

Insights Series #161

## Who Trusts Elections?

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### Key Findings:

- Less than half of the population trusts elections in most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean
- Older and wealthier people tend to trust elections more than younger and less wealthy people, respectively
- Individuals with higher levels of approval for the executive are more likely to trust electoral processes
- Satisfaction with democracy is positively associated with perceptions of electoral integrity
- Individuals who engage more often with the news tend to perceive higher levels of electoral integrity



In the past few years, the Americas have witnessed a number of public demonstrations calling into question the integrity of elections and policy proposals seeking to overhaul electoral systems. For example, in 2021, runner-up Keiko Fujimori's allegations of electoral fraud drove a series of protests in Peru. Additionally, in 2023, Brazilian rioters took over the Supreme Court, the presidential office, and Congress, claiming the presidential election was "stolen" from Jair Bolsonaro. Yet that same year, the Mexican Senate approved President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's electoral reform reducing the size and funding of the National Electoral Institute (INE) after having accused the organism of "allowing" electoral fraud,<sup>1</sup> which led to protests rejecting the proposal. Given the rhetoric on electoral integrity at the elite-level, it is important to understand the mass public's attitudes with respect to their elections."

When candidates refuse to accept electoral results, their supporters are more likely to distrust electoral processes.<sup>2</sup> The recent cases in which candidates and officeholders question the integrity of the electoral process by denying results and proposing legislation overhauling electoral processes stress the importance of citizens' attitudes toward their country's electoral process across the region. Low levels of trust in democratic and electoral institutions can have consequences such as lower turnout rates and civil unrest.<sup>3</sup>

This *Insights* report compares trust in elections across the region and analyzes sociodemographic and political factors predictive of this trust. This report uses responses from the 2021 AmericasBarometer, which measures trust in elections with the following question:<sup>4</sup>

**B47A:** To what extent do you trust elections in this country?

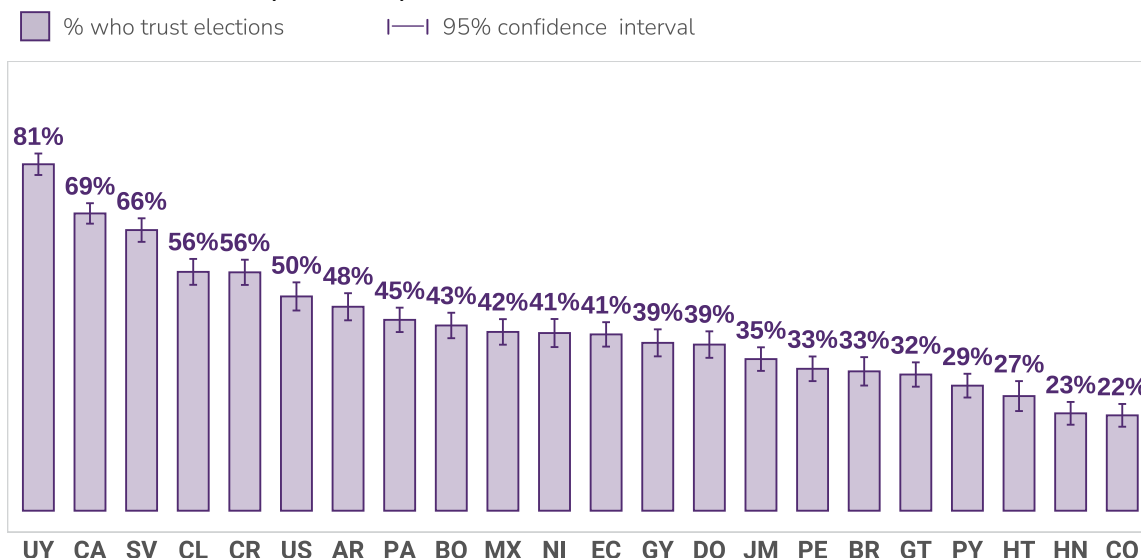
Individuals answered on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents "not at all" and 7 "a lot."

## In Most Countries, less than Half of The Population Trust Elections

Figure 1 shows the percent that trust elections across the 22 surveyed countries. While the question asks the level of trust on a scale from 1 to 7, the values in the graph represent the percentage of individuals who expressed trust by responding with values of 5 and above. Uruguay has the highest percentage of the public that trusts the electoral process in the region (81%), while Colombia has the lowest (22%). Notably, less than half of the population in all but six countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region trust the process. It is interesting to observe that El Salvador ranks as the country with the third largest share of trust in the region (66%) despite having the sixth lowest score among the sampled countries in V-Dem's Clean Elections Index.<sup>5</sup> This discrepancy indicates that other factors beyond the integrity of the electoral process shape a population's trust in elections.

Figure 1.

Trust in Elections, by Country



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



Previous scholarly work has shown that countries with higher levels of socioeconomic development, stronger democratic systems, and low incidences of corruption tend to have higher perceptions of electoral integrity, but even some established democracies have low levels of trust.<sup>6</sup> The remainder of this report moves beyond country-level considerations and analyzes what behaviors, attitudes, and experiences can predict this opinion at the individual level in Latin America and the Caribbean.

**Wealthier and Older Individuals Show Higher Levels of Trust in Elections**

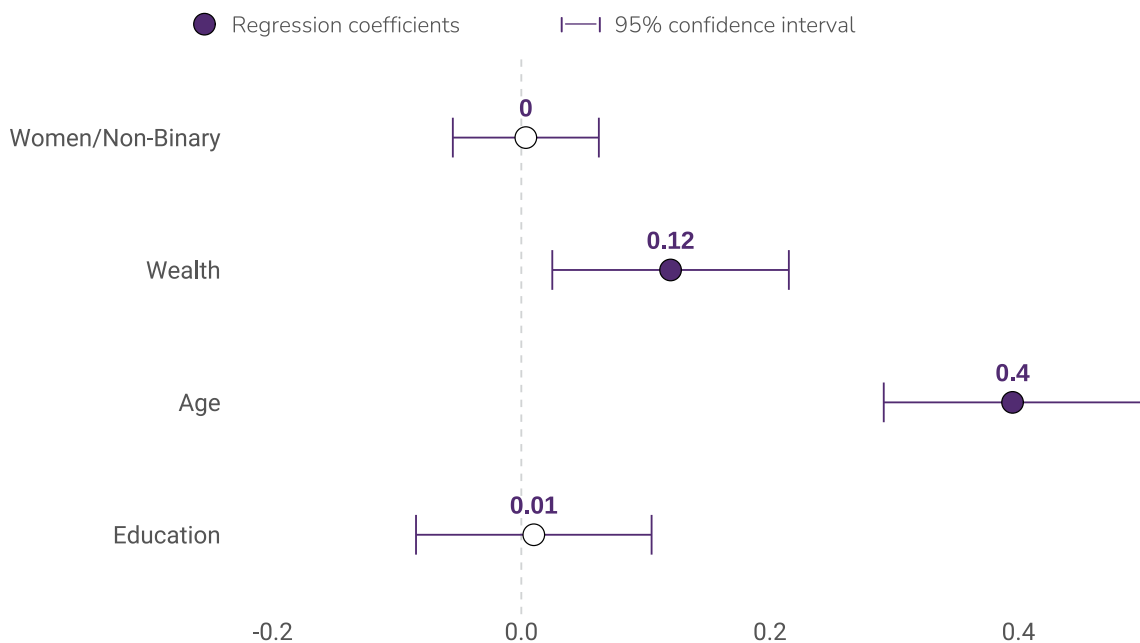
In this section, I analyze sociodemographic factors as predictors of trust in elections through an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model. The dependent variable measures trust in elections on a 1 (“Not at all”) to 7 (“A lot”), with higher values representing higher levels of trust. I use gender, wealth, age, and education as independent variables while controlling for country-fixed effects not shown in the figure.<sup>7</sup> Although Figure 1 included results for the United States and Canada, the following analyses will focus only on the LAC region.

Figure 2 shows that, out of the four predictors, age has the most substantial predicted effect on trust in elections. The average level difference between the eldest and youngest group cohorts is 0.4 units on the seven-point scale. This relationship is consistent with previous literature showing that older individuals tend to have higher levels of trust in democratic institutions as a whole and in elections.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, wealth is positively correlated with trust in elections with a coefficient of 0.12. This result follows expectations built upon previous research asserting that higher income and employment status are reliable predictors for positive perceptions of electoral integrity.<sup>9</sup> Neither education level nor gender had significant results. Previous literature indicates that women tend to have lower rates of trust in the electoral system and democratic institutions than their men counterparts, although some scholarship shows the opposite relationship without statistical significance.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, scholars have asserted that those with higher levels of education tend to hold higher perceptions of electoral integrity.<sup>11</sup> In this model, however, neither variable is a significant predictor.

**Figure 2.**

### Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Trust in Elections



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

**LAPOP**

## Trust in Elections is Associated with Executive Approval, Satisfaction with Democracy, and News Engagement

In this section, I analyze individual-level attitudes and political engagement indicators to predict the perceived level of electoral integrity using OLS. I include executive's performance approval level, political knowledge, satisfaction with democracy, and engagement with the news as independent variables.<sup>12</sup> Figure 3 shows the coefficient values for the mentioned variables controlling for the socioeconomic and demographic variables in Figure 2 and country-fixed effects.

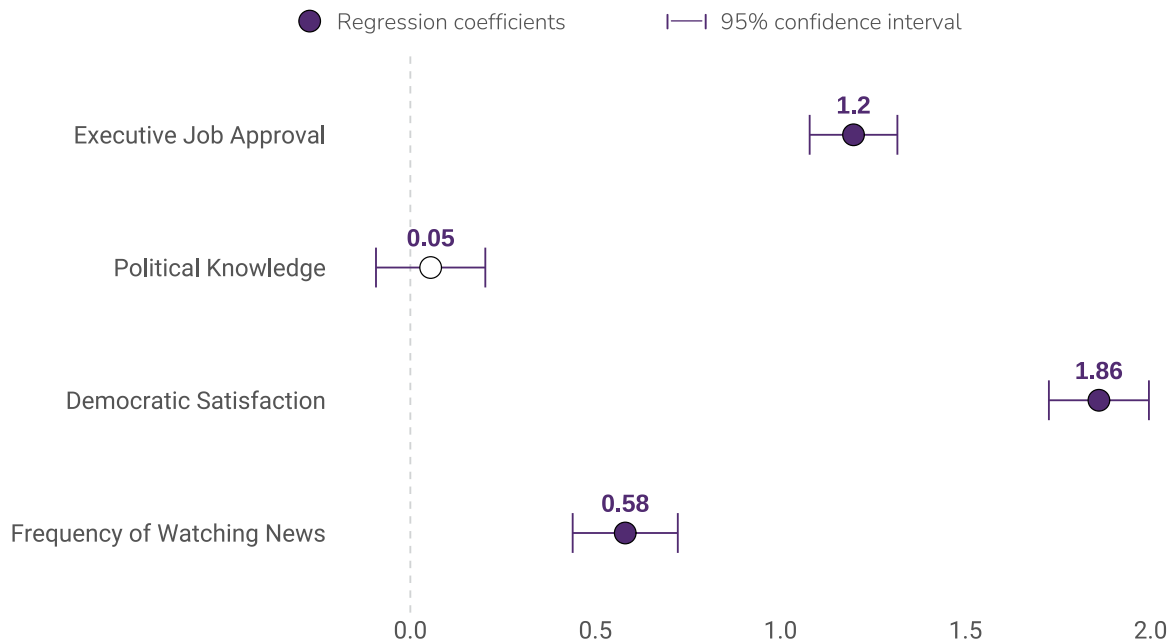
Among the four variables studied, an individual's level of satisfaction with democracy is the strongest predictor of trust in the electoral process. Those who are most satisfied with how democracy works in their country tend to have a level of trust in elections 1.86 units higher on the seven-point scale than those who are least satisfied with the system. Scholars have found that individuals tend to have lower levels of democratic satisfaction in contexts with electoral irregularities, and individuals skeptical of the integrity of the electoral process tend to show lower levels of satisfaction with democracy.<sup>13</sup> Individuals less satisfied with democracy also tend to perceive that the rich buy the elections at higher rates than those who report higher satisfaction.<sup>14</sup> As electoral processes are processes inherent to democracy, it is reasonable to expect that citizens who are skeptical of the electoral system's integrity will show lower levels of satisfaction and vice-versa.<sup>15</sup>

Previous research has shown that election winners are likely to perceive higher levels of electoral integrity than losers.<sup>16</sup> While winners are usually regarded as voters who cast their ballot for the incumbent, this effect also occurs among those who support or hold positive views of the incumbent during their performance.<sup>17</sup> Results in Figure 3 show that individuals who describe the executive's performance as "very good" are expected to have a level of trust in elections about 1.2 units higher than those who describe it as "very bad."

While there is no statistically significant relationship between the dependent variable and political knowledge, there is a significant positive correlation with news engagement. As the news provides a channel for citizens to gain more information on political events and increase engagement with public affairs, individuals' involvement with the news might affect the views they hold toward politics and other institutions.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have previously shown that higher engagement with the news is positively associated with political participation and attitudes toward democratic values, including trust in democratic institutions like the government.<sup>19</sup> Figure 3 results show that individuals who watch the news on a daily basis tend to have a trust level higher by 0.58 units than those who never do.

**Figure 3.**

**Political Views and Experiential Predictors of Trust in Elections**



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



**Conclusion**

This *Insights* report shows that less than half of the population in most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean trust electoral processes in their countries. Results from OLS regression analyses indicate that an individual’s democratic satisfaction level and executive performance ratings are among the strongest predictors of this trust. I also found that, on average, individuals that engage more often with the news, are wealthier, and are older have higher perceptions of electoral integrity.

I infer from these results that, amidst skepticism of electoral integrity and allegations of fraud, poorer and younger individuals may be more prone to believe in these types of claims. The same tendency may hold for those who are less satisfied with democracy, hold more negative views of the executive's performance, and have a lower engagement with the news. As the level of trust in elections among individuals with these traits tends to generally be lower, they may have higher acceptance and support for doubt-casting rhetoric as they feed and strengthen their previously conceived notions of the electoral system and its legitimacy. Further research is needed to assess the robustness of a direct relationship between these variables and trust in fraud allegations, but this report provides results that allow for such inference. Another topic that calls for further research is the extent to which the relationship between executive performance ratings and trust in elections holds. While voters who give higher ratings to the "winner" tend to have higher levels of trust, will this relationship remain among supporters of an incumbent engaging in rhetoric spreading doubts about the electoral system? Above all, this report underscores the cruciality recognized by other scholars to look beyond the strength of an electoral system and focus on socioeconomic, attitudinal, and behavioral traits in individuals when studying and proposing policies to strengthen the legitimacy of elections at both aggregate and individual levels.

## Notes

1. CNN: <https://cnnspanol.cnn.com/2023/02/28/criticas-reforma-ine-presidente-mexico-amlo-acusa-manifestantes-vinculos-narcotrafico-trax/>.
2. Hernández-Huerta and Cantú 2021.
3. Birch 2010.
4. The question was asked to half the sample, using a split-sample questionnaire format. Of those who were asked the question, 1.5% responded “don’t know” or did not respond.
5. Coppedge et al. 2021.
6. Birch 2008; Layton 2010.
7. 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).
8. Birch 2008; Quiroga 2008.
9. Birch 2008; Alvarez et al. 2008.
10. Birch 2008; Layton 2010.
11. Birch 2008; Quiroga 2008.
12. I recoded the following variables: **PN4**. “In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in (country)?” Answers to this question ranged from 1 (“Very satisfied”) to 4 (“Very dissatisfied”). I rescaled and reversed the variable so that 1 represents “very satisfied” and 0 represents “very dissatisfied.” **M1**. “Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President NAME CURRENT PRESIDENT?” This variable’s answers ranged from 1 (“Very good”) to 5 (“Very bad (terrible)”). I rescaled and reversed the variable so that 1 represents “very good” and 0 represents “very bad (terrible).” **GION**. “About how often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers, or the internet?” This variable’s answers included 1 (“Daily”), 2 (“A few times a week”), 3 (“A few times a month”), 4 (“A few times a year”), and 5 (“Never”). I rescaled and reversed the variable so that 1 represents “daily” and 0 represents “never.” **CONOCIM**. “Using the scale shown below, please rate your perception about the level of political knowledge of the interviewee.” This variable’s values range from 1 (“Very high”) to 5 (“Very low”). I rescaled and reversed the variable so that 1 represents “very high” and 0 represents “very low.”



13. Norris 2019; Fortin-Rittberger et al. 2017.
14. Mandell 2023.
15. Dahl 1971.
16. Birch 2008; Hooghe and Stiers 2016; Layton 2009; Reller et al. 2022; Sánchez 2022; Sinclair et al. 2018.
17. Sanchez 2022.
18. Chang 2017.
19. Kaye and Johnson 2002; Corrigan-Brown and Wilkes 2014; Chang 2017.

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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.php](http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.php).

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