AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2013

Special 100th Edition

Democracy Progress Report
Political Tolerance in the Americas, 2006-2012

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Executive Summary. In this *Special 100th edition* *Insights*, we focus on a fundamental principle of democracy: political tolerance. An essential quality of democratic culture is that citizens support the political rights of unpopular groups. Using data from the 2012 AmericasBarometer, we find that while political tolerance has risen in many countries of the Americas since the 2006 round of the AmericasBarometer, in other countries highly intolerant citizens outnumber the highly tolerant. To test potential explanations of support for regime critics having the right to vote, we estimate two predictive models of tolerance—a national level model, and a context-based (i.e., multilevel model) of tolerance at the individual level. Analyses suggest that while experience with democracy, education, and political activity generally increase political tolerance, national levels of inequality, religiosity, and support for the current president diminish levels of support for the political rights of opposing groups.

In this *Special 100ᵗʰ edition* *Insights*, we focus on a fundamental principle of democracy: political tolerance.[1] An essential element of democratic political culture around the world is "the degree to which [individuals] permit opposition both to the democratic regime and to the leaders who happen to be in power at a given moment" (Sullivan, et al. 1982, 1). At the individual level then, it is important for democratic regimes to have a citizenry that is supportive of the basic right to oppose those in power and even the system of government. With this release of our 100ᵗʰ *Insights* report, then, we provide an overview of political tolerance in the Americas, highlighting some countries that have made the most progress over the past four rounds of AmericasBarometer surveys, and those countries in which tolerance levels are trending downward. We then explore in more detail the individual and country-level characteristics that are associated with willingness to tolerate opposition to the incumbent government and/or political system. In so doing, we highlight those factors that may lead in the future to greater levels of tolerance across the region.[2]

Broadly defined, political tolerance is a person's willingness to support the civic and political rights of fellow citizens with whom she disagrees (Seligson 2000; Booth and Seligson 2009). Tolerant citizens who support "inclusive participation" are a basic requisite of democratic consolidation (Dahl 1971; Diamond 1994; 1999; Linz and Stepan 1996; Seligson

2000). Though certain levels of intolerance exist in even the most well-established democracies, particularly during times of crisis or threat (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009), a basic acceptance of an individual's right to vote regardless of her political views is widely considered to be an important component of a democratic political culture. Variations in a society's levels of tolerance for such basic political rights, therefore, can be interpreted as an attitudinal thermometer for the health of democracy and its political stability (Seligson 2000; Carlin and Singer 2011; Salinas and Booth 2011).

Figure 1. Levels of Tolerance between 2006 and 2012 across the Americas
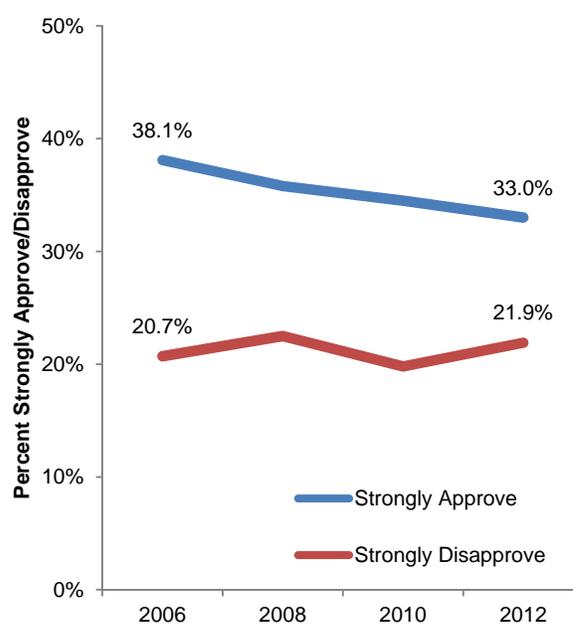
In Figure 1, we examine levels of tolerance and intolerance over time by using a survey item from the AmericasBarometer that asks respondents about their willingness to allow critics of the political system to exercise their right to vote.[3] We view this as a providing a

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[1] Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php. The data on which they are based can be found at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php

[3] Survey question wording: D1. There are people who only say bad things about the (country) form of government, not just the incumbent government but the system of

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fairly low threshold for assessing an individual's level of political tolerance, as granting even the most strident regime critic the right to vote would not seem to represent much of a risk to the political system itself.[4]

In order create Figure 1, we first rescale the original response categories onto a 0 to 100 scale, where 0 represents the lowest level of approval ("Strongly Disapprove") and 100 the highest ("Strongly Approve"). We then analyze these responses from two perspectives. The blue line represents the average percentage of respondents across the Americas that fall on the "strongly tolerant" end of the scale (80-100). From this we see a troubling downward trend across time, with the percentage falling from 38.1% in 2006 to 33.0% in 2012. Although the decline is not sharp enough to be cause for alarm, this decline in the percentage of "strongly tolerant" respondents across the region warrants close attention moving forward and may be linked toward the recent growth of "competitive authoritarian" regimes in the region.

A slightly more encouraging result, perhaps, is the absence of any significant increase in those respondents who are "strongly intolerant"— with the percentage in 2006 (20.7%) rising only slightly more than 1 point across the six-year period. A more pessimistic read of these data, however, would focus on the fact that even after nearly two decades of democracy, across most countries in the region, one in every five citizens remains strongly opposed to allowing system critics the most basic of democratic rights—the vote. In general, though, this regional perspective on tolerance over time across the Americas paints a picture of societies that for the most part have more citizens strongly in favor of this basic democratic principle than those who are strongly opposed to it.
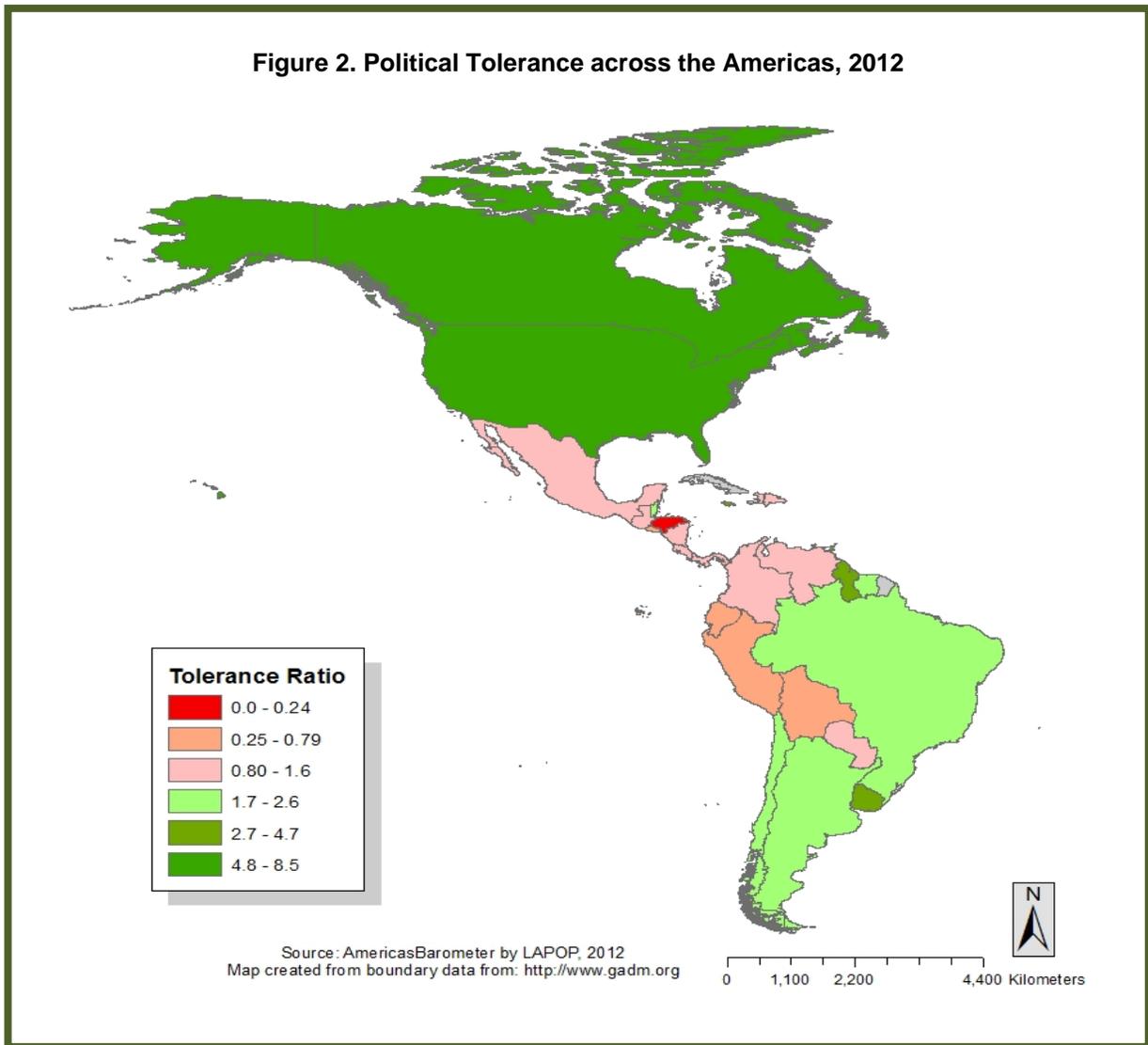
government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's right to vote?

[4] For a brief history and explanation for this measure of political tolerance, please see Appendix 1.

As is often the case, though, an aggregate regional profile can be misleading. We therefore now turn to a closer look at these data, highlighting countries in which optimism for the consolidation of tolerance as a deeply held societal value is warranted and, conversely, those cases with a tolerance profile that does not bode well for the future of democracy. Using our focus on the "strongly tolerant" and the "strongly intolerant" as a point of departure, we create a "tolerance ratio" that simply divides the percentage of respondents who strongly approve of regime critics' right to vote by the percentage that strongly disapprove. Hence, the higher the number, the stronger the overall tolerance landscape is in a particular country, with a large percentage of "strongly tolerant" citizens contrasting with a considerably smaller percentage of "strongly intolerant."

Figure 2 offers a spatial view of tolerance across the Americas in 2012 using this tolerance ratio. The figure highlights those countries in red where the "strongly intolerant" outnumber, or come close to outnumbering, the "strongly tolerant" and, conversely, those countries in green where acceptance of the right to vote for *all* citizens appears to have consolidated itself as part of a democratic political culture.

Examining these cross-national differences in more detail, Figure 3 provides both the regional average across time as well as the tolerance ratios for two countries that highlight the divergent patterns of tolerance levels that exist across the Americas. Uruguay offers an example of a society with a strong and growing trend of increasing political tolerance between 2006 and 2012. On the other end of the spectrum, however, lies Honduras, a country where the tolerance ratio has declined sharply during this same time period. In this latter case, we see Honduras in 2010 entering into what we refer to as a "*tolerance danger zone*" where there is a greater number of "strongly intolerant" Hondurans than there are individuals who are "strongly tolerant." We have highlighted this "danger zone" through use of the dotted red

Figure 2. Political Tolerance across the Americas, 2012

Tolerance Ratio

- 0.0 - 0.24
- 0.25 - 0.79
- 0.80 - 1.6
- 1.7 - 2.6
- 2.7 - 4.7
- 4.8 - 8.5

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2012
Map created from boundary data from: http://www.gadm.org

0   1,100   2,200   4,400 Kilometers

line in Figure 3. By 2012, we see Honduras firmly entrenched in this attitudinal danger zone, no doubt reflected in the country's current period of protest and conflict surrounding its recent presidential elections. As worrisome as the tolerance trends might be in Honduras, we see the flip side in a country like Uruguay, where an overwhelming percentage of "strongly tolerant" citizens predominate over a declining number of intolerant individuals. Overall, significant variation in political tolerance levels persists across the Americas.[5]

[5] To illustrate the cross-country differences over time, Appendix 2 displays the tolerance ratio for countries included in the AmericasBarometer in 2006 and 2012. We

Explaining Tolerance

How do we explain why some individuals are tolerant, while others are not, and why do some countries tend to have a greater proportion of tolerant citizens than intolerant ones? The literature on political tolerance offers many potential explanations. In this section, we review several potential factors that have been found to be important determinants of

rank countries from the highest/best tolerance ratio to the lowest/worst according to the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey. Once again we highlight a "danger zone" threshold at 1:1 and in doing so identify those countries that have failed to make much progress in generating citizen acceptance of the basic democratic right of voting for all citizens.

both individual- and country-level variation in tolerance.

Many scholars have evaluated the impact of various sociodemographic, economic, and religious characteristics on levels of political tolerance. For example, age and gender have been found to have an important effect on the likelihood that individuals support granting civil liberties to opposition groups, with women and the elderly often found to be less tolerant than younger males (Sullivan et al. 1982). Education has most consistently been found to increase political tolerance, although the mechanism by which it has this effect has been debated (Zaller 1992), as has socioeconomic class (Katnik 2002). Religiosity, on the other hand, seems to have a fairly consistent negative effect on political tolerance dating back to foundational work on the topic (Stouffer 1955), while high levels of crime and perceptions of insecurity have generally been viewed as contributing to an increased level of intolerance within a society (e.g., Doty, Peterson, and Winter 1991).

Yet another set of theories has examined how other political attitudes and behaviors affect tolerance, generally finding that individuals who favor democracy as a form of government (Gibson and Gouws 2003) and possess high interpersonal trust (Gibson 1987) are more open to the political participation of unpopular groups. Moreover, a litany of empirical studies highlights the importance of political and civic participation in producing more tolerant individuals, as such activities expose one to a greater variety of political viewpoints and motivate individuals to work towards compromise in order to resolve differences in opinions.

Figure 3. Tolerance Ratio between 2006 and 2012 across the Americas
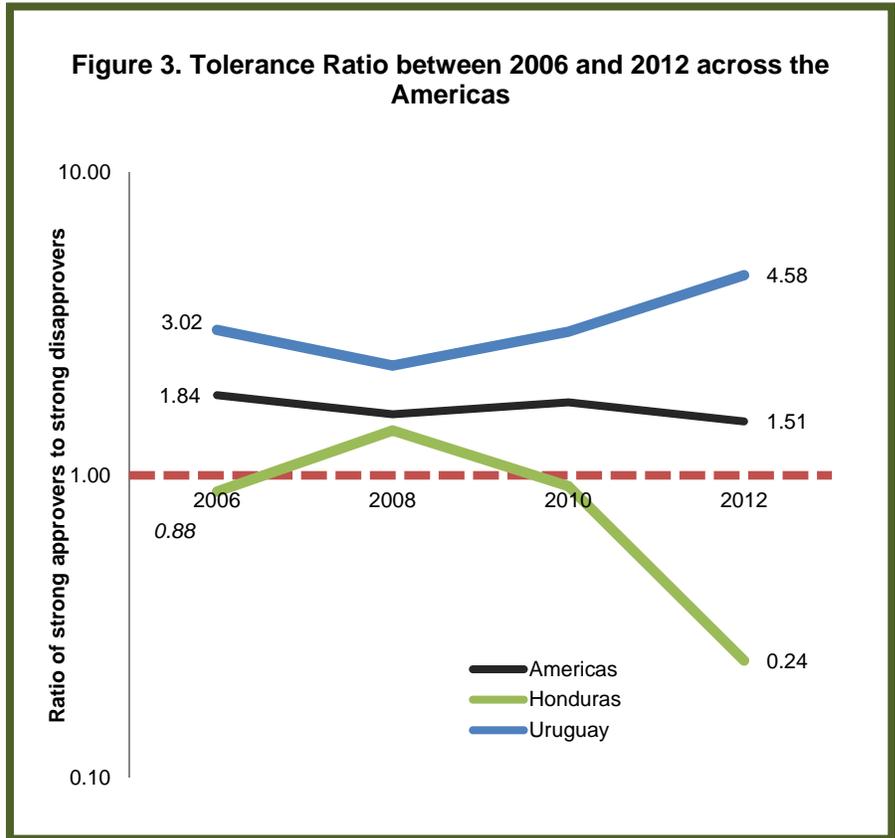
Finally, other researchers have endeavored to understand how country-level characteristics influence levels of tolerance cross-nationally. Peffley and Rohrschneider (2003) find that citizens who live in more long-lasting, high quality democratic regimes are more tolerant than their counterparts in authoritarian regimes and illiberal democracies. People who live in more ethnically diverse contexts in which there are strong in-group identities are more likely to hold intolerant values (Gibson and Gouws 2000). Economic inequality has also been found to fuel political intolerance (Andersen and Fetner 2008).

## Two Predictive Models of Tolerance

To test these potential explanations of support for regime critics having the right to vote, we estimate two models of tolerance. In the first, we carry out a cross-national analysis of LAC countries' tolerance ratio scores to determine at

this aggregate level whether country characteristics such as the stock of democracy, level of income inequality, or degree of ethnic fractionalization affect country tolerance levels as per the ratio measure. In the second model, we look at the individual-level determinants of the probability that an individual survey respondent places herself on the "strongly tolerant" side of our tolerance ratio.

With respect to the first, cross-national analysis, we summarize (but for the sake of space do not present) our results. In this analysis, where the dependent variable is the country's tolerance ratio, we find tentative support for some of the ideas put forth in the previous section. High levels of income inequality, using a country's Gini coefficient as the measure, are related to a lower score on our tolerance ratio measure. On the other hand, the quality and longevity of democracy and levels of education are related to an increased number of strongly tolerant citizens compared to strongly intolerant ones. None of these findings, however, are statistically significant at acceptable levels, making them merely indicative of possible aggregate-level explanations for tolerance ratio scores across the Americas.

In order to more fully understand what is driving tolerance trends we must turn to an individual-level analysis of this question. Figure 4 summarizes the findings from our second model, which is assessed using multilevel logistic regression analysis and where our dependent variable is simply whether or not an individual falls into our "strongly tolerant" category. Here, then, we are looking at one side of our tolerance ratio in an effort to understand those individual and national-level factors that lead an individual to fully embrace the right to vote for all citizens as a fundamental principle of democracy.

Figure 4. A Multilevel Logistic Regression Model Predicting Being "Strongly Tolerant"
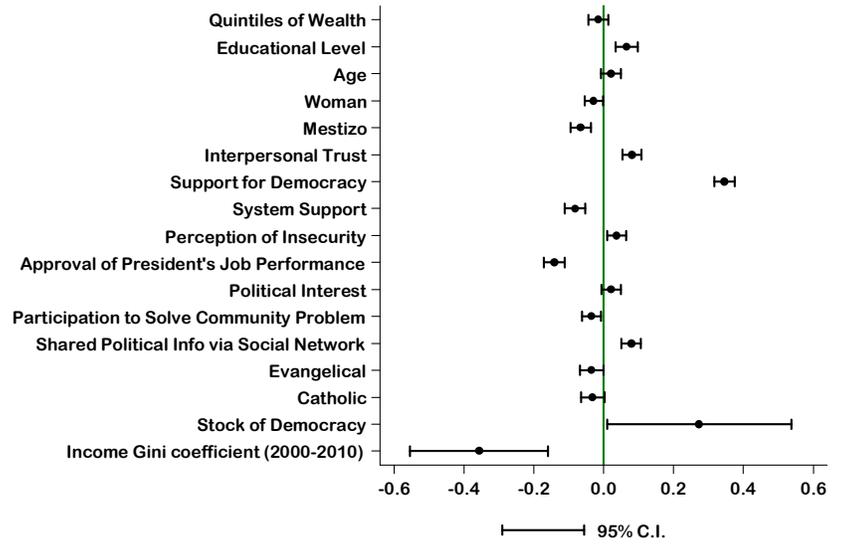
Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

The multilevel model of individual- and second-level predictors of being strongly tolerant provides more insight on the determinants of political tolerance. As for sociodemographic variables, the results corroborate previous findings with regard to education and gender, as more educated citizens appear more likely to be strongly tolerant, while women are less tolerant on average than men. Socioeconomic class does not appear to have a powerful effect on the probability of being strongly tolerant, nor does age, while being Evangelical or Catholic has a negative impact on levels of political tolerance. We also find from these results that when compared to other groups (e.g., indigenous, black, or white), mestizos across the Americas tend to be less likely to strongly embrace the right to vote for all citizens.

As expected, interpersonal trust is positively correlated with support for the rights of opposition groups. Notably, the belief that democracy is the best form of government has the strongest positive impact on being tolerant, demonstrating the extent to which citizens' preference for democracy carries through to

one of democracy's core tenets. System support appears to have a negative effect on the probability of being tolerant, indicating that a political system's regime's strongest supporters are less likely to be in favor of allowing critics of that system a chance to vote.

Among the other political variables included in the model, support for the current president appears to have the strongest negative impact on political tolerance, supporting the well-established finding that supporters of the incumbent government have a tendency to try to silence critics *and*, as is pointed out in Appendix 1, opponents of the incumbent government tend to be strongly in favor of allowing regime critics the right to vote. For our purposes, though, it is simply important that we control for this factor when trying to understand the role of other, more durable, individual-level predictors of tolerance

Constituting perhaps the most surprising result from the model, the variables for political engagement offer a mixed bag in terms of their relationship to tolerance. While sharing or receiving political information via the Internet has a strong positive relationship to tolerance, as does interest in politics, participating to solve a community problem actually is negatively related to political tolerance. This might reflect that civic organizations can cultivate in-group/out-group mentalities, or that some organizations espouse inherently intolerant beliefs, but the mechanisms driving this result require further investigation.

Finally, the "stock" of democracy in a particular regime and the country's level of income inequality emerge as two significant national level predictors of being strongly tolerant. It seems that in countries where citizens have decades of experience with democracy, and in contexts characterized by relatively low inequality, political tolerance prospers.

Conclusion

While the Latin America and Caribbean region has finally entered into an era in which electoral democracy is well established and widely accepted, progress in terms of citizen acceptance of basic democratic principles continues to be slow and uneven. In this report, we find that while tolerance has risen in many countries, in other cases strongly intolerant citizens outnumber the strongly tolerant. Given the importance of tolerance to the health of democracy, this represents alarming news.

However, our analysis of the individual- and national-level factors associated with high levels of tolerance offers several reasons for hope. Education constitutes one of the most important predictors of political tolerance, and education levels have been steadily rising across the region for more than twenty years. Moreover, internet use for political purposes is also on the rise in the Americas, and the evidence here suggests it could be strongly related to the cultivation of higher levels of tolerance. Finally, as democracy consolidates as the only legitimate form of government in the minds of citizens, and citizens gain more experience with the everyday realities of democratic governance, our results indicate that progress in terms of political tolerance will follow. The powerful relationship that support for democracy in general has with high levels of tolerance is encouraging in this respect. Moreover, to the extent that economic inequality is declining across the region, our findings suggest that this trend too bodes well for an increase in tolerance levels across the region in years to come.

> "…many citizens have trouble separating their current political sympathies from fundamental democratic rights."

Conversely, the connection between Evangelical religions and lower levels of tolerance suggests a troubling dynamic across the region, given the rise of Evangelical churches in Latin America (see Marcano 2013). In addition, the fact that support for the current administration and the political system has such a strong negative impact on political tolerance signals that many citizens have trouble separating their current political sympathies from fundamental democratic rights.

Given the results for the relationship between Polity democracy scores and tolerance, recent work indicating a reduction in democratic quality across many Latin American countries (e.g. Puddington 2012, Weyland 2013) helps us understand why tolerance levels across the Americas have remained stagnant and even fallen in certain cases. As democratic quality and stability increases, so too does political tolerance, and we can only hope that this recent uptick in illiberal democracy across the region reverses.

We conclude this special *Insights* issue, the 100th in our series, with points of optimism for the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and the emergence of strong attachments to the core principles of democracy around which a democratic culture is based. The many years of work at the Latin American Public Opinion Project devoted to measuring and analyzing citizens' political attitudes and behaviors is guided by the goal of shedding light on the region's constantly evolving, and highly diverse, democratic landscape.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. The Long Road to Measuring Political Tolerance: Still No Perfect Solution

While the concept of political tolerance has held a central role in the theory of democratic values, its measurement has gone through many iterations, none of them completely satisfactory. The early work by Samuel A. Stouffer, carried out in the 1950s in the U.S., was focused on tolerance for communists, since at the time it was the fringe group garnering greatest public attention. Hence, questions were formulated about the rights of communist to, for example, teach in school or have their books in a public library. The problem in this approach became evident when, over time, surveys were showing that tolerance in the U.S. was on the rise, when in fact much of this increase may have been due to the decreasing national sense of threat from communists, especially as the Cold War ended. A further problem is that a focus on one group made the unreasonable assumption that there might not have been other fringe groups that might have been tolerated more (or less) by various sectors of the population. The solution to this problem emerged from John Sullivan and his fellow researchers, who developed the "least-liked group" approach. Respondents were read a list of groups and asked which one they liked the least. Then, respondents were asked if they would allow individuals belonging to such groups to enjoy basic civil liberties such as the right to vote. While this approach solved some of the Stouffer problems, it created others. One problem is that not all groups on the list were of the same threat level; granting rights to feminist groups (in the early 1980s), was one thing, while granting rights to Al-Qaeda terrorist cells. A further problem, discovered by Mitchell Seligson in his research in Nicaragua, is that large proportions of the population refused to pick a group, saying, "I am ok with everyone." The result is that large proportions of respondents do not have tolerance scores. The LAPOP approach tries to "thread the needle" by avoiding specifying any specific group, but by focusing on those "who only say bad things about our system of government." Thus, LAPOP avoids singling out a particular group (e.g., communists) and avoids having respondents who will not pick a least-liked group from a list. But the LAPOP approach does not solve the problem entirely, since we have found that those who oppose the incumbent administration are more likely to be tolerant of "those who only say bad things about our system of government." Our solution has been to control for each respondent's answer to the standard LAPOP question evaluating presidential performance. In that way, we attempt to purge from the tolerance scores the component that relates to antipathy toward the incumbent. That said, research by Jim Gibson in 1992 found that while different tolerance measures provide different levels of tolerance, there is a strong association among the different measures, such that whichever method is used, the items probably all tap into the same underlying concept: political tolerance of basic civil liberties.

Appendix 2. Distribution of Citizen Tolerance Levels Across the Americas, 2012
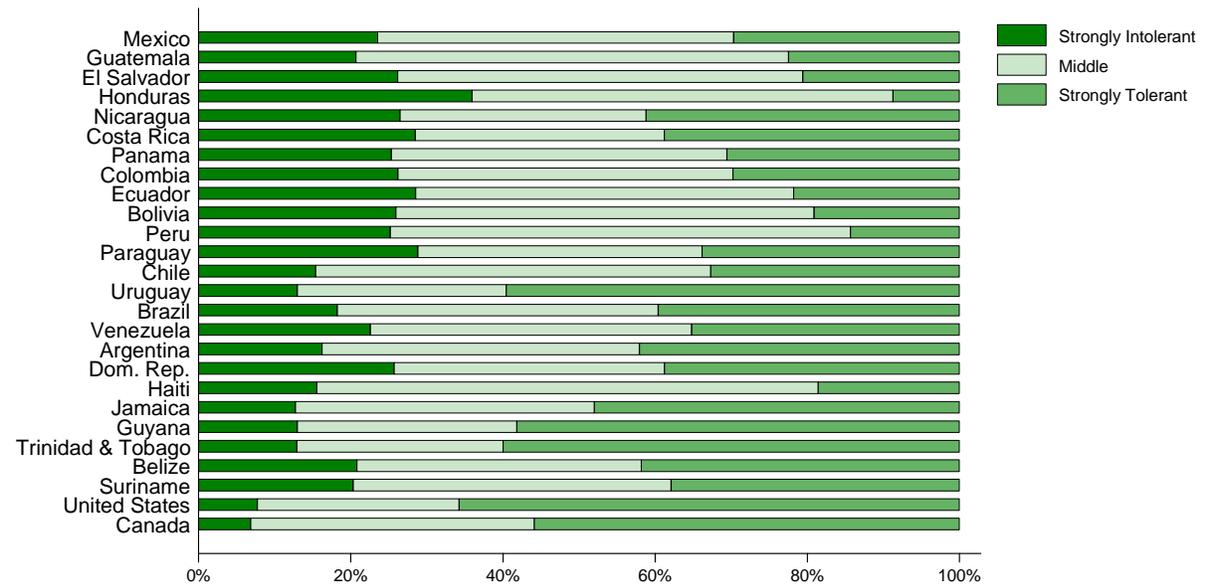
Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Appendix 3. Cross-national Comparisons of the Tolerance Ratio for 2006 and 2012