give substantive answers to the trust in China question. Specifically, for the survey as a whole, 15,170 answered "don't know" to MIL10A and 581 participants had no response. In order to ensure that the number of observations would not be decreased significantly for the other variables in Figure 3, I recoded MIL10A to include .a and .b as 2.5, later rescaled into 0.5, to represent a neutral opinion. An additional 3,701 cases were coded simply as ".", or missing, and were dropped from the analysis.

28. Collins et al. 2021.
29. Ibararán et al. 2020; Valdés 2015.
30. UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2021.
31. Layton 2010.
32. Cantú and Hernández-Huerta 2021.

References

Aaron, Elisha, Matthew Barak, Alexandra Dent, Cathryn Grothe, David Meijer, Shannon O'Toole, Alessandra Restifo, Tyler Roylance, Lora Uhlig, Manisha Vepa. 2022. "Freedom in the World 2022." *Freedom House*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>

Aragnov, Marina, Jacob K. Goeree, Julian Romero, and Leeat Yari. 2018. "What Makes Voters Turn Out: The Effects of Polls and Beliefs." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 16(3): 825–856.

"Basic services." UNESCO Institute for Statistics. <http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/basic-services>

Campbell, David. 2009. "Civic Engagement and Education: An Empirical Test of the Sorting Model." *American Journal of Political Science* 53(4): 771-786.

Cantú, Francisco and Victor Hernández-Huerta. 2021. "Public Distrust in Disputed Elections: Evidence from Latin America." *British Journal of Political Science* 1-8.

Collins, Robert, David R. Mandel, and Sarah S. Schywiola. 2021. "Political Identity Over Personal Impact: Early U.S. Reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Frontiers in Psychology*.

Collins, Rosie, Roberto Stefan Foa, Andrew Klassen, Michael Slade, Alex Rand. 2020. "Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?" Centre for the Future of Democracy. <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/>

Egan, Patrick J. and Megan Mullin. 2012. "Turning Personal Experience into Political Attitudes: The Effect of Local Weather on Americans' Perceptions about Global Warming." *The Journal of Politics* 74(3).

Fetterolf, Janell, Richard Wike. December 7, 2021. "Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety." Pew Research Center.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety/>

Gillis, Alanna, Andrew J. Perrin. 2019. "How College Makes Citizens: Higher Education Experiences and Political Engagement." *Socius*.

Glaeser, Edward L., Giacomo A. M. Ponzetto, Andrei Shleifer. 2007. "Why does democracy need education?" *Journal of Economic Growth* 12: 77-99.

Grafstein, Robert. 2005. "The Impact of Employment Status on Voting Behavior." *The Journal of Politics* 67(3): 804-824.

"Guatemala: Corruption, Uncertainty Mar August 2019 Elections." July 5, 2019. Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11249>

Ibarrarán, Pablo, Gillinda M. James, Diana Londoño, María Laura Oliveri, Ho June Rhee, Marco Stampini. 2020. "Working Less to Take Care of Parents?: Labor Market Effects of Family Long-Term Care in Latin America." Inter-American Development Bank.

Kaiser, Karl. February 6, 2019. "China's Role in World Affairs: How it Matters." Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center.

<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/chinas-role-world-affairs-how-it-matters>

Layton, Matthew L. 2010. "Trust in Elections." *AmericasBarometer Insights: 2010* (No. 37). LAPOP Lab. <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0837en.pdf>

Li, He. 2015. "The Chinese Model of Development and Its Implications." *World Journal of Social Science Research* 2(2): 128-138.

Meyer, John W. 1977. "The Effects of Education as an Institution." *American Journal of Sociology* 83(1).

Norris, Pippa. 2014. *Why Election Integrity Matters*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Nugent, Ciara and Charlie Campbell. "The U.S. and China Are Battling for Influence in Latin America, and the Pandemic Has Raised the Stakes." *TIME*.

<https://time.com/5936037/us-china-latin-america-influence/>

Pring, Coralie, Jon Vrush. 2019. "Global Corruption Barometer Latin America & The Caribbean 2019." Transparency International.

<https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb/latin-america/latin-america-and-the-caribbean-x-edition-2019>

Sears, David O., and Jack Citrin. 1985. *Tax Revolt: Something for Nothing in California*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Seligson, Mitchell A. 2007. "The Democracy Barometers (part I): The rise of populism and the left in Latin America." *Journal of Democracy* 18(3): 81-95.

Stuenkel, Oliver. November 8, 2021. "Nicaragua's Farcical Election Marks Consolidation of Ortega's Autocracy." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/08/nicaragua-s-farcical-election-marks-consolidation-of-ortega-s-autocracy-pub-85733>

Tucker, Duncan. 2021. "Nicaragua: Announcement of Ortega's re-election augurs a terrible new cycle for human rights." Amnesty International.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/11/nicaragua-announcement-of-ortegas-re-election-augurs-a-terrible-new-cycle-for-human-rights/>

Valdés, René M. 2015. "Spotlight on Women's Care-work in Latin America." United Nations Development Programme.

<https://hdr.undp.org/en/content/spotlight-women%E2%80%99s-care-work-latin-america>



Katherine Oung (katherine.oung@vanderbilt.edu) is a second-year undergraduate student at Vanderbilt University. They intend to major in Political Science and minor in Data Science and Chinese.

This report was edited by Elizabeth Zechmeister and Laura Sellers. This report was translated by Margarita Corral and J. Daniel Montalvo. This report was audited by Valerie Schweizer-Robinson. Formatting, production, copy editing, graphics, and report distribution were handled by Mariana Rodríguez and Laura Sellers. Our data and reports are available for free download on the project website. Please follow us on Twitter to stay in touch.

As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP Lab 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.

This *Insights* report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Vanderbilt University. The contents of this *Insights* report are the sole responsibility of its author and LAPOP and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government or any other supporting organization. LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys are supported predominantly by USAID and Vanderbilt University.

vanderbilt.edu/lapop 

@LAPOP_Lab 

lapop@vanderbilt.edu 

+1-615-322-4033 

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