

Insights Series #162

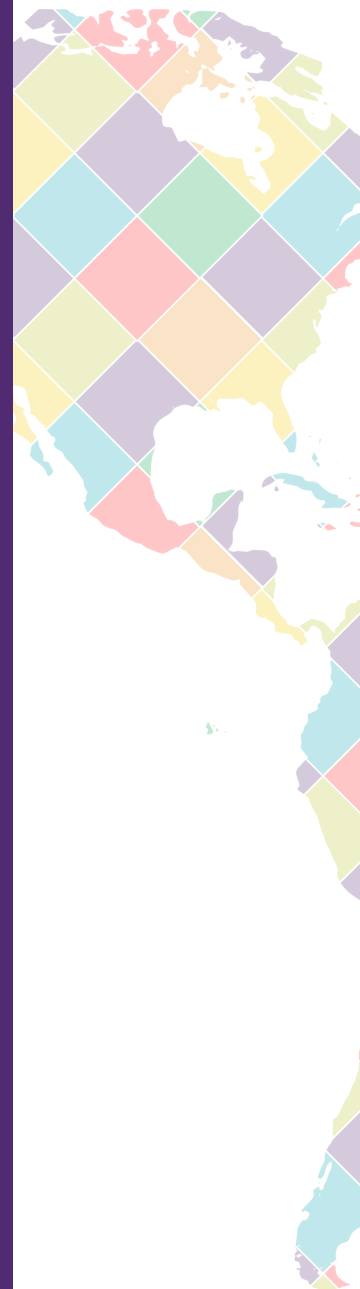
Who Trusts the Government in the Americas?

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Key Findings:

- Executive job approval has the strongest correlation with trust in government, suggesting that presidents are a highly visible symbol of a country's government
- Salvadorans had the most trust in their government in 2021. On the other hand, Hondurans ranked lowest. In most countries, trust in the national government is low
- Those with higher levels of education and wealth are less trusting in government
- Although previous work suggested a relationship between trust in political institutions and trust in government, analyses reveal only a modest correlation between these variables



Trust in government is integral to broader evaluations of democracy. Considering that Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries are facing challenges regarding the health of their democracies, trust in government is worth examination. Low levels of trust in government can generate a lack of political participation, less support for necessary policies, political cynicism, and detrimental government performance. In other words, trust in government may increase the effectiveness of government operations.¹ This leads to the central question of this *Insights* report: how much do citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean trust their government to do the right thing?

This report addresses the subject of trust in government using data from the 2021 AmericasBarometer survey in 19 LAC region countries. The “Trust in the national government” variable is based on a question in the American National Election Studies (ANES) and was included as a new item in the 2021 AmericasBarometer. Interviewees were asked the following question:

ANESTG: How much do you trust the government to do the right thing?

Respondents to this question could answer a lot, somewhat, a little, or not at all.²

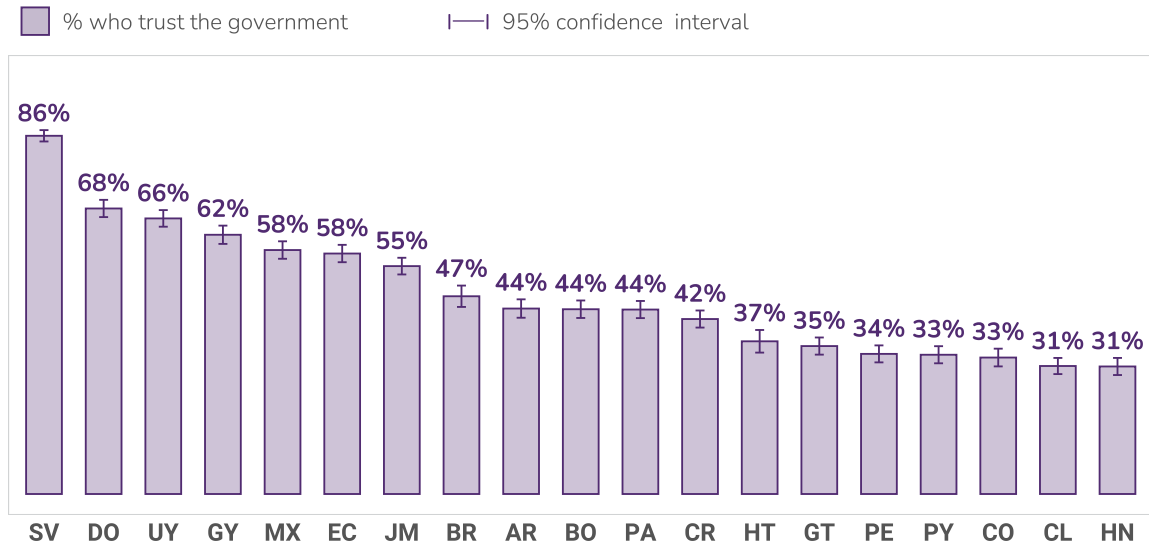
This report finds that, in most countries, the majority have low levels of trust in the government. Through individual-level analyses of citizens’ trust in the national government, the report finds that trust is highly associated with presidential job approval. These results help to identify areas of opportunity for healthy and trusting relationship dynamics between individuals and governing institutions, which in theory ought to promote better government performance throughout the Americas.

In Most Countries, less than Half Have a Lot or Some Trust in the National Government

Figure 1 shows the percentage of individuals in each country who trust their government “a lot” or “somewhat.” This analysis shows that many people in the LAC region do not have much trust in the national government. The mean proportion of trust in government across these 19 countries is 48%. The country that expressed the highest levels of trust in its government was El Salvador (86%). At the other end, the country with the least trust in its government is Honduras (31%). These results are noteworthy considering the geographic proximity and similarities in terms of economic and political development across both countries. These stark differences between countries like Honduras and El Salvador suggest that, rather than long-term structural factors, perceptions of trust in the government are associated with more short-term political and governance-related dynamics. This report assesses whether this is the case with individual-level analyses.

Figure 1.

Trust in the National Government Varies around a Low Regional Mean



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

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Age, Education, and Household Wealth Predict Trust in the National Government

Figure 2 shows the results of a linear regression analysis that examines the correlation between a set of socio-demographic factors and the trust in government variable.³ The individual-level characteristics evaluated are age, level of education, gender, and level of household wealth.⁴ The results show that the age variable is positive and significant: older age cohorts have more trust in the government. On the other hand, the result for level of education shows that higher education levels are associated with less trust in government. Education and its processes are expected to have a significant relationship with democratic behavior, especially by citizens gaining higher expectations for government performance and in political participation.⁵ Previous work has found that even though higher levels of education lead to more participation, they might also lead to symptoms of political disaffection within citizens.⁶ Other research finds that education is a factor that will expose citizens to political information, leading to political engagement, activism, and political discontent.⁷ As for gender, there is no correlation with trust in government. That said, this finding does not preclude gender from playing a role in citizens' perceptions of government. For example, past research has revealed that the "presence of women in political office is correlated with higher citizen satisfaction with democracy, women's increased interest in politics, greater support for women in politics, and other political attitudes."⁸ Finally, the regression analysis finds a negative relationship between trust in government and wealth: higher levels of household wealth are associated with less trust in the national government.

Figure 2.**Socioeconomic and Demographic Correlates of Trust in the National Government**

Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

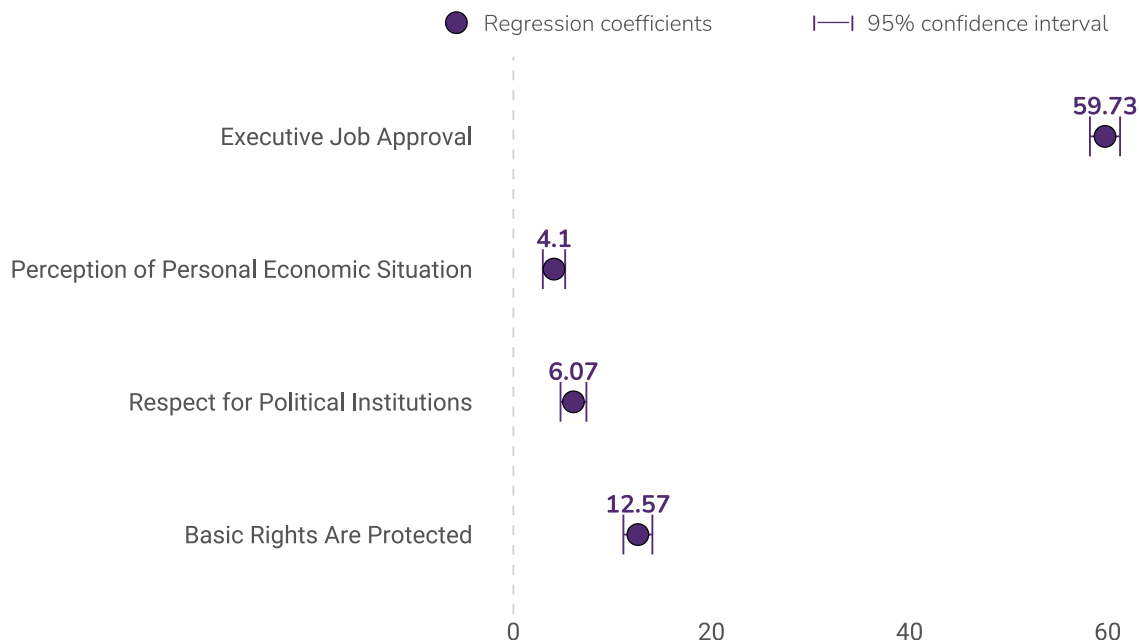
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Executive Job Approval Is a Strong Correlate of Trust in the National Government

For a final analysis, this report examines the relationship between trust in government and other attitudes measured in the AmericasBarometer survey. Figure 3 summarizes the results of a regression of trust in government on four attitudinal variables: executive job approval, perception of one's personal economic situation, respect for political institutions, and belief that basic rights are protected.⁹

Figure 3.

Political Views and Experiential Predictors of Trust in Elections



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

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The most substantively important result within this analysis is that trust in government is significantly and strongly predicted by executive job approval.¹⁰ With a coefficient of around 60, the perception of the president's performance has by far the strongest association with trust of all the variables examined in this report. The presidency can serve as an institutional focus for public confidence in government. In other words, a successful political image, reality, and historical context matter.¹¹ Citrin and Green (1986) state that "the public has certain expectations about presidential character, and the incumbent's ability to project an image that conforms to these expectations can enhance the level of support for government in general."¹² The link between executive job approval and trust in government raises some reasons for concern. Previous research has found that the public prefers the provision of government programs that provide immediate benefits, and executive popularity will be tied to generating such benefits.¹³ However, neglecting long-term government investments in areas such as education or infrastructure, will hurt future growth.¹⁴ This can generate a cycle in which executive actions that boost approval and trust in the short term can be detrimental to government trust and performance in the long term.

A result worth highlighting is how respect for political institutions has a positive correlation with government trust, but the relationship is substantively small in comparison to the magnitude of the relationship with executive job approval.¹⁵ This correlation with respect for political institutions is smaller than expected considering previous research, which has indicated that low institutional trust can decrease trust in government.¹⁶ Political institutions are extensions of the government. If the public does not trust these institutions, then they may disengage from public mandates, consequently affecting the quality of public service provision. Some argue that this creates a vicious cycle that affects governance and the functioning of institutions themselves.¹⁷

Research on political trust highlights that citizens base their trust in government on the government's performance and processes.¹⁸ Addressing the question of government processes, Figure 3 includes a variable measuring the extent to which respondents believe basic rights are protected.¹⁹ A core component of democratic processes is an independent judiciary that protects citizens' civil and political rights.²⁰ The results show a positive correlation—individuals with stronger beliefs that their rights are protected express more trust in government. While the magnitude of the relationship is not nearly as strong as that of executive approval, it is still substantively significant. Someone who believes their rights are protected a lot compared to someone who believes not at all expresses higher trust in government by over 12 units on the 0 to 100 scale.

To examine the extent to which evaluations of government performance influence trust in government, the regression analysis in Figure 3 includes a variable measuring citizens' perception of their personal economic situation.²¹ This variable has a positive relationship with trust in the national government. This outcome is consistent with previous findings that subjective evaluations of the economy are related to political trust in many contexts.²² However, the correlation is substantially smaller than executive approval and the weakest correlation of the other attitudinal measures examined here.

Conclusion

Trust in government is a challenge in an era marked by a faster and more diversified flow of information across society. High levels of government trust may provide a foundation for social well-being, while also reflecting the legitimacy and sustainability of political systems. Acknowledging that trust in government is highly correlated with presidential job performance, it is illustrative to consider the relationship between El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, and the public. In this report, El Salvador is the country with the highest levels of trust in the national government. Although Bukele's presidency has been criticized (because of past issues with checks and balances²³ and other corruption scandals), he has engaged in actions that are popular with the mass public.²⁴ Throughout Bukele's presidency and up to the time of data collection for the 2021 AmericasBarometer, crime rates declined as the government imposed *mano dura* policies.²⁵ Moreover, Bukele implemented rigorous COVID-19 protocols in response to the pandemic.²⁶ In contrast to Bukele, Honduras' ex-president, Juan Hernández (in office during the 2021 AmericasBarometer fieldwork), is less trusted amid corruption scandals, drug trafficking accusations,²⁷ and allegations of electoral fraud.²⁸ The regression analyses in this report provide perspective on how these dynamics are reflected in the Figure 1 results. In brief, the greater the public approval for a president's actions, the more the public trusts the national government to do what is right.

Future research on this topic ought to shed further light on trust in national government by considering how levels of trust change over time and across countries.²⁹ This would allow for a more thorough analysis of the short-term political factors that influence shifts in trust, building on the insights offered in this report.

Notes

1. OECD 2013 (21).
2. This question had a non-response rate of 2.99%. This includes respondents who answered “don’t know” or did not provide a response.
3. The dependent variable has been rescaled to range from 0 to 100, with 0 corresponding to “not at all” and 100 to “a lot”. The lines with the black and white dots in Figure 2 represent the 95% confidence intervals or coefficients and their predicted change in trust in government levels according to each independent variable. Figure 2 includes a vertical line that distinguishes between positive (to the right) and negative (to the left) associations with the dependent variable. If the coefficients overlap with the vertical line, then there is no statistically significant correlation with the dependent variable.
4. These sociodemographic variables have been recoded and rescaled from 0 to 1. The regression analysis also includes country fixed effects, which have been omitted from the figure in the interest of space. Age is measured by using the variable **EDAD**: the age ranges vary between 16-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66+ years old. Level of education is measured by using the variable **EDR**: the education ranges vary between none/primary, secondary, and university. Gender is measured by using the variable **GENDER**; the variable is an indicator of women and non-binary individuals against the baseline of men. It is coded so that 1=women and a small number of nonbinary participants and 0=men. Level of household wealth is measured by **WEALTH**, which is a five-category variable ranging from least wealthy (1) to most wealthy (5). The model includes country fixed effects, but are omitted from the figure to save space.
5. Dalton 2005, as cited in OECD 2013 (21).
6. Sebastián Rivera 2019 (568).
7. Jorge, Leguizamón, and Steciow 2013 (154).
8. Schwindt-Baye and Senk 2020 (392).
9. The attitudinal variables include executive job approval (**M1**), perception of one’s personal economic situation (**IDIO2**), respect for political institutions (**B2**), and the belief that basic rights are protected (**B3**). All are rescaled from 0 to 1. Additionally, the country fixed effects and demographic variables from Figure 2 are included in this linear regression analysis but omitted from the figure in the interest of space.
10. **M1**: Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President (name current president)? On a scale to 1 (very good) to 5 (very bad). The variable coding has been switched to be reverse-coded for purposes of this analysis, so that higher values represent stronger approval of executive job approval.
11. Wilson 2001 (67-76).
12. Citrin and Green 1986 (432).
13. Bachelet 2018, referencing Keefer, Scartascini, and Vlaicu 2018
14. Bachelet 2018, referencing Keefer, Scartascini, and Vlaicu 2018.
15. **B2**: To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)? On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot).

16. Morris and Klesner 2010 (1259).
17. Keefer and Scartascini 2022 (142).
18. Norris 2011.
19. **B3**: To what extent do you think that the basic rights of the citizen are well protected by the political system? On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot).
20. Tommasoli 2012.
21. **IDIO2**: Do you think that your current economic situation is better, the same or worse than it was twelve months ago? On a scale from 1 (better) to 3 (worse). The variable coding has been switched to be reverse-coded for purposes of this analysis so that higher values represent better perceptions of one's personal economic situation.
22. Van der Meer 2018.
23. Renteria 2021.
24. IUDOP 2022.
25. Crisis Group 2020.
26. Mellen 2020.
27. United States Department of Justice 2022.
28. Chaves García 2018.
29. Gershtenson, Ladewig, and Plane 2013.

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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.

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