

Insights Series #163

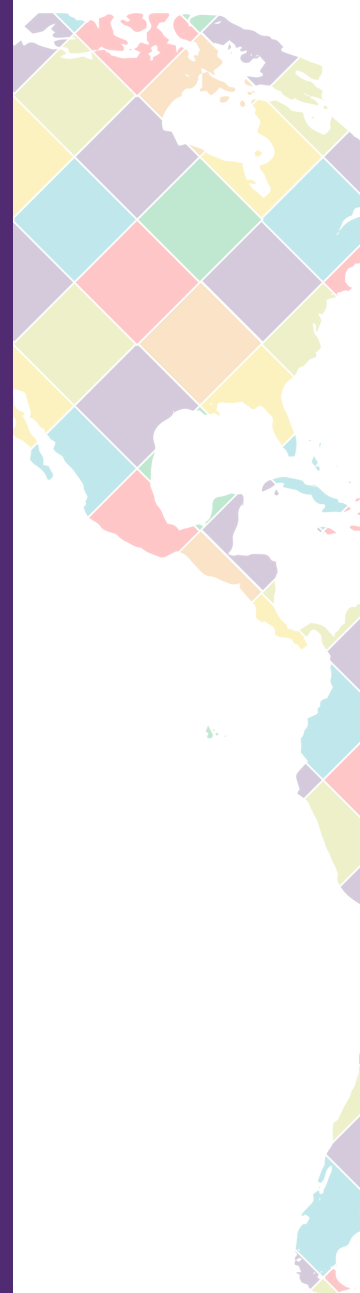
Who Trusts Votes Are Counted Correctly and Fairly?

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Key Findings:

- Less than half of individuals in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region believe that their votes are counted correctly and fairly
- Individuals who are older and wealthier tend to trust more that their votes are counted correctly and fairly
- Satisfaction with overall executive performance is correlated with belief that votes are counted correctly and fairly
- Individuals who support democracy are more likely to perceive that their votes are counted fairly



For the almost decade and a half starting in 1990, 10 countries in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region had at least one election where electoral misconduct took place.¹ Since then, the region continues to experience elections where losing candidates deny the validity of the outcomes.² More recently, in Mexico, the decision to minimize the power of the National Electoral Institute (INE), has threatened the country's electoral integrity.³ In Brazil's 2022 presidential election, Bolsonaro's dedicated voters took to the streets in protest of a stolen election and demanded the military intervene.⁴ When elections are perceived as "unfair, corrupt, or flawed, this strengthens public perceptions of electoral malpractices, undermines feelings of political legitimacy, dampens voter turnout, and encourages protest politics."⁵ Given these events in the region and the implications of electoral integrity for the health of democracy, it is important to examine what makes individuals more or less likely to trust their votes are counted fairly.

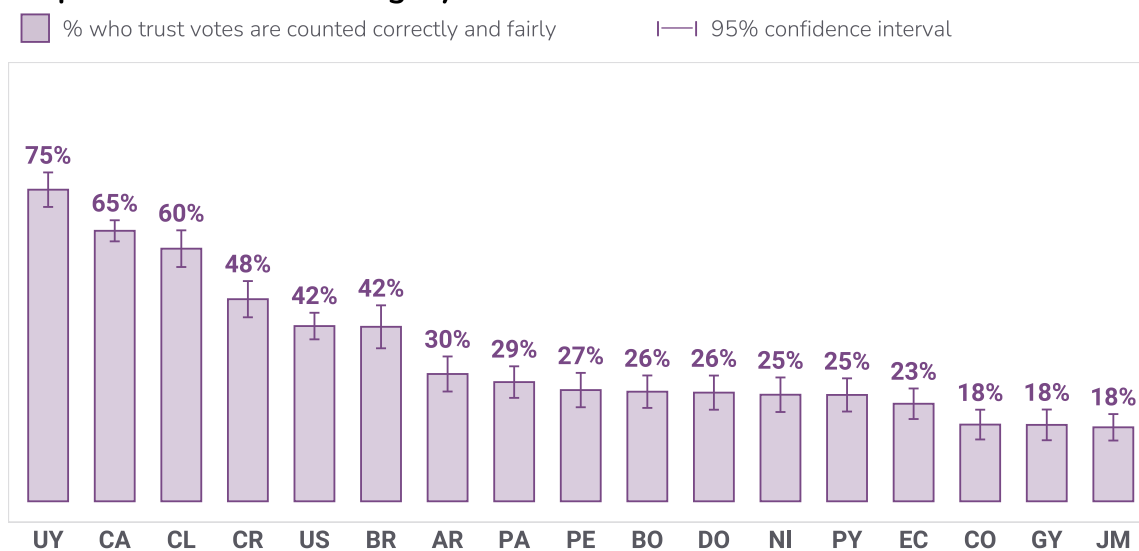
Electoral integrity is a broad concept that encompasses norms, standards, and/or practices. For this report, I consider perceptions that votes are counted fairly as an indicator of citizens' belief in electoral integrity. An individual's perception of election results is viewed through the lens of a vote's integrity, and that, in turn, influences attitudes of the country's political system.⁶ While there is significant research on how perceptions of electoral integrity can impact various attitudes, this report aims to analyze how sociodemographic variables and other experiences and beliefs are related to electoral integrity in the LAC region.⁷

This *Insights* report analyzes predictors of perceptions of electoral integrity. The 2021 round of the LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey measured the belief that votes are counted correctly and fairly by asking the following question to 14,965 respondents from across 17 countries in the Americas:⁸

I will mention some things that can happen during elections and ask you to indicate if they happen in [country]... COUNTFAIR1: Votes are counted correctly and fairly. (1) Always (2) Sometimes (3) Never

Figure 1.

Perceptions of Electoral Integrity



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

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How Do Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Vary across the Americas?

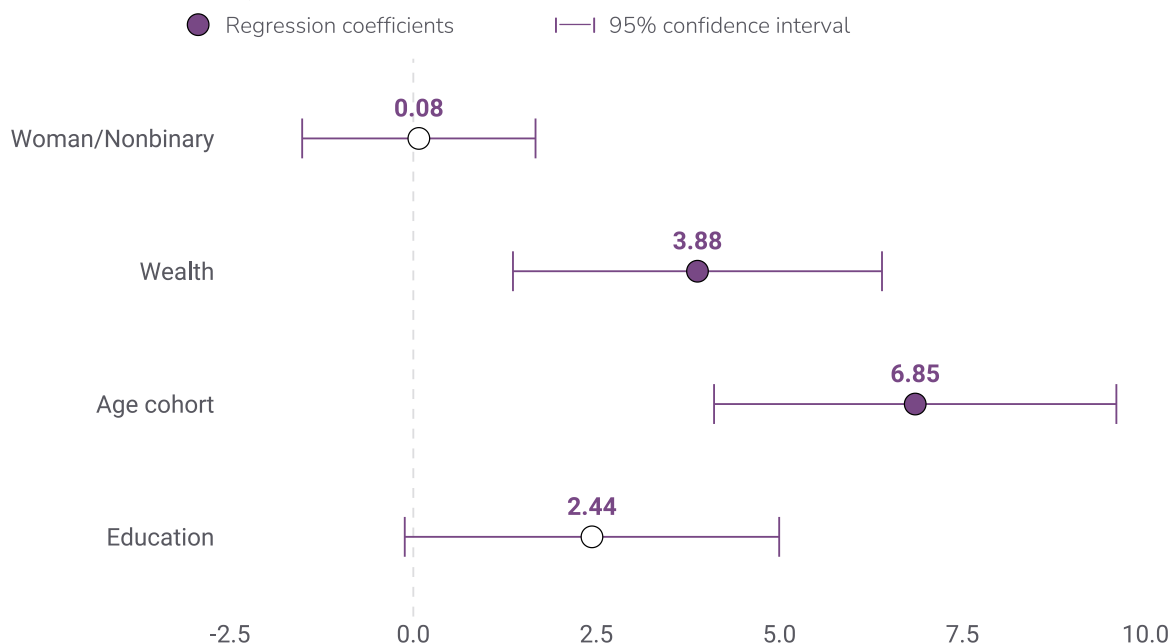
Figure 1 summarizes the percentage of individuals across the surveyed countries who believe their votes are always counted correctly and fairly. The I-shaped line represents the 95% confidence interval for each country. In 11 out of the 17 countries, trust that votes are counted correctly and fairly is held by less than half of the population surveyed. Those in Uruguay (75%), Canada (65%), and Chile (60%) have the highest percentage of trust that their votes are counted correctly, while other countries have relatively lower proportions: Jamaica (18%), Guyana (18%), and Colombia (18%). Ultimately, there is a 57-percentage point difference between Uruguay, the country with the highest percentage of individuals who believe their votes are always counted correctly and fairly, and Jamaica, the country with the lowest percentage. Jamaica's low ranking may come as a surprise given that in two categories, having the head of government and the legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections, Freedom House gave Jamaica the highest score possible.⁹ The disparity between assessments of electoral integrity and the publics' belief that their votes are being counted correctly and fairly suggests that there are other factors contributing to unfavorable views.

While there has been extensive research by scholars on how perceptions of electoral integrity contribute to other views such as democracy and overall political legitimacy, there is comparatively limited work on how specific sociodemographic variables predict how citizens perceive electoral integrity.^{10,11} The remainder of this report focuses on individual-level predictors of electoral integrity.

The Older the Voter, the More Likely They Are to Have Positive Perceptions about Electoral Integrity in Their Country

Making use of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, I analyze how certain socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of individuals contribute to perceptions of electoral integrity.¹² Figure 2 shows regression results for a set of independent variables: age, wealth, education, and gender. I rescale all the independent variables from 0-1 to allow for a comparison of the maximum change in the outcome associated with each variable and rescale the dependent variable from 0-100, where higher values indicate greater belief in votes being counted correctly and fairly.¹³

Across all the predictors, age is most likely to determine perceptions about electoral integrity. As shown in Figure 2, those in the highest age cohort are 6.85 units more likely to believe votes are counted correctly than those in the lowest age cohort. This is consistent with past research, which has found that older citizens have more positive views of electoral integrity.¹⁴ Also, across the LAC region, those in the highest wealth category are 3.88 units more likely to believe their votes are counted correctly than those in the lowest wealth category. While previous research has not found income to be a significant predictor of opinions on electoral integrity, in this case, wealth is.¹⁵ In previous research, women, on average, have less favorable views of electoral integrity than do men.¹⁶ Meanwhile, others have reported that those with higher levels of education tend to have increasingly positive perceptions of electoral integrity, but that is only found in more robust democracies—in weaker democracies, the more educated an individual is, the more likely they are to hold negative views of electoral integrity.¹⁷ Despite these claims, in this report, both measures of gender and education are not significant predictors of trust in correct and fair vote counts.

Figure 2.**Socioeconomic Factors Predicting Perceptions of Electoral Integrity**

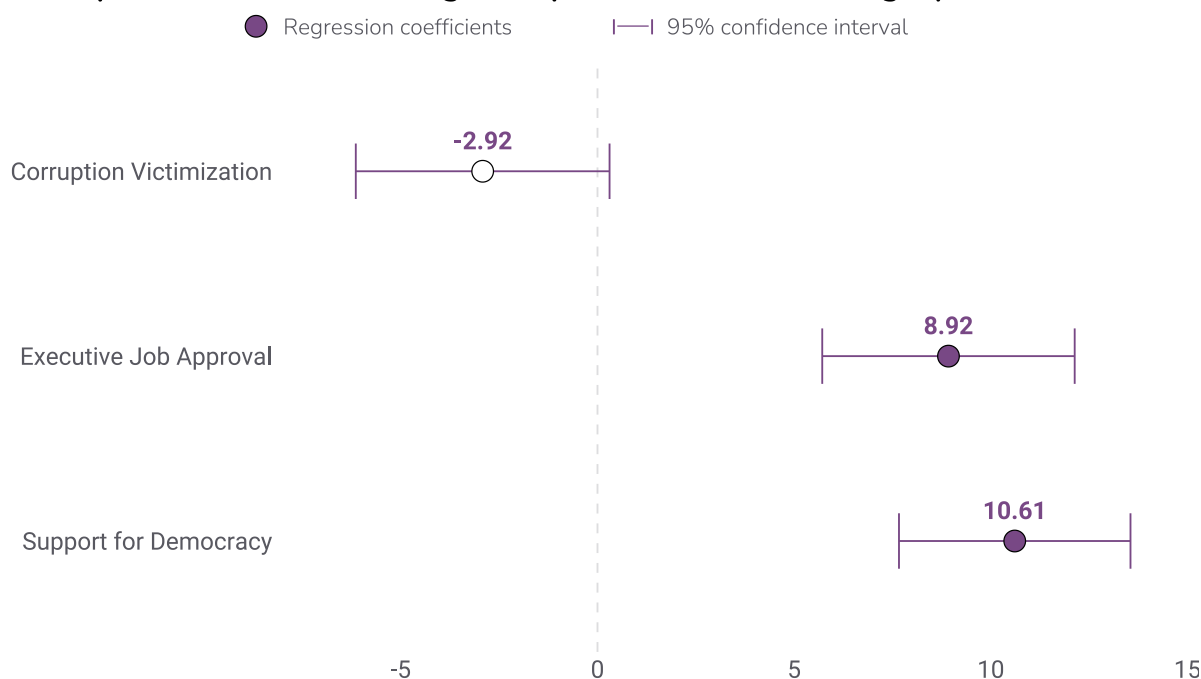
Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

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Executive Performance and Support for Democracy Are Associated with Trust in the Conduct of Elections

In this section, I consider additional variables that may be associated with perceptions of electoral integrity: corruption victimization, executive performance, and support for democracy. Figure 3 displays the coefficients corresponding to these variables; the model also includes the sociodemographic variables in Figure 2, but these are not shown.¹⁸

Recent scholarship has found that, in Latin America, corruption victimization increases the likelihood casting an invalid vote in an upcoming election, which may signal a lack of trust in electoral integrity.¹⁹ Other scholars have found that individuals who perceive more corruption tend to have lower levels of trust and support for their government.²⁰ Corruption victimization is operationalized using a dummy variable indicating whether a respondent was asked to pay a bribe by a government employee in the last twelve months. Figure 3 shows that the corruption victimization variable does not have a significant relationship with citizens' perceptions of their votes being counted correctly and fairly.

Figure 3.**An Expanded Model Predicting Perceptions of Electoral Integrity**

Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

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Scholars have demonstrated that when individuals have high approval ratings of a president, they also tend to increasingly trust their elections.²¹ I assess this relationship by analyzing how views on executive job performance may affect how citizens perceive the integrity of their elections. Looking deeper at executive job approval, my results affirm past scholarship by showing that those who believe the executive has done a “very good” job are 8.92 units more likely to believe their votes are counted correctly and fairly than those who answer, “very bad.”

Finally, there is a broad literature on the link between support for democracy and trust in elections.²² Typically research focuses on the effect of electoral integrity on democratic support, where electoral misconduct is associated with lower levels of support for democracy. To a similar end, it is worth examining whether support for democracy predicts belief that the votes are counted correctly and fairly.²³ To do so, I use a question that asks to what extent an individual agrees or disagrees with the statement that “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” The results support previous research: those who are the most supportive of democracy are 10.61 units more likely to believe their votes are counted correctly and fairly, as compared to those who are least supportive of democracy.

Conclusion

This *Insights* report sheds light on the complex issue of electoral integrity in the LAC region, revealing that less than half of citizens trust that their votes are always counted correctly and fairly. After looking at four sociodemographic variables (gender, wealth, age, and education), I found that the older and wealthier individuals are, the more likely they are to express confidence in the accuracy and fairness of the counting of their votes. Moreover, the research reveals two additional findings. First, the stronger satisfaction citizens have for their executive's overall performance, the more likely they are to have stronger perceptions of electoral integrity in their country. Second, citizens who express a higher support for democracy are more likely to trust electoral processes. Despite these noteworthy findings, questions remain unanswered about the other variables. I recommend that future research focus on understanding what variables are contributing to older individuals having more trust in their votes being counted correctly as well as what accounts for the effectively null results for education. Given that this analysis shows that being asked for a bribe by a government employee does not correlate to having negative perceptions of electoral integrity, I would encourage scholars to continue building on this report to fully understand these dynamics between corruption and trust in institutions.

Notes

1. Donno and Roussias 2012.
2. Hernández and Cantú 2022.
3. Wirtschafter and Sarukhan 2023.
4. Brito and Marcello 2022.
5. Norris 2012, 2.
6. Mauk 2022.
7. Norris, Frank, and Martínez i Coma 2014.
8. Of those who were asked the question, 531 responded “don’t know” and another 350 gave no response, for a total item non-response rate of 5.89%. This comparatively elevated non-response rate should be taken into consideration when interpreting findings from this report.
9. Jamaica: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report. Freedom House. (n.d.). Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/jamaica/freedom-world/2022>
10. Norris, Frank, and Martínez i Coma 2014.
11. Karp, Nai, and Norris 2018.
12. All independent variables were re-coded from 0 to 1. Gender (**GENDER**), women and non-binary individuals are represented by a 1, while men are represented by 0. Wealth (**WEALTH**) is a measurement based on a factor analysis of household possessions, such as a TV, refrigerator, etc. Age (**EDAD**) is a measure of the respondent’s age in cohorts (youngest cohort = 25 or under; oldest = 66+). Movement from 0 to 1 in age is from the youngest category to the oldest category. Education (**EDR**) is categorical by the highest level of education obtained by the individual. In this report, the lowest category is no or primary education while the highest is post-secondary education. Due to this, movement from 0 to 1 in education is from primary or no education to post-secondary education. Country-fixed effects are included but not shown in the regression analyses in this report.
13. The three-category variable is coded so that 0="never", 50="sometimes", and 100="always".
14. Cantú and García-Ponce 2015.
15. Flesken and Hartl 2018.
16. Klassen 2015.
17. Klassen 2015.

18. I did not recode the following variable: **EXC6**. In the last twelve months, did any government employee ask you for a bribe? The variable (**EXC6**) is on a 2-point scale that is scored in terms of a minimum (no, scored as 0) to maximum (yes, scored as 1). However, I did recode the following variables. **M1**. Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President [NAME OF CURRENT PRESIDENT]? The variable (**M1**) is on a 5-point scale that is coded in terms of a minimum (very bad, scored as 0) to maximum (very good, scored as 1). **ING4**. Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? The variable (**ING4**) is on a 7-point scale and is coded in terms of a minimum (strongly disagree, scored as 0) to maximum (strongly agree, scored as 1).
19. Borges 2021.
20. Anderson and Tverdova 2003.
21. Gutiérrez Sánchez 2022.
22. See Norris 2013 for a broad overview of the relevant scholarship.
23. Norris 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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