

AmericasBarometer Insights: 2010 (No.34)\*

# Popular Support for Suppression of Minority Rights<sup>1</sup>

By Diana Orces, Ph.D. candidate  
[diana.m.orces@Vanderbilt.edu](mailto:diana.m.orces@Vanderbilt.edu)  
Vanderbilt University

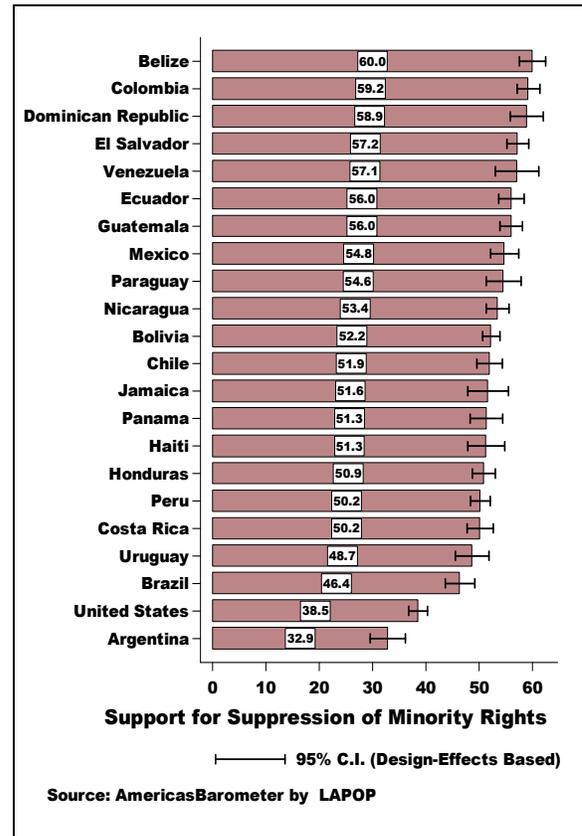
An apparently growing support for populist leaders and their policies in Latin America is one of the greatest concerns among democracy scholars (Conniff 1999; Seligson 2007). In order to have a comprehensive understanding of this support, the *AmericasBarometer Insights Series* has analyzed various features of citizens' support for the concentration of executive power. This paper is the fourth one (IO834) in this series and analyzes, specifically, popular support for the suppression of minority rights once "the people decide what is right." This question was included in the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey, which involved face-to-face interviews conducted in 22 nations in Latin America and the Caribbean (this question was not asked in

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<sup>1</sup> Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

Canada), and a web survey in the United States.<sup>2</sup> A total of 33,412 respondents were asked the following question:

Figure 1. Average Support for Suppression of Minority Rights in the Americas, 2008



POP110. Once the people decide what is right, we must prevent opposition from a minority. How much do you agree or disagree with that view?

Responses were based on a 1-7 scale, where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 7 meant "strongly agree"; to simplify comparisons across

<sup>2</sup> Funding for the 2008 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

questions and survey waves, these responses were recoded on a 0-100 scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Strongly disagree			Strongly agree				Doesn't know

Figure 1 demonstrates national averages for the 22 countries in the sample.<sup>3</sup> Belize is the country with the highest support for suppression of minority rights, with an average of 60 points on a 0-100 scale. There is little variation across countries in the Americas with the exception of the United States and Argentina, the only two countries that show statistically significant differences from the rest of the countries in the sample (United States, 38.5 and Argentina, 32.9). It is noteworthy that in Venezuela and in Ecuador, two countries where populist leadership has emerged, there is fairly high support for suppressing minority opposition with scores of 57.1 and 56 points, respectively. Perhaps these results mirror people's satisfaction with the performance of their current leaders (i.e., Presidents Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa), who have carried out various political and economic reforms in favor of certain sectors of the population. Thus, citizens may prefer to impose limits on the opposition to avoid any threats to these popular (and populist) leaders. Following this logic, it is not surprising that Colombia and the Dominican Republic, which also had very popular presidents at the time of the survey, show high levels of support for suppressing the opposition. In the following section, we analyze the effects of socio-economic and demographic determinants as well as political attitudes and behaviors on the support for suppression of minority rights in the Americas.

## Predicting Support for Suppression of Minority Rights

<sup>3</sup> Non-response was 12% for the sample as a whole.

What explains the limited variation across countries in the Americas?<sup>4</sup> We first analyze the effect of the traditional socio-economic and demographic variables, such as levels of education, gender, wealth, and size of the city/town.

**Figure 2.** Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Average Support for Suppression of Minority Rights in the Americas, 2008

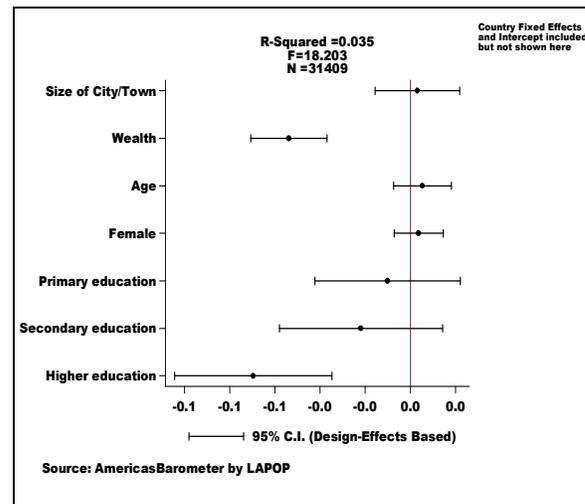


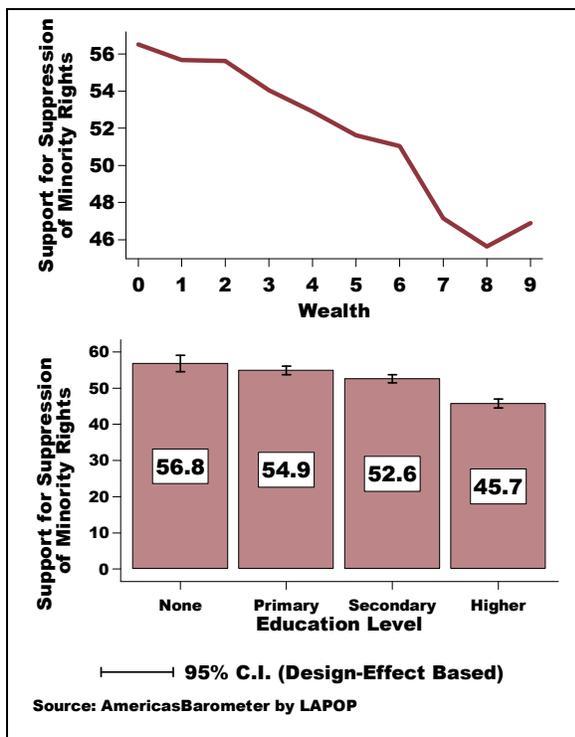
Figure 2 shows the significant role that socio-economic and demographic variables play in explaining support for popular support for the suppression of minority rights once “the people decide what is right.” Given that the average citizen in the United States scores very high on socio-economic characteristics compared to those in the rest of the countries in the sample, we excluded this case from the analysis. Each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical “0” line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left of the

<sup>4</sup> We examined contextual factors that might explain some of the national-level variation we found. However, multilevel analyses predicting support for the prevention of opposition from a minority with the traditional national characteristics, such as GDP, economic growth, and level of democracy, did not yield significant results.

“0” line a negative effect. If the effects are statistically significant, they are shown by confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot that do not overlap the vertical “0” line (at .05 or better). If they overlap the vertical line, the effects are statistically insignificant.

We find in Figure 2 that wealthy citizens show significantly lower levels of support for the suppression of minority rights. This finding corroborates those of previous reports in this *Insight Series* where the wealthy report lower support for presidential limits on the voice and vote of opposition parties (I0809), lower support for the executive to govern without a legislature (I0825), and lower support for political monism or citizens’ worldview of a battle between good and evil (I0817).

**Figure 3.**  
Wealth, Education, and Support for Suppression of Minority Rights in Latin America, 2008



Gender, age, and size of the city/town did not yield significant results among the key demographic variables. By far, the most important factors explaining opposition to this undemocratic view of limiting the opposition of a minority are education and wealth; the higher an individual’s education and wealth, the more strongly s/he would resist imposing limits on the minority. These effects are better illustrated in Figure 3, shown by its sample means.

To have a more in depth comprehension of what factors influence support for executive dominance, we also examine the impact of some political attitudes and behaviors that may play a role in explaining this support. Specifically, we expect that those who are especially satisfied with the performance of the incumbent president<sup>5</sup> and who express support for the government to rule with an “iron fist”<sup>6</sup> will express greater support for imposing limits to the voice of the minority who oppose the government. As we suggested earlier, citizens may be satisfied with existing political and economic reforms. Consequently, they may prefer to impose limits on the opposition to avoid any threats to the administration of the current president. Other variables included in this analysis are rightist ideology, political knowledge, and political interest.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 4 displays the impact of political attitudes on support for suppression of minority rights. Indeed, we find that those more satisfied with the performance of the incumbent

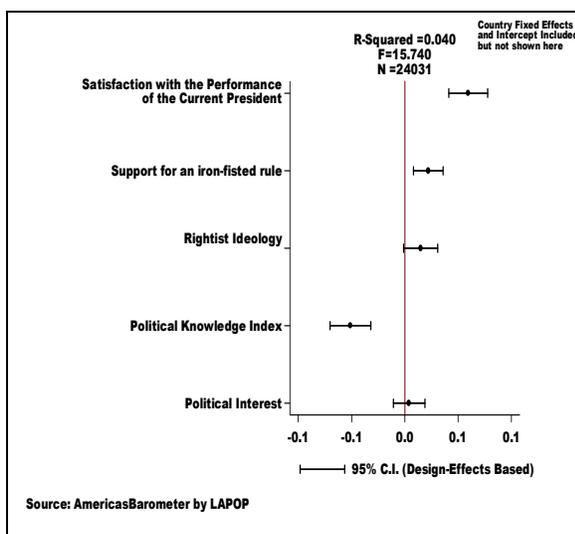
<sup>5</sup> Satisfaction with the job of the current president was measured by: speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President (...)? (1) Very good (2) Good (3) Neither good nor bad (fair) (4) Bad (5) Very bad. In order to simplify the interpretation of these responses, we recoded them on a 0-100 scale.

<sup>6</sup> This attitude was measured by: “Do you think that our country needs a government with an iron fist, or that problems can be resolved with everyone’s participation?” The item was recoded into (1) indicating support for a government with an iron fist and (0) indicating otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> This variable was measured by: how much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?

president have higher support for the concentration of executive power when related to the limiting of the minority's voice. In other words, the more popular the president, the less support there is for a minority's opposition after controlling for socio-economic and attitudinal variables. Similarly, those who demonstrate more authoritarian attitudes, as measured by support for an "iron fisted" government are those who express a higher support for suppression of minority rights. Furthermore, in the same way as with the demographic and socio-economic characteristics analyzed so far in this short report, these results also parallel those of prior reports in this *Insight Series* when related to support for the concentration of executive power. Support for an iron-fisted rule and support for the incumbent president consistently have a positive effect on various aspects of populist attitudes, such as support for presidential limits on the voice and vote of opposition parties (I0809), support for the executive to govern without a legislature (I0825), and support for political monism or citizen's worldview of a battle between good and evil (I0817).

**Figure 4.**  
Determinants of Average Support for Suppression of Minority Rights in the Americas, 2008



A surprising finding, and in opposition to what we have seen so far in this series, is the insignificant effect of rightist ideology<sup>8</sup> in particular, given that this variable has consistently achieved statistical significance in all the various features of support for executive concentration of power previously analyzed. Here, ideology does not have any significant effect. Additionally, in contrast with our findings of a previous report related to support for political monism (I0817), political knowledge<sup>9</sup> yields statistically significant results, indicating the relevance of political knowledge as a factor capable of depressing undemocratic attitudes. It is worth mentioning that all these variables are statistically significant after controlling for the perception of personal and national economic well being, as well as country effects and the traditional socio-economic and demographic variables.<sup>10</sup>

## Program and Policy Implications

With the persistent and increasing support for populist leadership in Latin America, it is vital to understand the sources of this support. Why do citizens continue to support populist leaders who may hinder the prospects of democracy in the region? In this short paper, we specifically examined one feature of executive dominance support, measured by the suppression of

<sup>8</sup> Rightist ideology was measured by: L1. (Left-Right Scale) On this card there is a 1-10 scale that goes from left to right. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those on the left and those on the right. In other words, some people sympathize more with the left and others with the right. According to the meaning that the terms "left" and "right" have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?

<sup>9</sup> The Political Knowledge Index is measured through the following questions: GI1. What is the name of the current president of the (country)? GI2. What is the name of the President of (Congress) in (country)? GI3. How many (provinces) does the (country) have? GI4. How long is the (presidential/prime ministerial) term of office in country? GI5. What is the name of the current president of Brazil?

It is worthy of note that the question related to Congress was not asked in Bolivia.

<sup>10</sup> Refer to the Appendix for a detailed display of those effects.

minority rights once “the people decide what is right.” We found that the wealthy and the highly educated are those who consistently demonstrate low support for this view, rendering further evidence for the significant role that wealth and education play to preserve a healthy democratic political culture. The AmericasBarometer data also suggest that the more citizens are satisfied with the incumbent government’s performance and the more they support a government that rules with an “iron fist,” the more they are willing to support limits on the voice of a minority. As previously mentioned, when people feel that their needs have been met, their interests may be threatened by the opposition, therefore, showing higher support for imposing restraints on those who oppose the government. What do these results mean for democracy in the region? If people continue to express high support for governments that in one form or another carry out undemocratic practices, as recently experienced in Venezuela where President Hugo Chávez won by a majority a referendum that will allow him to run again for office in 2012 and beyond without limits,<sup>11</sup> this is a clear example that democracy as a form of government may be at risk.

However, our findings also indicated that those who have higher political knowledge express lower levels of support for limiting the voice of a minority, suggesting that those who have a deeper understanding of the political world are more aware of the importance that the protection of the rights of minorities represents for the persistence of democracy as a form of government (Gibson 2005a; Gibson 2002; Gibson 2005b; Gibson 2006; McClosky 1983). For that reason, democratic governments should not only aim at increasing wealth and education but should emphasize the transmission of political knowledge, so that a strong political culture can be built, increasing the prospects for the

sustainability of democracy as a form of government. One way that such a program could be implemented in the region is by including in children’s educational agenda a section related to political awareness. By slowly increasing political knowledge among children, who represent the future of our countries, this may contribute to the reduction of intolerant attitudes, such as the attitude analyzed in here.

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<sup>11</sup> For more detailed information on this subject see [http://www.infolatam.com/entrada/venezuela\\_chavez\\_gano\\_su\\_referendum-12438.html](http://www.infolatam.com/entrada/venezuela_chavez_gano_su_referendum-12438.html)

## Appendix

**Table 1. Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Average Support for Suppression of Minority Rights in the Americas, 2008**

	Coefficient.	T
Higher education	-0.070*	(-3.94)
Secondary education	-0.023	(-1.23)
Primary education	-0.010	(-0.64)
Female	0.004	(0.66)
Age	0.004	(0.61)
Wealth	-0.054*	(-6.23)
Size of City/Town	0.003	(0.34)
Mexico	0.036*	(3.03)
Guatemala	0.032*	(2.88)
El Salvador	0.046*	(4.32)
Honduras	0.002	(0.16)
Nicaragua	0.019	(1.68)
Costa Rica	0.013	(1.14)
Panama	0.015	(1.12)
Colombia	0.058*	(5.38)
Ecuador	0.059*	(3.76)
Bolivia	0.022	(1.57)
Peru	0.009	(0.82)
Paraguay	0.027*	(2.31)
Chile	0.024*	(2.08)
Brazil	-0.018	(-1.46)
Venezuela	0.053*	(3.48)
Argentina	-0.086*	(-6.55)
Dominican Republic	0.054*	(4.25)
Haiti	-0.006	(-0.41)
Jamaica	0.011	(0.80)
Belize	0.064*	(5.50)
Constant	0.009	(0.93)
R-Squared	0.035	
Number of Obs.	31409	
* p<0.05		
Education level of Reference: None		
Country of Reference: Uruguay		

**Table 2. Determinants of Average Support for Suppression of Minority Rights in the Americas, 2008**

	<b>Coefficient.</b>	<b>t</b>
Political Interest	0.004	(0.53)
Political Knowledge Index	-0.051*	(-5.22)
Ideology Scale	0.015	(1.82)
Support for an iron-fisted rule	0.022*	(3.11)
Satisfaction with the Performance of the Current President	0.059*	(6.36)
Perception of National Economic Situation	-0.011	(-1.32)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation	-0.008	(-0.97)
Education	-0.039*	(-3.99)
Female	-0.010	(-1.42)
Age	-0.006	(-0.75)
Wealth	-0.040*	(-4.09)
Size of City/Town	0.012	(1.15)
Mexico	0.024*	(1.99)
Guatemala	0.018	(1.48)
El Salvador	0.039*	(3.49)
Honduras	-0.001	(-0.10)
Nicaragua	0.010	(0.80)
Costa Rica	0.018	(1.56)
Panama	0.017	(1.27)
Colombia	0.045*	(3.80)
Ecuador	0.056*	(3.24)
Bolivia	0.025	(1.71)
Peru	0.004	(0.39)
Paraguay	0.024	(1.78)
Chile	0.017	(1.48)
Brazil	-0.018	(-1.48)
Venezuela	0.041*	(2.47)
Argentina	-0.095*	(-6.64)
Dominican Republic	0.042*	(3.25)
Haiti	-0.003	(-0.25)
Jamaica	0.014	(0.98)
Belize	0.047*	(3.50)
Constant	0.020	(1.93)
R-Squared	0.040	
Number of Obs.	24031	
* p<0.05		
Country of Reference: Uruguay		