

Insights Series #155

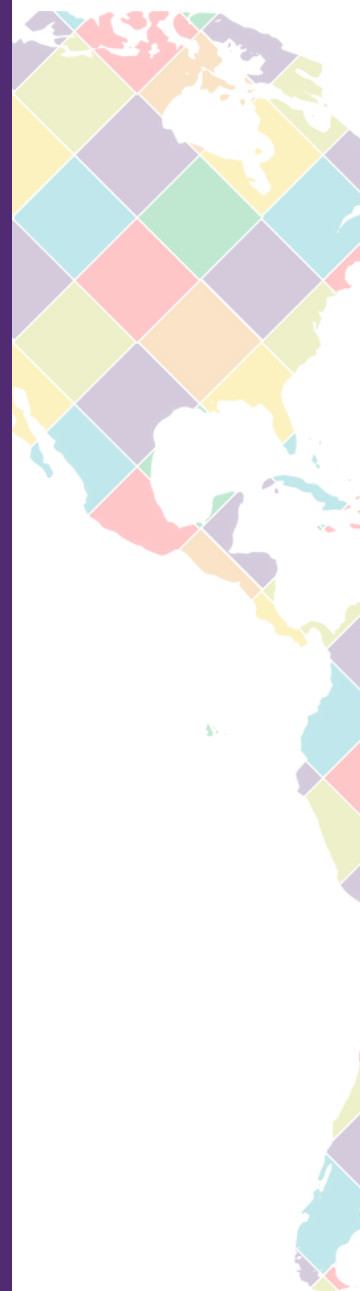
# Who Desires Authoritarian Leadership in the Latin America and Caribbean Region?

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## Key Findings:

- Higher levels of education are strong predictors of opposition to strong and unbounded leadership
- Economically secure respondents are more likely to express support for strong and unbounded leadership
- Respondents who feel safer in their neighborhoods are more likely to express support for strong and unbounded leadership



In recent times, outright coups are far less common than executive aggrandizement, a process by which an executive removes checks and balances without necessarily doing away with elections.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have demonstrated a relationship between the concentration of executive power and subsequent long-term democratic backsliding.<sup>2</sup> Azpuru and colleagues conceptualize leaders in the Americas who disregard democratic norms and institutions as “caudillos” or “strongmen”.<sup>3</sup> Other research suggests that popular support often determines whether executive aggrandizement efforts by these strongmen are successful.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is important to assess the degree to which the public expresses a preference for powerful leaders who override normal democratic processes in the spirit of delivering on promises.

This *Insights* report analyzes individuals' inclinations toward the idea of a strong and unbounded leader. The 2021 round of LAPOP's AmericasBarometer survey measured this concept by asking 62,837 respondents the following question:<sup>5</sup>

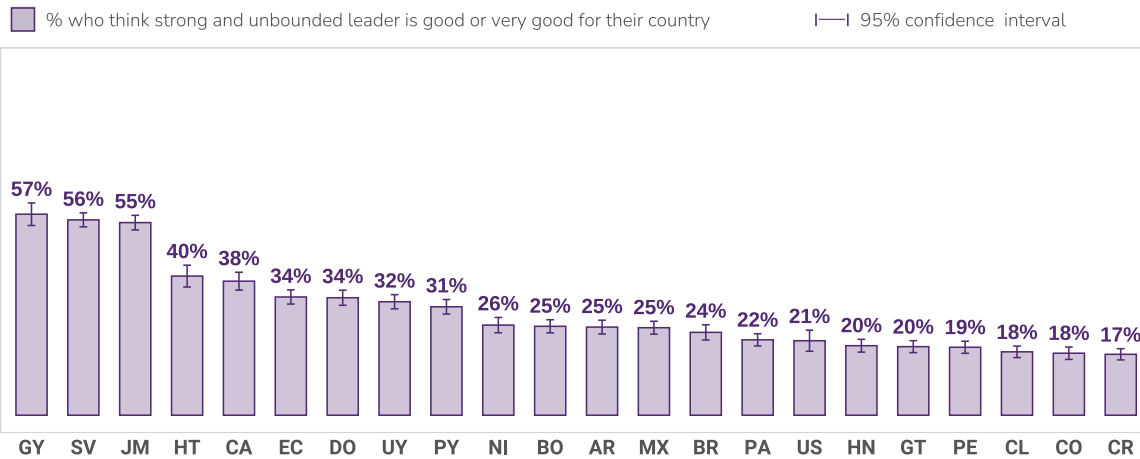
**CSES6N:** “Having a strong leader in the government, even if the leader bends the rules to get things done. Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad as a form of government for our country?”

## Support for Strong and Unbounded Leadership Varies across Countries

Figure 1 summarizes the percentage of respondents in 22 countries who report that a strong and unbounded leader is “good” or “very good” for their country. Guyana has the highest percentage of individuals who support this type of leadership (57.5%), while Costa Rica (17.4%) has the lowest. Notably, Guyana, El Salvador, and Jamaica form a cluster to the right, all overlapping significantly within their respective margins of error, and clearly separated from other country results. It is interesting to see Canada ranked in the upper third of countries despite being one of the most democratic countries in the region, as per V-Dem's rankings.<sup>6</sup> Also notable is a cluster of “moderately high-scorers”: six countries have 30-40% approving of a strong unbounded executive. In the remaining thirteen countries, only 17%-26% hold this attitude.

**Figure 1.**

**Support for Strong and Unbounded Leadership, by Country**



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



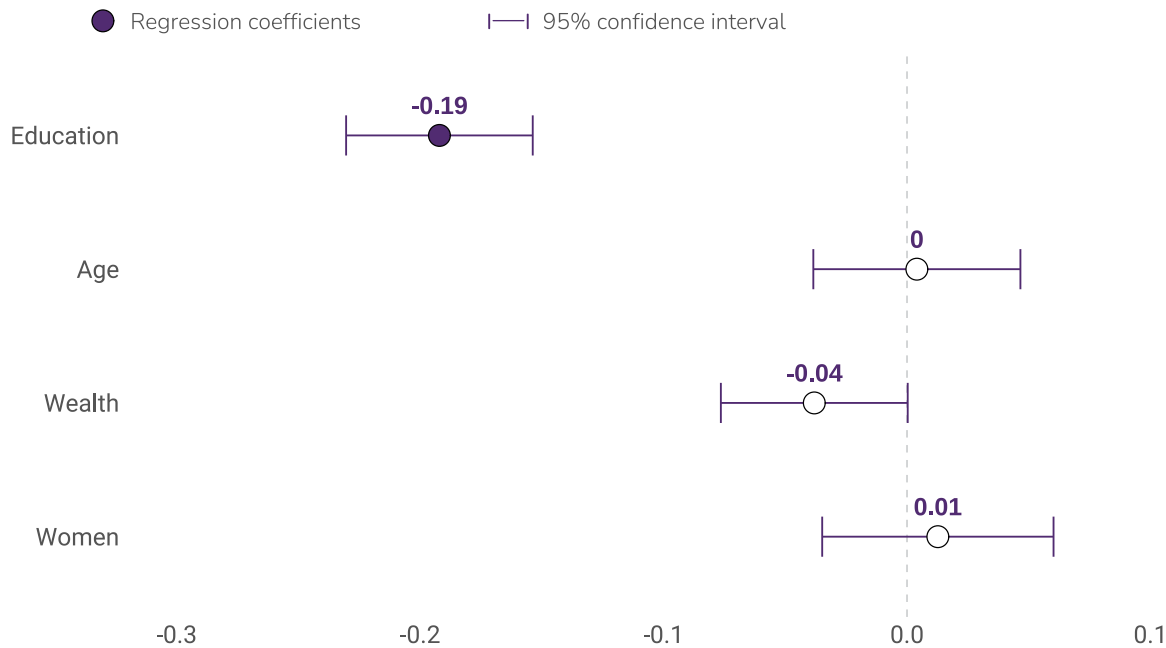
**Those with Higher Levels of Education Are Less Likely to Support a Strong and Unbounded Executive**

To understand who is more likely to express support for strong and unbounded leadership, I use an OLS regression analysis. For independent variables, I consider age, wealth, education, and gender.<sup>7</sup> These independent variables are coded to run from 0 to 1, while the dependent variable is kept on a 1-5 scale and coded so that higher values indicate more support.

Figure 2<sup>8</sup> shows that, on average, higher educational levels are significantly correlated with lower support for strong and unbounded rule. Specifically, a shift from the minimum level to the maximum level of education measured lowers the level of support for “strongman” rule by 0.19 points on the 5-point scale. In contrast, age, wealth (just barely), and gender are not significant predictors of this attitude.

**Figure 2.**

**Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Support for a Strong and Unbounded Leadership**



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



These results are consistent with previous analyses of AmericasBarometer data that also find a significant correlation between years of education and lower support for authoritarian-style rule.<sup>9</sup>One mechanism that scholars have offered to explain this type of connection is that education provides a degree of social status which helps mitigate the types of feelings of alienation that give rise to support for strong and unbounded leadership.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast with previous analyses of AmericasBarometer data,<sup>11</sup> this graph shows no significant correlation between support for strongman rule and age or wealth. This difference could be driven by the fact that the measure used for the analysis in Figure 2 is different from those used in prior analyses of AmericasBarometer data, in that it was asked for the first time in 2021. Further, some scholarship suggests that the role of a factor like wealth (and related cultural and economic marginalization) may vary across more and less developed democracies, and so future research might look for heterogeneity in the predicted effect of wealth across countries in the Americas.<sup>12</sup>

## The Importance of Threat Perception for Support for Strong and Unbounded Leadership

Scholars have noted the role of threat perception in explaining support for authoritarian leaders. Related, several of these studies conceptualize desiring submission to a strong leader as a key component of support for authoritarianism.<sup>13</sup> Feldman and Stenner (1997) conceptualize “threat perception” as the perception of both short-term risks to one’s well-being as well as general anxieties. Scholars have argued that increased perception of threat and uncertainty, both national and personal, causes people to seek order and stability in the form of an authoritarian government.<sup>14</sup> Some have found that this kind of threat response mainly or exclusively occurs among people who are predisposed to support authoritarian leaders in the first place.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, Singer (2018) proposes that instances of executive aggrandizement by incumbent elected officials often find support among those satisfied with the status quo, since those individuals will be more likely to approve of the current executive. For the purposes of this report, I assess the direct relationship between threat perception and support for strongman leaders, without examining the moderating effect of authoritarian predispositions. Namely, I will consider perceptions of threats to one’s personal security and economic well-being.

I expect that security threat, as measured by the perceived unsafety of an individual’s neighborhood,<sup>16</sup> will correlate with support for strong and unbounded leadership. Concern about crime can galvanize support for “strongmen” leaders, especially in developing democracies.<sup>17</sup> Some have found that authoritarian attitudes are more likely to emerge in countries with high crime rates.<sup>18</sup> These expectations are tempered by previous analyses of AmericasBarometer data, some of which have found no relationship between perceptions of neighborhood security threat and support for this type of leadership.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the relationship between perceived security threat and support for strong and unbounded leadership may vary significantly across national contexts, which is not accounted for in my analysis.<sup>20</sup>

I also expect that economic threat, as measured by negative perceptions of one’s economic situation compared to 12 months prior,<sup>21</sup> will be correlated with support for a strong leader who can bend the rules to get things done. Periods of economic threat are associated with the manifestation of authoritarian characteristics, including support for a strong and unbounded leadership.<sup>22</sup> These expectations are tempered by findings that those who report improving personal finances are more likely to voice support for an executive who bypasses the courts or legislature.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it may also be that only perceptions of *national* economic threat are more likely to prompt authoritarian manifestations.<sup>24</sup> In brief, with this analysis, I can test whether there is a direct relationship between perceptions of personal economic threat and desire for strong and unbounded leadership.

**Figure 3.**

**Security and Economic Threat Predictors of Support for Strong and Unbounded Leadership**



Figure 3 shows that contrary to conventional threat-leads-to-authoritarianism expectations, those who feel *less* threatened both in terms of neighborhood security and their personal economic situation are significantly *more* likely to report desiring a strong and unbounded leadership. This analysis builds on the model that produced Figure 2, by including all the same variables and adding in the measures of security and economic threat. This new model predicts that a shift from the minimum level to the maximum level of neighborhood security threat lowers the level of support for unbounded leaders by 0.45 points on the 5-point dependent variable scale. And, a shift from the least to the most negative evaluation of a respondent’s personal economic situation compared to 12 months prior lowers the level of support for unbounded leaders by 0.36 points on the 5-point scale.

Interestingly, prior analyses of data from the AmericasBarometer have also found this same negative relationship between economic threat and support for strong and unbounded leadership.<sup>25</sup> Singer (2018) argues that this is because endorsement of strong and unbounded leadership is linked to approval of the incumbent executive, which itself is linked to satisfaction with the status quo. Alternatively, Foa (2021) argues that in developing democracies, strong and unbounded leaders often find their base among economically ascendant people concerned about crime and corruption. To some degree this framework is supported by others’ findings that positive evaluations of the economy are negatively correlated with votes for “strongmen” in the United States, but positively correlated with votes for this type of leader in Ecuador and Nicaragua.<sup>26</sup> However, such a framework would also suggest that neighborhood security is negatively correlated with support for strongmen, yet Figure 3 shows the opposite.

Thus, the negative relationship between security threat and support for strong and unbounded leadership is surprising and worth additional investigation. It may be that the ways individual insecurity translates into support for strong and unbounded leadership varies across contexts; further, it may be the case that a result more consistent with theoretical expectations would emerge if the analysis focused on national security. Scholars have noted that perceptions of individual-level security can behave differently than perceptions of national-level security when it comes to predicting support for strong and unbounded leadership.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

This *Insights* report shows that those who are more economically secure and those who feel safer from crime are *more* supportive of strong leaders who can bend the rules to get things done. Of all the variables tested, neighborhood security is the *strongest* predictor of support for strongmen: I find that those reporting higher levels of neighborhood insecurity also report lower levels of support for strong and unbounded leadership, which is a finding that runs contrary to theoretical expectations.

Does threat, or do “better times”, lead individuals to support strong and unbounded leadership? From one theoretical perspective, threat induces authoritarian preferences as individuals strive to find order amid disorder<sup>28</sup>; from another perspective, satisfaction with certain elements of the status quo may boost tolerance for executives seizing more power.<sup>29</sup> The findings in this report offer evidence for the latter perspective.

That said, more research is needed to assess the ways that these dynamics vary across individuals and countries. With respect to the former, future analyses should consider the moderating effect of authoritarian predispositions on threat response, in line with previous research.<sup>30</sup> With respect to the latter, further inquiry about the relationship between authoritarianism and threat response would benefit by comparing results across different countries, given that several scholars note that the relationship between threat and authoritarian manifestations varies across national contexts.<sup>31</sup> Finally, should such a direct *negative* relationship between threat and support for strongman leaders prove robust upon further investigation, more theoretical work will need to be done to understand how higher levels of security threat and economic threat work to reduce support for strongmen.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, this *Insights* report also shows that higher levels of education are a strong predictor of opposition to strongman rule. This finding that higher levels of education predict opposition to strongmen is consistent with expectations derived from scholarship. However, this is a relationship that analysts should continue to observe: some scholars warn that, to the degree there is an increase in the privatization of education, schooling may become less able to generate citizens with respect for democracy and public institutions.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, while most scholars conceptualize strong and unbounded leadership (the type of leadership associated with populism) and democratic backsliding as going hand in hand (as this *Insights* report has done), others argue that a certain level of populism may serve as a corrective to democracies that have lost touch with the needs of their citizens.<sup>34</sup> Thus, another avenue for future research is to explore the relationship between endorsing a “strongman” leader and support for democracy as a regime type. In conclusion, this report provides a set of important findings regarding public support for strong and unbounded leadership, while also contributing to develop a research agenda for those who continue to advance discoveries on this topic.



## Notes

1. Bermeo (2016).
2. Pérez-Liñan, Schmidt, and Vairo (2019).
3. Azpuru (2011); Azpuru, Malone, Pereze (2017).
4. Guachalla et. al (2021).
5. The item non-response rate for this question is 7.5% (4,722 of the 62,837 respondents indicated "don't know" or did not answer the question). All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: 2021 v.1.2.
6. Alizada et. al (2021).
7. Age is a cohort variable, reflecting a respondent's placement into one of six age buckets. A movement from 0 to 1 in the age variable can be understood as movement from the youngest bucket to the oldest one. Wealth is measured based on a respondent's placement into one of five categories based on a factor analysis of household possessions. Movement from 0 to 1 in wealth can be understood as movement from the least wealthy category to the wealthiest one. Education is determined by the highest level of education a respondent has obtained, movement from 0 to 1 in education reflects a move from no education/primary education to post-secondary education. Gender is represented as a dichotomous measure with 0 being male and 1 being female/nonbinary. Figures 2 and 3 are based only on data from the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region; to focus on the LAC public, the U.S. and Canada are excluded from the analyses.
8. In Figure 2, the dots represent the change in predicted probability associated with each variable, and the bars represent the 95% confidence interval around that estimate. Country fixed effects are included as controls in the analysis, but excluded from the figure.
9. Cohen and Smith (2011); Azpuru (2011).
10. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck (2016).
11. Azpuru (2011).
12. Foa (2021).
13. Adorno (1950) cited in Sales (1972), Sales (1973), and Sales and Friend (1973). Sales uses Adorno's concept of the "F-Scale" to measure the relationship between threat perception and authoritarianism. Alternatively, see Altermeyer (1996) cited in Roccato, Vieno, and Russo (2014) for a discussion on Right-Wing Authoritarianism and authoritarian submission.
14. Sales and Friend (1973); Mirisola et. al (2014); Fromm (1941) cited in Feldman and Stenner (1997); and Peters (2020).
15. Feldman and Stenner (1997); Roccato, Vieno and Russo (2014); Russo, Roccato and Merlone (2020).
16. This independent variable was recoded and rescaled from 0 to 1 with 0 being "Very Safe" and 1 being "Very Unsafe". It is measured with following variable:  
**AOJ11.** Speaking of the neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?

17. Foa (2021).
18. Roccato, Vieno and Russo (2014).
19. See, e.g., Azpuru (2011).
20. Azpuru (2017).
21. This independent variable was recoded and rescaled from 0 to 1 with 0 being “Better” and 1 being “Worse”. It is measured with following variable:  
**IDIO2.** Do you think that your current economic situation is better, the same or worse than it was twelve months ago?
22. Sales (1972); Sales (1973).
23. Singer (2018)
24. Feldman and Stenner (1997).
25. Azpuru (2011).
26. Azpuru (2017).
27. Azpuru (2011) finds that while perceptions of neighborhood security threat are not correlated with support for strongmen, perceptions of national security threat are; Feldman and Stenner (1997) find a similar pattern when it comes to perceived economic threat: personal economic threat is not correlated, but perceived national threat is.
28. Sales and Friend (1973); Mirisola et. al (2014); Fromm (1941) cited in Feldman and Stenner (1997); and Peters (2020).
29. Foa (2021); Singer (2018).
30. Feldman and Stenner (1997); Roccato, Vieno, and Russo (2014).
31. Foa (2021); Öztürk (2020); Azpuru (2017).
32. Adorno (1950) and Rokeach (1960) cited in: Sales (1972), Sales (1973), Sales and Friend (1973), and Feldman and Stenner (1997); Fromm (1941) cited in: Feldman and Stenner (1997) and Peters (2020).
33. Hussain and Yunus (2021).
34. Hussain and Yunus (2021).

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