AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2015

Number 111

Political Culture in Costa Rica: Long-term slide continues in attitudes favoring stable democracy

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Executive Summary. The results of the 2014 AmericasBarometer in Costa Rica document a worrisome trend away from a mass public that had largely displayed high levels of attitudes consistent with stable democracy. In assessing two components of a set of attitudes that LAPOP has validated as conducive to democratic stability, we find long-term declines. We also find a recent decline in political tolerance, which we link to partisan conflict that have left their imprint on the Costa Rican public.

Costa Rica has the longest history of democracy in the Latin American region. However, in recent years, there have been important political changes, including a breakdown of the two-party system, corruption scandals at the highest levels of the political leadership, and a growing discontent of the population with the political elite. Given these changes, one might ask: To what extent do these political changes affect the pillars of Costa Rican democracy, which is so widely admired throughout the world? In this *Insights* report[1] we investigate this question with the most recent data from the 2014 AmericasBarometer,[2] in the context of long-term data.
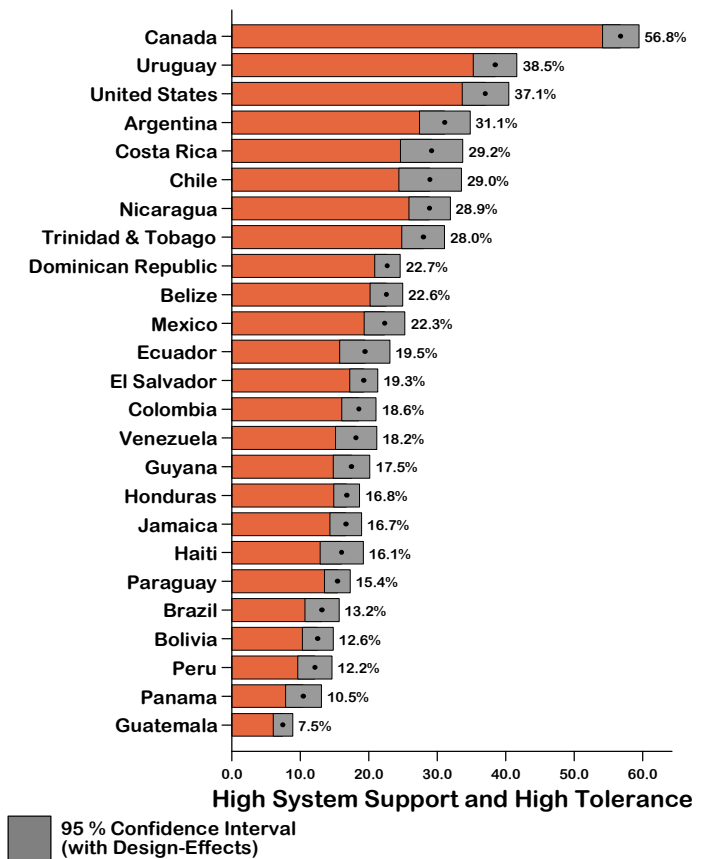
System Support and Political Tolerance

Political legitimacy and political tolerance are two key factors in any functioning democracy, in that they are considered essential for democratic consolidation (Diamond, 1999; Seligson, 2000; Booth and Seligson, 2009). Political legitimacy is also central to the study of political culture and the stability of democracy, allowing us to understand how citizenship is related to the institutions of the state. At the same time, political tolerance is essential for the rights of minorities to be respected. The AmericasBarometer allows us to measure these two dimensions: citizen system support and tolerance for the civil rights and the participation of others.

Figure 1. Attitudes Favorable for Stable Democracy in the Americas

Country	Value
Canada	56.8%
Uruguay	38.5%
United States	37.1%
Argentina	31.1%
Costa Rica	29.2%
Chile	29.0%
Nicaragua	28.9%
Trinidad & Tobago	28.0%
Dominican Republic	22.7%
Belize	22.6%
Mexico	22.3%
Ecuador	19.5%
El Salvador	19.3%
Colombia	18.6%
Venezuela	18.2%
Guyana	17.5%
Honduras	16.8%
Jamaica	16.7%
Haiti	16.1%
Paraguay	15.4%
Brazil	13.2%
Bolivia	12.6%
Peru	12.2%
Panama	10.5%
Guatemala	7.5%

High System Support and High Tolerance

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; Merged 2004-2014 draft 120114

System support has two principal dimensions: diffuse support and specific support[3] (Easton, 1975; Seligson, 2000). The measurement created by LAPOP and operationalized by the AmericasBarometer captures diffuse support,[4] whose minimum levels are essential for the survival of any of regime (Booth and Seligson, 2009). Political tolerance, for its part, is a fundamental pillar of the survival of a democratic regime. In LAPOP studies, political tolerance is defined as "respect for the political

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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.

[2] Funding for the 2014 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of USAID or any other supporting agency.
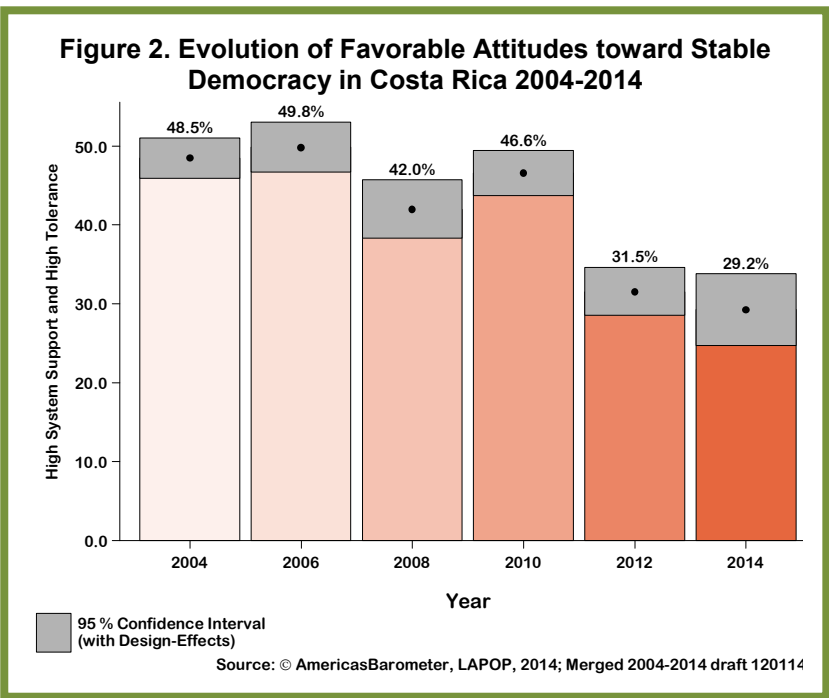
[3] Traditionally, specific support is measured by questions about the authorities that are in positions of power, while diffuse support refers to a more abstract aspect, for example, the generalized link represented by the political system and those in elected positions.

[4] In addition to the measures of diffuse support, LAPOP provides measures of specific support that are not analyzed in this report.

rights of others by citizens, especially those with whom one may not agree" (Seligson, 2000).

A leading indicator of democratic stability

Over the years of study at LAPOP, we have seen the important effects that system support and political tolerance have on the consolidation and stability of democracy. By combining the index of system support and political tolerance we obtain a leading indicator, "support for stable democracy" (Seligson, 2000; Pérez, Seligson and Booth, 2013). This indicator is based on the fundamental principle that in societies in which the public supports the political system and respects differences, the rules governing political life tend to be respected, and therefore democracy tends to be stable.

Figure 2. Evolution of Favorable Attitudes toward Stable Democracy in Costa Rica 2004-2014

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; Merged 2004-2014 draft 120114

According to this approach, a democracy achieves a high probability of maintaining its democratic stability if the plurality of its citizens—ideally the majority—are those who support the political system and respect the

Figure 3. Evolution of Favorable Attitudes for Stable Democracy in Costa Rica 1978-2014
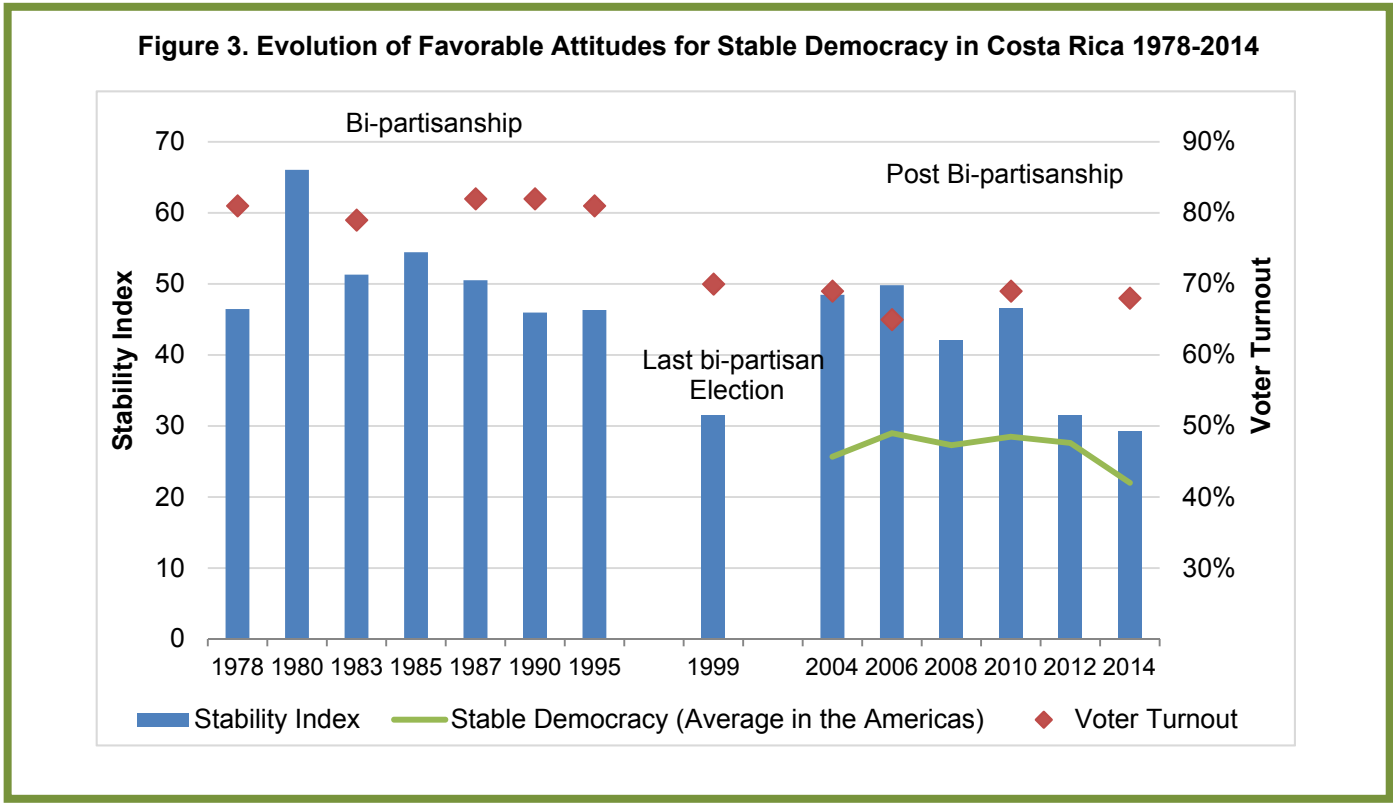
civil rights of others. In contrast, a system in which there is little system support and low levels of tolerance for the rights of others is one in which there may be willingness to see democracy replaced by with an authoritarian system.

Results

Figure 1 shows the extent to which citizens of the Americas enjoy this combination of favorable attitudes toward democracy.[5] Canada, Uruguay, and the United States have the highest percentages of those surveyed with attitudes favoring democratic stability on the continent, while Peru, Panama, and Guatemala have the lowest. Costa Rica holds the fifth highest position in the hemisphere; the percentage of citizens who combine high system support with high tolerance is 29%.

Despite this relatively high ranking in the context of the Americas, the question is, how has the percentage of Costa Ricans with favorable attitudes toward stable democracy evolved over time? Figure 2 shows the values obtained for this indicator 2004-2014. The data series reflects a decline (although not statistically significant) between 2012-2014. Between 2004 and 2010 the values remained relatively stable at around 45%, but in 2012 and again in 2014, the index fell to its lowest level throughout the entire series, falling below 30%. Over the last 10 years, attitudes that support a stable democracy have fallen to what is, for Costa Rica, worrisome levels, reflecting the deterioration of politics that has impacted public institutions and, as is evidenced by these data, in turn has had negative effects on key democratic values among the population. In an analysis of the last 36 years, we find the percentage of the population with high system support and high tolerance has been reduced by half, comparing current data to data from the late seventies and early eighties (Figure 3).


Figure 4. Determinants of Attitudes Conducive of Stable Democracy in Costa Rica

F = 5.304
N = 1247

95% Confidence Interval (Design-Effect Based)
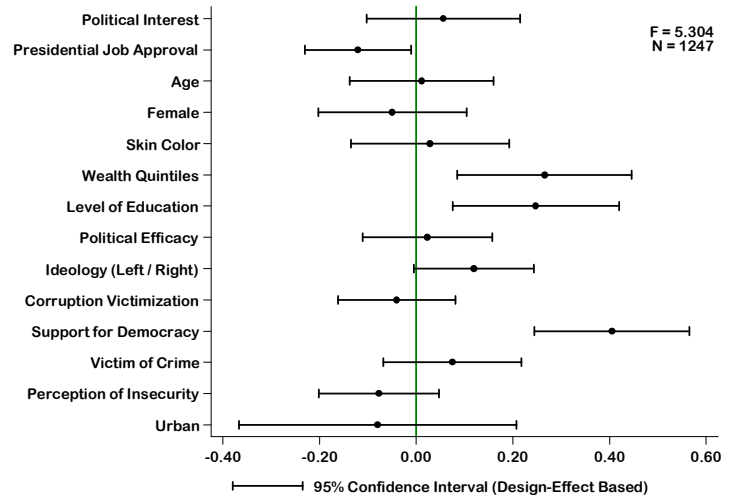
Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2014; Merged 2004-2014 draft 120114

Figure 5. Evolution of Political Tolerance in Costa Rica

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; Merged 2004-2014 draft 120114

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[5] See questions in the Appendix.
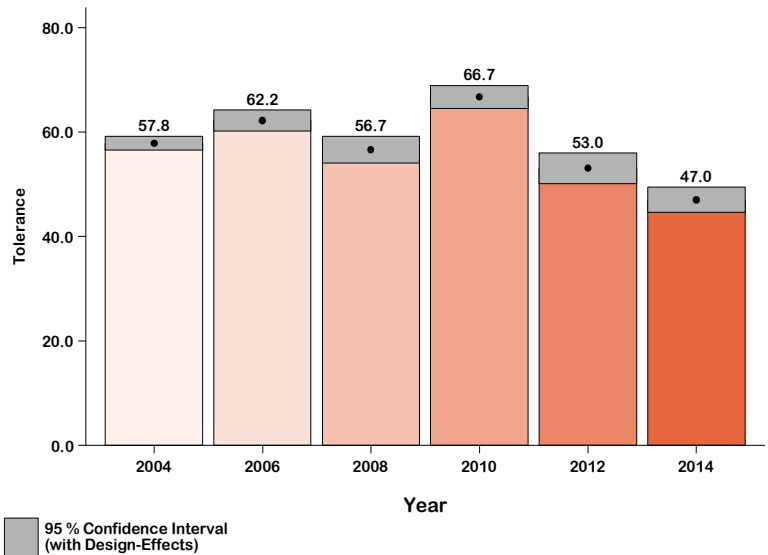
The data from 2014 demonstrates a new, marginal decline in the percentage of Costa Ricans with attitudes that support stable democracy. In our analyses, we find that this decrease is due to the increase in the percentage of individuals who have lower democratic values, namely those with high system support and low tolerance. In other words, Costa Ricans by the middle of the second decade of the twenty first century remain somewhat supportive of their political system, but are less tolerant of their opponents (see Figure 5 below). The combination of these factors can undermine the principles of coexistence of citizens in democracy and can create tensions that could ultimately destabilize the system.
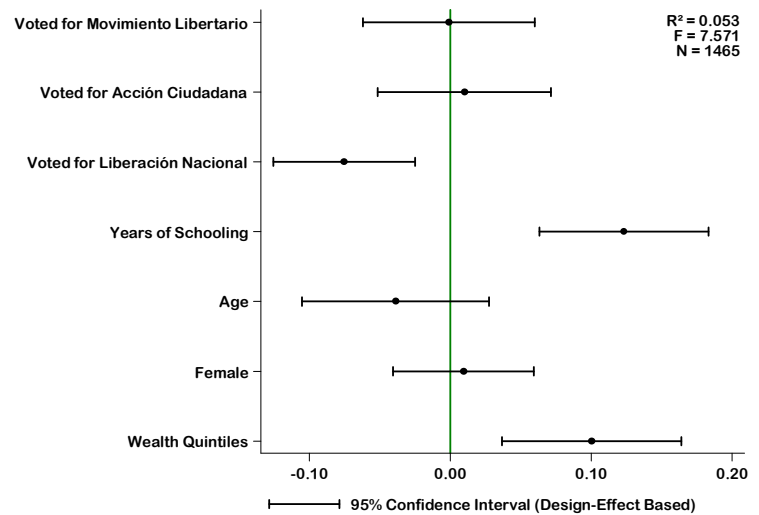
The factors that influence this indicator of stable democracy[6] in the case of Costa Rica is examined in Figure 4, which presents the results of a logistic regression (with standardized coefficients). The level of wealth, education, and support for democracy are, according to this analysis, the main significant determinants of this indicator: all of these factors are significantly and positively related to attitudes that favor a stable democracy. At the same time, a positive perception of the work of the president diminishes the probability that an individual will fall into the "stable democracy" category.

The decline of political tolerance is the determining factor in explaining the decrease in the percentage of stable democrats in Costa Rica.[7] As Figure 5 shows, tolerance declined

Figure 6. Determinants of Political Tolerance in Costa Rica

$R^2 = 0.053$
$F = 7.571$
$N = 1465$

95% Confidence Interval (Design-Effect Based)

Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2014; Costa Rica 2014 120114 v1

again in 2014, reaching its lowest level across the entire period analyzed. This decrease was approximately 20 points in comparison to the 2010 value (when we observe the highest level of the series) and 6 points below the figure reported in 2012.

Observing the descent, it is pertinent to inquire about the factors that explain this attitude. Figure 6 presents a linear regression model (with standardized coefficients) to address this question. The analysis reveals the common finding in studies of tolerance, namely that the wealthier and more educated express higher levels of tolerance. But these factors are basically constant across time, and therefore cannot explain the decline.

The decrease of reported tolerance could be explained perhaps by a unique set of circumstances. In this instance, in response to a resurgence in the polls of an ideological leftist party, the *Frente Amplio*, in the first two months of the campaign season (during the period October and November of 2013) for the

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[6] The variable "attitudes conducive to stable democracy" is dichotomous in that the values equal to 100 correspond to cases of individuals who possess both high system support and high system tolerance; and the values that equal 0 correspond to individuals who possess any other of combination of these factors (for example, high system support combined with low tolerance). In addition, it excludes cases of missing values.

[7] In this regard, it is important to mention that even though system support suffered a considerable decline in 2012, the 2014 AmericasBarometer data show that in 2014 these levels returned to the average levels of the last decade, 2004-2014. This is why the most important explanation in

the decrease of people in this category of stable democracy is due to low tolerance and not a problem with system support in 2014.

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presidential election in February of 2014, many of his opponents categorized candidate José María Villalta as a "communist" and aired several commercials in which they referred to the candidates of the *Frente Amplio* as "Chavistas" and implied their political platform was similar to that of Venezuela. This strategy created a sector of the electorate that saw the *Frente Amplio* as anti-system, yielding a situation in which *Frente Amplio* supporters were met with intolerance among some in Costa Rica. To test this hypothesis, we examine the 2014 data

> *Over the last 36 years, the percentage of the population with high system support and high tolerance has been reduced by half.*

and find that the main opponents of the *Frente Amplio* (the supporters of the PLN party) express lower tolerance levels compared to supporters of the *Frente Amplio* party. This result is expressed in a regression analysis captured in Figure 6. According to the raw 2014 AmericasBarometer data, supporters of *Frente Amplio* reported almost 20 points higher on tolerance (59 versus 41) than those who supported the PLN candidate and 11 points more than those who supported the Libertarian Party candidate (59 versus 48). These data show how perception of an anti-system candidate can produce, in the short term and in the context of an electoral campaign, declines in one of the pillars of citizen support of the democratic political system.

Conclusion

Compared to other nations in Latin America and the Caribbean, Costa Rica has a political culture that stands out for its high support for democracy. Nevertheless, if it is compared with its own scores over the last three decades, the tendency of decline in such support over the long term is evident and occurs in a context of great political transformation, one that brought the end of traditional bi-partisan rule, and the election of a new party—*Acción Ciudadana*—to the presidency in 2014.

Democratic consolidation combined with significant economic and social achievements in the second half of the 20th century have turned this small nation into a unique case of deep democratic stability. However, over the last decade, dissatisfaction with politics has significantly increased. This raises the question "why is there growing discontent with the countries institutions and politicians in a consolidated democracy?" In producing this report, we have analyzed this question and thus provided insights into contemporary Costa Rican politics and prospects in that country for democratic stability. At the same time, we hope these insights might also help us to further understand why surveys in many mature democracies have shown that they are experiencing long-term declines in system support world-wide.

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Appendix

The construction of indicators of system support and tolerance:

System Support

      The indicator of system support is based on a core series of items that use a scale from one to seven to measure "diffuse support" or legitimacy of the political system. The five items read as follows:

B1. To what extent do you think the courts of justice guarantee a fair trial?

B2. To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)?

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

B4. To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of (country)?

B6. To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of (country)?

      The items are rescaled to a 0-100 range and combined into a single additive scale, the system support index, also based on a 0-100 metric.

Tolerance

      The indicator of political tolerance is based on a core series of items that use a scale from one to ten in which respondents are asked the extent to which they approve "who only say bad things about our system of government" to participate in politics:

D1. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people's right to vote?

D2. How strongly do you approve or disapprove that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views?

D3. Still thinking of those who only say bad things about the (country) form of government, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office?

D4. How strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people appearing on television to make speeches?

      The items were rescaled to a 0-100 range and combined into a single additive scale, the political tolerance index, also based on a 0-100 metric.

Support for Stable Democracy

      The indicator of support for stable democracy is based on the combination of the system support and tolerance indicators. First, both indicators are first divided into low (≤50) and high (>50) categories. Then, they are combined into a two-by-two scheme of low or high tolerance and low or high system support:

		System Support	
		Low (≤ 50)	High (>50)
Political Tolerance	Low (≤ 50)		
	High (>50)		Support for Stable Democracy

      Finally, scores of high tolerance and system support are recoded into support for stable democracy.

Table 1: Predictors of High System Support and High Tolerance in Costa Rica, 2014

	Coefficient	t
Urban	-0.080	-0.56
Perception of Insecurity	-0.077	-1.25
Victim of Crime	0.075	1.06
Support for Democracy	0.405*	5.09
Corruption Victimization	-0.040	-0.67
Ideology (Left / Right)	0.119	1.93
Political Efficacy	0.023	0.35
Levels of Education	0.248*	2.90
Wealth Quintiles	0.266*	2.97
Skin Color	0.029	0.36
Female	-0.049	-0.64
Age	0.012	0.16
Presidential Job Approval	-0.120*	-2.20
Political Interest	0.056	0.72
Constant	-1.054*	-7.77
F	*5.30*	
Number of Observations	*1,247*	
* p<0.05		

Note: Coefficients with an asterisk are statistically
significant at p<0.05, two-tailed.

Table 2: Predictors of Tolerance in Costa Rica, 2014

	Coefficient	t
Wealth Quintiles	0.100*	3.19
Female	0.009	0.38
Age	-0.039	-1.18
Years of Education	0.123*	4.15
Voted for Liberación Nacional	-0.075*	-3.01
Voted for Acción Ciudadana	0.010	0.33
Voted for Movimiento Libertario	-0.001	-0.03
Constant	-0.000	-0.00
F	*7.571*	
Number of Observations	*1,465*	
* p<0.05		

Note: Coefficients with an asterisk are statistically
significant at p<0.05, two-tailed.