

Insights Series #159

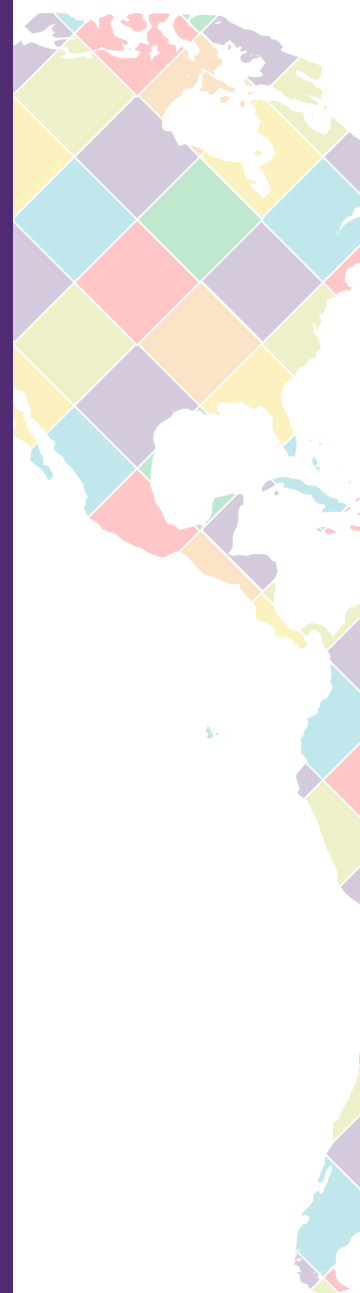
Who Perceives Well-Protected Basic Rights in the Americas?

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March 14, 2023

Key Findings:

- In the Latin America and Caribbean region, citizens in Uruguay report the most satisfaction with their country's protection of basic rights while citizens in Chile report the least
- Those with higher levels education and older individuals report more negative perceptions of basic rights protection
- Trust in local government is a particularly strong predictor of evaluations of basic rights protection: those more trusting of local governments are significantly more likely to believe the country has well-protected basic rights
- Executive job approval is a significant, positive predictor of perceptions that basic rights are protected
- Satisfaction with democracy is a strong, positive predictor of perceptions that basic rights are protected



In recent years, mass protests have occurred in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela—among other places across the Americas—to air grievances regarding “the political elite, lack of social mobility, infringement of human rights, and shortages of food, fuel and other necessities.”¹ Increasing levels of protests may have “consequences for democratic stability and the legitimacy of elected governments.”² Some theorize that “protests represent a warning of deeply rooted public dissatisfaction with traditional methods of civic engagement and political participation.”³ However, protests may also be seen as a healthy manifestation of democratic freedom and a normalization of demonstration as integral to politics.⁴ Either way, these types of protests put a spotlight on perceptions of deficiencies in the extent to which governments are meeting basic needs, such as basic rights protection, in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

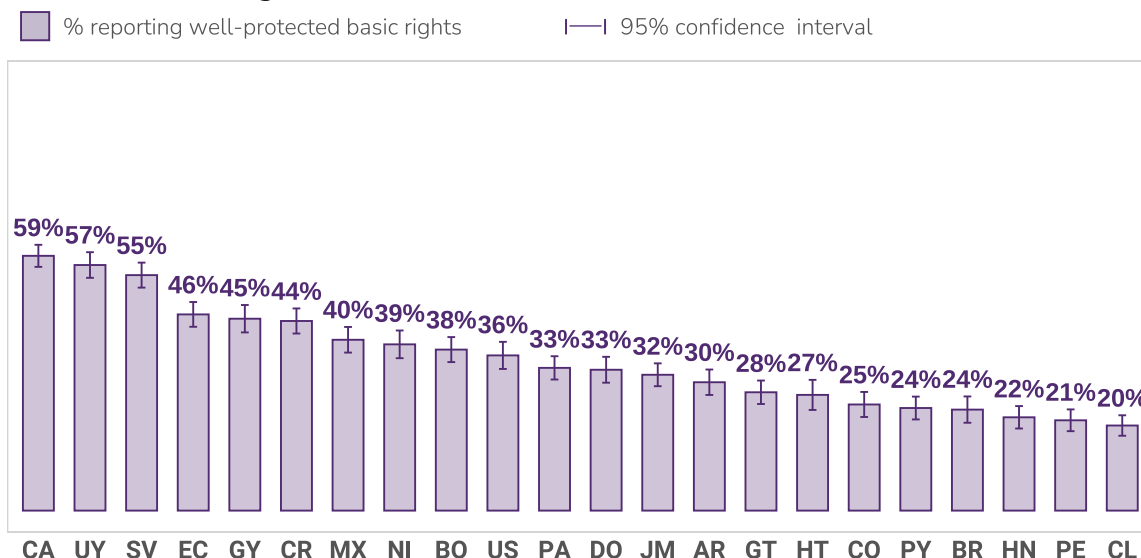
In this *Insights* report, I take stock of the public’s views on basic rights protection, and I examine predictors of views on this topic. A key focus in my analyses is views of the current government. I find that public opinion on the protection of basic rights is closely connected to satisfaction with the current system of government and the current regime. This makes sense, given that others have argued a connection between citizens’ perceptions of human rights and democratic support.⁵ This report analyzes 32,807 responses⁶ from 22 countries in the Americas to the following question:

B3: To what extent do you think that citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system of (country)?

The response categories for this measure range from 1-7, with 1 indicating those who strongly disagreed with basic rights being well-protected and 7 indicating those who strongly agreed with basic rights being well-protected. On average across the region, 20.5% believe rights are “not at all” protected, while only 9.5% of responses indicated “a lot” of protection of basic rights.

Figure 1.

Belief that Basic Rights Are Well-Protected



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



How Do Perceptions of Basic Rights Protection Vary across the Americas?

Figure 1 shows the percentage of the public in Canada, the United States, and 20 Latin America and Caribbean countries that believes basic rights are well-protected. This statistic is generated by grouping together those who respond on the affirmative side (5-7) on the 7-point scale. Percentages range from a low of 20% in Chile and a high of 59% in Canada. The public in Uruguay (57%) and El Salvador (55%) also report some of the highest perceptions of well-protected rights. On the other hand, in 12 of the 22 countries, less than a third of citizens believe basic rights are well-protected. Interestingly, belief in well-protected basic rights does not appear to correlate with a country’s regime type. Nicaragua (39%), an autocracy, reports similar percentages as the United States (36%). In fact, in analyses conducted, I find the Pearson’s correlation statistic between countries’ percentage of citizens reporting well-protected rights and V-Dem’s liberal democracy score is 0.1, an outcome that suggests very little correlation between regime type and satisfaction with the protection of basic rights.

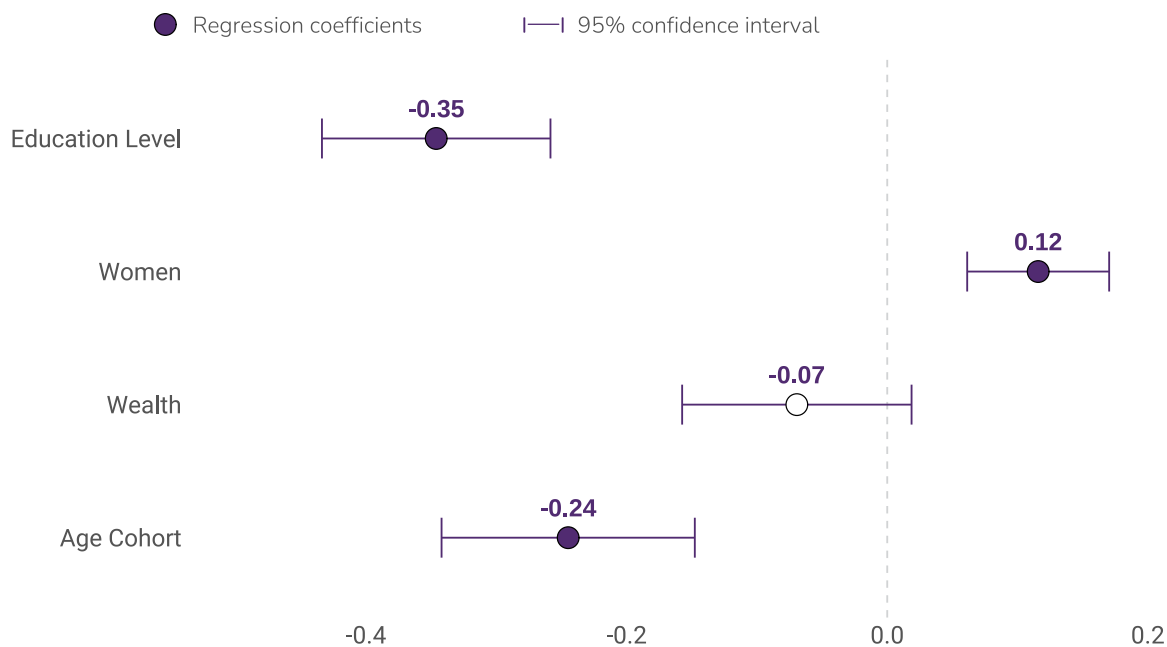
The More Educated, Older Individuals, and Men Are More Critical of the Protection of Basic Rights

To evaluate who believes basic rights are well-protected, I begin by determining the predicted effects of level of education,⁷ gender,⁸ wealth,⁹ and age.¹⁰ Figure 2 presents the estimated effects for these socioeconomic and demographic predictors on reported belief in well-protected rights, as predicted by an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model.¹¹ All four independent variables are recoded on a scale of 0-1, so that the results show the effect of moving from one end of any given socioeconomic or demographic variable to the other end on the original 7-point belief in well-protected rights scale.

The dots in Figure 2 represent the estimated coefficients for the independent variables. The bars that intersect the dots represent the 95% confidence interval around each estimate. Confidence intervals that intersect the dotted line signify that the coefficient for the variable is not statistically significant. These have unfilled white circles. Confidence intervals completely to the left or right of the dotted line signify statistically significant relationships. These have filled in solid circles.

Figure 2.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Perceiving Basic Rights to Be Well-Protected



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

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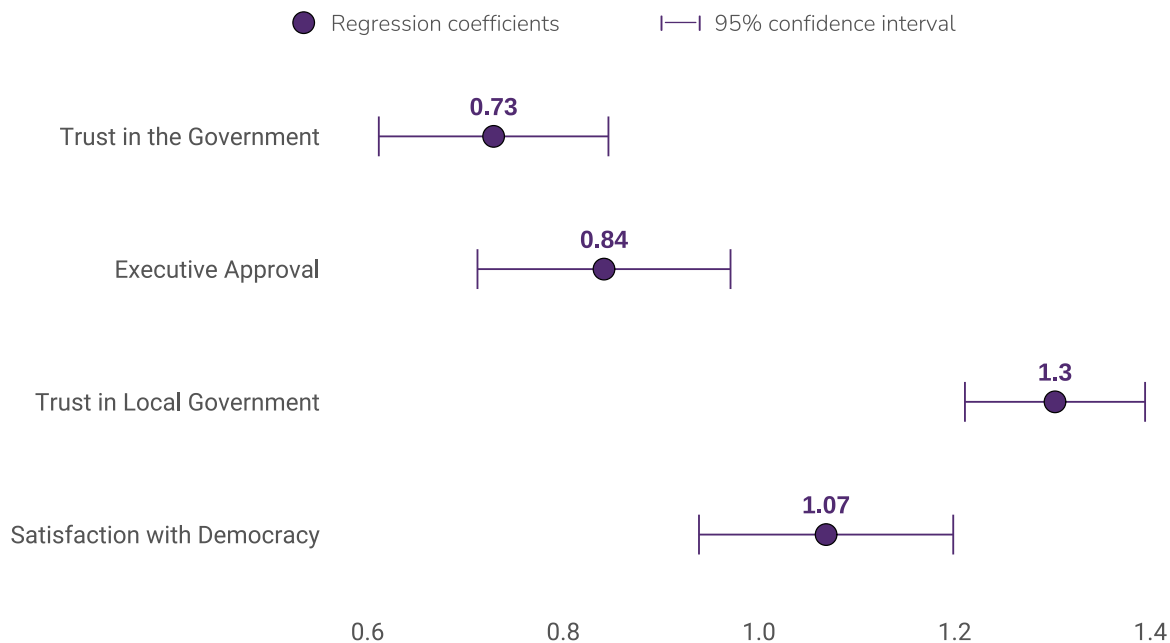
People who possess more education have lower perceptions of well-protected basic rights: the predicted effect of a change from minimum to maximum levels of education is -0.35 units on the 7-point scale. This result makes education the strongest sociodemographic predictor of belief in well-protected basic rights. Age also predicts lower levels of belief in well-protected basic rights: a shift from the youngest to the oldest cohort decreases belief in protected basic rights by 0.24 units.

Women have higher perceptions of basic rights being well-protected: self-identifying as a woman (or non-binary) is associated with an increase of 0.12 units on the seven-point scale. An explanation for this positive relationship between women and protection of basic rights warrants further research. Finally, wealth is not a significant predictor of perceptions of basic rights being well-protected.¹²

Government Trust and Satisfaction Are Linked to Basic Rights Perceptions

Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for variation in perceptions of well-protected rights at the individual level. In this report, I consider the following variables as predictors of views on well-protected rights: confidence the government is doing what is right,¹³ executive job approval,¹⁴ trust in the local government,¹⁵ and satisfaction with democracy.¹⁶ Using an OLS regression model, Figure 3 presents results for these additional variables, while controlling for the same variables as in the analysis for Figure 2.

My first expectation is that greater confidence in how the government is performing will correlate with a positive perception that basic rights are well-protected. One aspect of democratic governance is the protection of citizens' "minimum social and political guarantees recognized by the international community as necessary for a life of dignity in the contemporary world."¹⁷ Those who report high confidence in the government to do what is right have likely experienced comparatively strong or improved human rights conditions. This would lead those individuals with greater confidence in the government's performance to have more positive views of the protection of basic rights. I operationalize trust in government with a question that asks, "How much do you trust the national government to do what is right?"

Figure 3.**An Expanded Model Predicting Perceptions of Well-Protected Basic Rights**

Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

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The results in Figure 3 demonstrate a strong and significant positive correlation between confidence the government is doing what is right and perception of the protection of basic rights. There is a predicted increase of 0.73 units on the 7-point scale when confidence in the government to do what is right shifts from its minimum to its maximum value. If the public is not confident that the government will do what is right, this may translate into more negative attitudes towards individual rights policy outcomes.

My second expectation is that greater executive approval will correlate with a positive perception that basic rights are well-protected. Presidentialism characterizes a significant number of democracies in the Latin America and Caribbean region. After transitioning to democracy, many constitutions underwent further reforms to enhance the president's agenda-setting ability.¹⁸ Throughout the region, public actors, like the executive, have been responsible for key decision-making, even when these decisions were taken "outside of liberal democratic institutions."¹⁹ The executive, at least initially, comes to power with the will of the people in electoral democracies. To appease their base of support, the executive will enact changes that align with the wants of their supporters. If basic rights protection is among the wants of supporters, the executive is likely to enact changes to address these rights. But, as well, those who support the executive may simply evaluate conditions in the country in a better light. Either way, those who have strong approval for the executive are likely to believe that the protection of rights have been addressed or at least improved since the inauguration of the current executive. In support of this expectation, Figure 3 shows that a shift to maximum executive job approval predicts a 0.84 unit increase in perceptions of well-protected basic rights.²⁰

My third expectation is that greater trust in local government will correlate with a positive perception of well-protected basic rights. Although trust in public institutions may be an indicator of good governance in many scenarios, it is also a subjective measure of how well government is perceived to function in a way that is preferable to citizens.²¹ Local government officials and related authorities may be more familiar to citizens, and trust in them may lead them to have more positive associations with the way the system is functioning, including with respect to how well rights are protected.

In this analysis, trust in the local government is one of the strongest predictors of perceptions of well-protected rights. A maximal increase in trust in local government predicts a 1.30 unit increase in views of the protection of basic rights on the seven-point scale. I conclude that on average, local governance is strongly linked to individuals' perception of basic rights protection.

Finally, my fourth expectation is that people who are satisfied with how democracy works in their country will be more likely to believe that basic rights are well-protected. Scholars have suggested that satisfaction with the political system in their country may be higher among those who are less likely to experience discrimination by the government.²² Figure 3 shows that satisfaction with democracy is a significant, positive predictor of the perception of the protection of basic rights. There is a predicted increase of 1.07 units on the 7-point scale when moving from the minimum to the maximum level of satisfaction with democracy.

Discussion

This *Insights* report shows that trust in local governments and satisfaction with the way democracy works in a country are the strongest predictors of an individual's likelihood of perceiving well-protected basic rights. Additionally, trust in the national government and executive job approval are also significant predictors of an individual's perceptions of rights protection. In short, there is a robust connection between different facets of individuals' trust and satisfaction with their political system, on the one hand, and perceptions of basic rights protection, on the other hand.

I also find that level of education and age are negative predictors of perceiving well-protected basic rights: those who are more educated and older are more likely to respond that basic rights are not well-protected. Meanwhile, wealth was not a significant predictor, unless education is removed from the model (absent education, wealth has a negative predicted effect), which suggests that the relevance of wealth for perceptions of basic rights protection is carried through by education.

Women and those who identify as non-binary are more likely to believe that basic rights are well-protected. This finding may surprise readers because historically women have experienced significant amounts of violence and discrimination. In fact, in a previous *Insights* report, women were found to be more likely to believe their country has insufficient human rights protection.²³ The contradiction between these two findings raises the question of what citizens believe to be basic rights and what they perceive to be human rights. Which rights do they feel entitled to be guaranteed by the government? Further research on this topic is important to reconcile these different findings. That research also might explain why V-Dem's liberal democracy score has little to no correlation with the percentage of citizens satisfied with basic rights protection in their country. It seems reasonable to believe that citizens' conception of the meaning of "basic rights" differs across countries and sociodemographic statuses, something that future research should explore.

In supplemental analysis, I also tested job approval for the highest court as an independent variable.²⁴ This question was asked only in 8 countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region.²⁵ Previous research has found a strong relationship found between trust in courts and human rights perceptions.²⁶ Using an OLS regression model, including this additional variable with the same sociodemographic variables in Figure 2, I find that job approval for the highest court has a predicted positive effect of 1.94 units when shifting from its minimum to maximum value (see Figure 4 in the Appendix). Gender, wealth, and age become insignificant predictors. Education also has a diminished predicted negative effect compared to its effect in Figure 2. In short, attitudes toward the highest court are highly correlated with views of basic rights protection. Future research should consider whether that finding extends across all countries in the region.

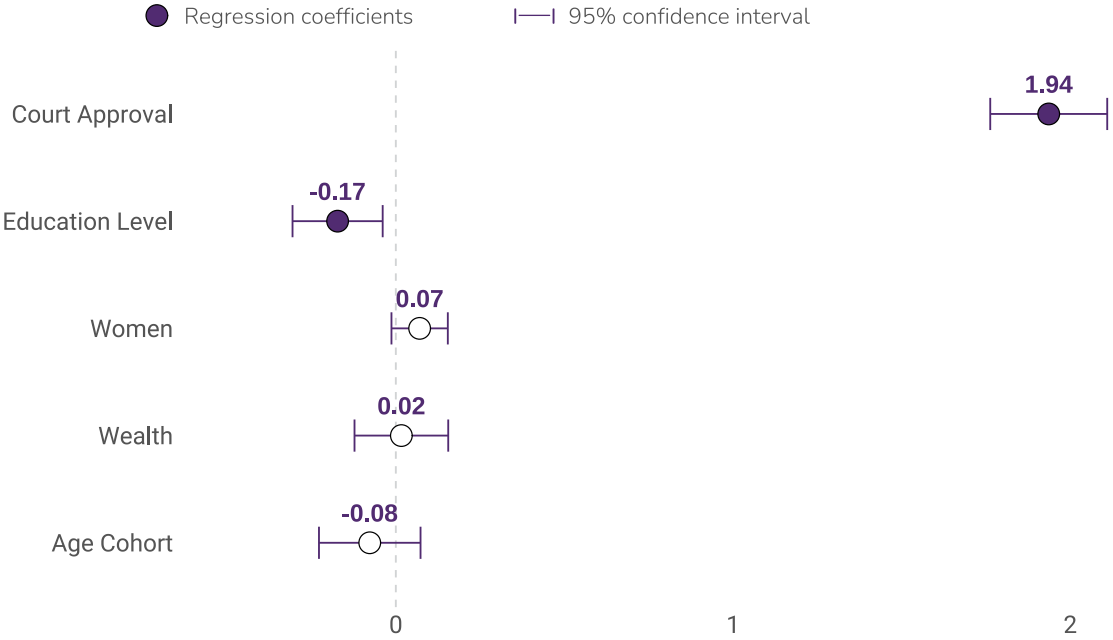
Conclusion

I conclude this report by emphasizing the strong connection between trust in local and national government, satisfaction with democracy, and executive job approval, on the one hand, and assessments of basic rights protections, on the other hand. I suggest that policymakers who are interested in improving perceptions of basic rights protection in a country continue to focus their efforts on improving not just national, but also local governance structures. For policymakers to know which aspects of local governance citizens value, further research must be devoted to individuals' definition of basic rights. At the maximum, improving protections for these specific rights may help foster satisfaction with and, by extension, support for democracy as a form of government.

Appendix

Figure 4.

Approval of Highest Courts as a Predictor of Perceiving Well-Protected Basic Rights



Source: AmericasBarometer , 2021



Notes

1. Nikki Rojas, "Harvard Panel Discusses Protests across Latin America," Harvard Gazette (Harvard Gazette, November 8, 2021), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/11/harvard-panel-discusses-protests-across-latin-america/>.
2. Norris, Pippa, Stefaan Walgrave, and Peter Van Aelst. "Does protest signify disaffection?" in *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social Capital, Institutions and Politics* (2006): 302.
3. Crozier, Huntington, and Waknuki (1975) as cited in Norris et al. (2006, 302).
4. Mosely and Moreno (2010). Norris et al. (2006).
5. Anderson et al. (2005, 772). I assume that citizens' conception of human rights overlaps with their conception of basic rights.
6. An additional 1,059 individuals were asked the question but responded with "don't know" or gave no response, for an item non-response rate of 3.1%. All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: 2021 v.1.2_w.
7. Education (**EDR**) is categorical by the highest level of education obtained by the individual. Thus, the lowest category is no or primary education while the highest is post-secondary education.
8. Gender (**GENDER**) is a dichotomous measure. To avoid excluding non-binary respondents from the analysis, I recode the gender variable to include non-binary respondents with women as 1 and men as 0.
9. Wealth (**WEALTH**) is measured based on a factor analysis of household possessions, such as a TV, refrigerator, etc. It is coded into 5 quantiles, running from least wealthy to most wealthy. Because the wealth module questions are not asked in the US and Canadian surveys, those countries are excluded from the analyses for Figures 2 and 3.
10. Age (**EDAD**) is a six-category cohort measure, running from the youngest category to the oldest category.
11. Country fixed effects are included in the model but not shown.
12. When running the OLS regression without level of education as an independent variable, wealth has a predicted effect of -0.20 when shifting from the lowest category of wealth to the highest category.
13. Confidence in the government (**ANESTG**) was measured by asking "How much do you trust the national government to do what is right?" Respondents could choose 1 (A lot), 2 (Somewhat), 3 (A little), or 4 (Not at all). This was recoded from 0 to 1, and the answer scale was reversed. So, movement from 0 to 1 means moving from no confidence in the government to do what is right to a lot of confidence in the government to do what is right.
14. Executive job approval (**M1**) was measured by asking "Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President (insert name of current president)? Individuals were asked to choose a number between 1, very good, and 5, very bad. This was recoded from 0 to 1, and the answer scale was reversed. So, movement from 0 to 1 means moving from believing the President is performing very badly to the president is performing very well.

15. Trust in the local government (**B32**) was measured by asking “To what extent do you trust the local or municipal government?” Respondents were asked to choose a number between 1, not at all, to 7, a lot. This was recoded from 0 to 1 so movement from 0 to 1 means moving from no trust in the local government to a lot of trust in the local government.
16. Satisfaction with democracy (**PN4**) was measured by asking “In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in (insert country)?” Responses were placed on a 4-point scale from 1, very satisfied, to 4, very dissatisfied. This was recoded from 0 to 1, and the answer scale was reversed. Movement from 0 to 1 means moving from very dissatisfied with how democracy works in your country to very satisfied with how it works.
17. Donnelly (1998, 9) as cited in Anderson et al. (2005).
18. Singh and Carlin (2015, 4).
19. Bonner (2005, 56).
20. Although the predictors from Figure 2 are hidden for the purpose of streamlining the graph, there is a significant decrease in the predicted effect of education level on perceptions of the protection of basic rights when “Executive job approval” is factored into the model. A shift from the lowest amount of education to the highest level of education predicts a decrease of 0.19 units. Previously, in Figure 2, level of education had a predicted effect of -0.35 units.
21. Bouckaert and van de Walle (2003, 336).
22. Carlson and Listhuag (2007, 437).
23. Gao et al. (2019).
24. Job approval for the highest court (**CTSPECIFIC1**) was measured by asking “And even if you don’t know much about it, how would you evaluate the way the Supreme Court/Constitutional Tribunal is doing its job?” Responses were placed on a 4- point scale from 1, very good, to 4, very bad. This was recoded from 0 to 1, and the answer scale was reversed. Movement from 0 to 1 means moving from very bad evaluations of the highest court to very good evaluations of how it is performing.
25. Countries in which this question was asked are Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, and Paraguay.
26. Perry (2003).

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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 Eui Young Noh and Meg Frost. Formatting, production, copy editing, graphics, and report distribution were handled by Valerie Schweizer-Robinson 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.

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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.

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