# The Varying Economic Meaning of "Left" and "Right" in Latin America

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The terms "left" and "right" are widely used to describe politics around the world. But what do these terms mean to citizens in the Latin American region? On the one hand, there is widespread agreement that ideological labels can be useful tools (often called "cues") with which individuals can make sense of and communicate about the complex world of politics (see Fuchs and Klingemann 1990). On the other hand, however, research in a number of countries (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976) including those in Latin America (Zechmeister 2003, 2006b and chapter 3 in Kitschelt et al. 2010) has shown that the significance of the terms "left" and "right" varies across individuals and across countries. The purpose of this new *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* report[1] is to examine the extent to which understandings of the left-right labels vary from country to country, and from person to person, in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For reasons stated below, we limit our focus to assessing cross-national differences in the economic component of the left-right semantics. Given research suggesting that individual capacities for ideological thinking vary, we also explore variation within countries by level of political knowledge. The data we use are from the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys.[2] In this survey 37,035 respondents from 22 nations in Latin America and the Caribbean were asked the same question:[3]

**L1**. Now, to change the subject.... 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?

**Figure 1. Left-right Distribution in Mexico and Central America, 2008**
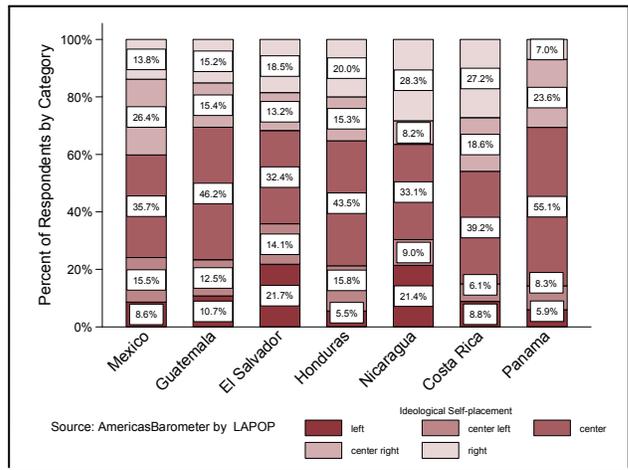
Across the 22 countries in the sample, citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean place themselves on average in centrist positions on the left-right scale. The mean in each country falls between 5 and 6 on the 1-10 scale except for the Dominican Republic where the national average falls to the right, at 7. Given that averages do not allow us to see differences in the distribution of responses, we created a new scale, compressing the original one into five categories: left (1-2), center-left (3-4), center (5-6), center-right (7-8), and right (9-10). Figures 1 to 3 show the distribution of responses on this variable by regions and allow us to see differences among countries despite the fact that the mean is usually at the center. Considering Figures 1 and 2, countries with more people placed on the left (left+center left) include El Salvador and Nicaragua (see Figure 1) and Uruguay (see Figure 2). In contrast, in Mexico, Costa Rica, and Colombia, the tendency is to self-place on the right; in each of these three countries, around 40% of the population falls into the center right and right categories.

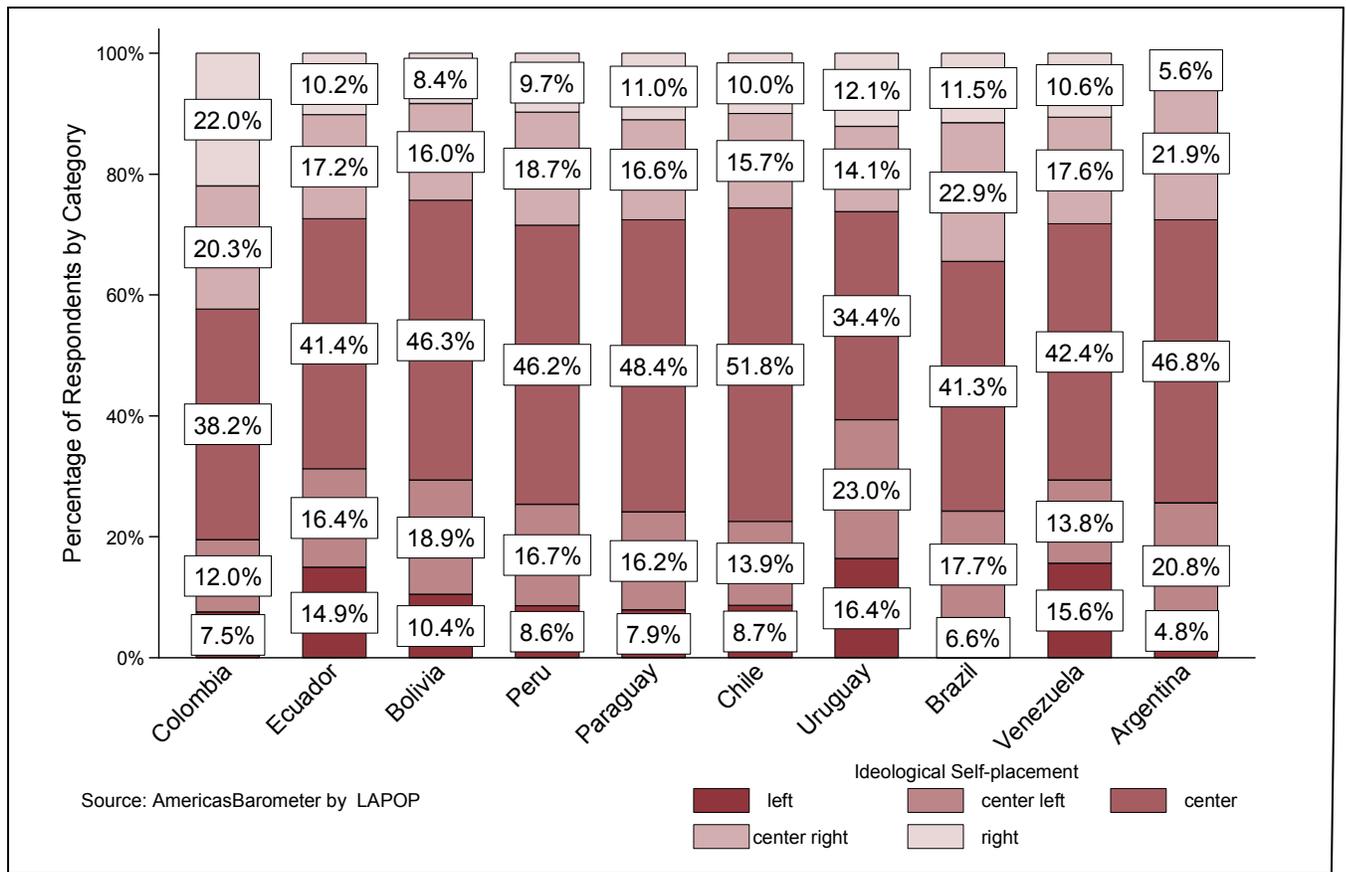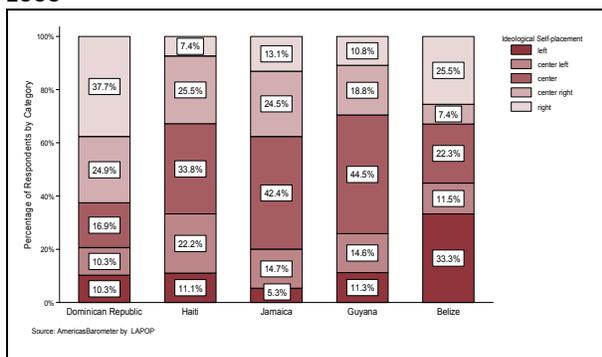**Figure 2. Left-right Distribution in South America, 2008**



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**Figure 3. Left-right Distribution in the Caribbean, 2008**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

As Figure 3 depicts, the Caribbean shows even more heterogeneity in left-right distribution. On the one hand, the majority of people in Dominican Republic place themselves to the right. On the other hand, citizens in Haiti and Belize on average are more likely to lean left.

## Examining the Relationship between Left-right Self-Placement and Economic Policy Preferences

What do people have in mind when they place themselves on the left-right scale? To some people, the terms "left" and "right" refer to policy stances, while to others they signify something else such as political objectives (e.g., ending poverty), political parties, groups (e.g., rich and poor), or politicians.[4]

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[4] Still others may have less clear political conceptions of the terms, or no understanding altogether. In fact, the high non-response rate for the question (see Footnote 3) suggests that as many as twenty percent of people in the region lack an understanding of the terms that is sufficient enough to facilitate their own placement on the scale (or are unwilling to disclose those views to the interviewer). Although this non-response level is high, it is worth noting that, according to data from the 2002 Eurobarometer, a similar percentage of European survey respondents does not answer the left-right question. There does, though, exist greater variation across countries in the Americas as compared to Europe; in the former, the lowest percentage of non-respondents is 8% for Uruguay and the highest is found in Belize (41%) (See Appendix 1). We thank Zeynep Somer-Topcu for this information on the Eurobarometer data. Regression analysis predicting non-response with socioeconomic variables

For two reasons, we consider here the degree to which economic policy preferences predict left-right stances. First, as Inglehart (1997) suggests, classic conceptions of the left-right semantics see the terms as distinguishing between those who prefer more (left) or less (right) state intervention in the economy. Second, Kitschelt et al. (2010) identify the economic-distributive divide as the strongest dimension of programmatic party competition at the turn of the century in Latin America. Thus, there is reason to suspect that left-right placements will and should be associated with economic policy preferences. However, given past research and recent shifts in the party systems and in salient issues, the debate is open regarding the economic significance of these labels in contemporary Latin America.

In order to assess the content that Latin Americans assign to left-right labels we consider preferences over the role of the state in the economy and, as well, preferences for/against free trade. We begin with the assumption that, to the degree to which the terms "left" and "right" are understood as indicators of an economic issue divide, people's stances on economic policies should predict their left-right self-placement.

We first make use of three questions in the AmericasBarometer that measure preferences over the role of the State in the economy: whether the State, more than the private sector, should be responsible for ensuring the well-being of people (ROS2), creating jobs (ROS3), and implementing strict policies to reduce income inequality (ROS4).[5] We examined the

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revealed that the less educated, women, the poorer, and people living in small cities or rural areas are more likely to not place themselves on the left-right scale.

[5] The questions were the following: ROS2. The (Country) government, more than individuals, is the most responsible for ensuring the well-being of the people. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?; ROS3. The (Country) government, more than the private sector, is the primarily responsible for creating jobs. To what extent to do you agree or disagree with this statement?; ROS4. The

scale reliability of these questions, which turned out to be reasonably high for most of the countries.[6] We then created a single variable scale (additive) from those three variables that we call *Support for an Active State*.[7] We recoded that variable so that higher values indicate pro-market positions. Furthermore, we also take into account positions regarding free trade (B48), that is to say the degree to which people think free trade agreements help the country's economy.[8]

The expectation is that pro-market preferences and pro-free trade attitudes are related to rightist positions. In order to assess this expectation, we regress left-right self-placement on the new variable *Support for an Active State* and the *Free Trade* variable.[9]

**Table 1. Economic Content of the Left-Right Scale**

|  | Active State | Free Trade |
|---|---|---|
| Argentina | Y | Y |
| Belize | - | - |
| Bolivia | Y | NA |
| Brazil | - | - |
| Chile | Y | - |
| Colombia | - | Y |
| Costa Rica | - | Y |
| Dominican Republic | - | Y |
| Ecuador | Y | Y |
| El Salvador | Y | Y |
| Guatemala | - | Y |
| Guyana | - | Y(opposite) |
| Haiti | Y | NA |
| Honduras | Y(opposite) | Y |
| Jamaica | Y | Y(opposite) |
| Mexico | Y(opposite) | Y |
| Nicaragua | - | - |
| Panama | - | - |
| Paraguay | Y | Y |
| Peru | - | Y |
| Uruguay | Y | Y |
| Venezuela | - | - |

Table 1 summarizes the regressions results for each country. It shows the variables that are statistically significant at a generous cut-off of p<0.10, meaning that with a moderate level of confidence we can say that those variables noted with a "Y" predict ideological self placement. A note of "(opposite)" indicates results that are statistically meaningful but that, as we will describe next, run in an unexpected direction.

We see that in two countries (Honduras and Mexico) we obtain results that go in the opposite direction than the expectation. That is to say, in Honduras and Mexico people who have a pro-market orientation tend to locate themselves toward the left. Likewise, in Guyana and Jamaica, supporting free trade policies corresponds with leftist, rather than rightist, positions. In 9 countries the role of state predicts ideological self-placement in the expected

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(Country) government should implement firm policies to reduce inequality in income between the rich and the poor. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?. Responses were based on a 1-7 scale where 1 meant strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. The survey also contains this question: ROS1. The (Country) government, instead of the private sector, should own the most important enterprises and industries of the country. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement? Analyses revealed that the scale reliability coefficient decreased when we consider this fourth variable and therefore we do not include it here.

[6] For the sample as a whole the scale reliability coefficient was 0.79. The lowest value is 0.53 for the Dominican Republic whereas the highest value is 0.87 in Ecuador (See Appendix II).

7 An alternative would be to factor analyze the set of variables for each country and create separate country-specific variables (see ch. 3 in Kitschelt et al., 2010).

[8] The wording for this question was the following: "To what extent do you believe that free trade agreement will help to improve the economy?" This question was not asked in Bolivia or Haiti.

[9] No control variables are included; see the next series of analyses for results by political knowledge.

direction. In 12 countries attitudes toward free trade predict ideological self-placement. However, only in 5 countries are both variables significant in the expected direction. Appendix III shows the R-squared for all the countries. The largest R-squared is 0.11 for El Salvador.[10]

Zechmeister's previous work suggests that elite discourse (and the general political information environment) affects the content assigned to the left-right semantics, so that if politicians use the labels in ways that associate the terms with policies, then people will understand the left and right in those ways. The results here are consistent with this argument. For example, in Costa Rica we see that free trade is a significant predictor of ideological self-placement. The survey in this country was conducted some months after the referendum on CAFTA, which likely made salient this issue and influenced the content assigned to ideology.

But, elite discourse is not all that matters. The economic content of the left-right dimension likely also depends on some individual characteristics of the respondent, so that we expect differences not only across countries but also within countries across different types of individuals.

Classic studies have demonstrated that ideological understanding demands some degree of cognitive effort (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976) and that the use of abstract concepts such as ideology varies with levels of formal education, information and political involvement (Converse 1964). Following recent studies that consider citizens engaged in politics to have richer policy attitudes, (Adams and Ezrow 2009), we evaluate the influence of political knowledge on the economic meaning of left-right positions in Latin America and the

Caribbean.[11] Table 2 summarizes these results for those respondents with the lowest and those with the highest political knowledge.

**Table 2. Economic Content of the Left-Right Scale by Level of Political Knowledge**

|  | Lowest Level | | Highest Level | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Role of State | Free Trade | Role of State | Free Trade |
| Argentina | - | Y | Y | Y |
| Belize | - | - | - | Y |
| Bolivia | Y | NA | Y | NA |
| Brazil | - | Y | - | Y |
| Chile | - | - | Y | - |
| Colombia | - | - | - | Y |
| Costa Rica | - | - | - | Y |
| Dominican Republic | Y (opposite) | - | - | Y |
| Ecuador | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| El Salvador | - | - | Y | Y |
| Guatemala | Y (opposite) | - | - | Y |
| Guyana | - | - | - | - |
| Haiti | Y | NA | - | NA |
| Honduras | Y (opposite) | - | Y (opposite) | Y |
| Jamaica | - | - | Y | Y |
| Mexico | Y (opposite) | Y | - | Y |
| Nicaragua | - | - | - | - |
| Panama | - | - | - | - |
| Paraguay | - | - | Y | Y |
| Peru | Y | - | Y | Y |
| Uruguay | Y (opposite) | Y (opposite) | Y | Y |
| Venezuela | Y | - | - | - |

When we assess the economic meaning of the left-right labels taking into account the level of political knowledge, we observe interesting differences. Among those with low levels of political knowledge, the role of the state predicts ideological placement in five countries in the expected direction (and five in the opposite direction). If we consider only those with higher political knowledge, the number of countries

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[10] For comparative purposes, we ran the same analysis for the United States and results yield statistically significant results for *Active State* with a R-squared of 0.19 (the largest in the whole sample). Moreover, the coefficient on the variable is in the expected direction.

[11] This variable is measured on a scale from 0 to 5 based on the respondents' number of correct answers to a series of objective and factual questions. We consider those who score 0 or 1 to have the "lowest level" and those who score 4 or 5 to have the "highest level" of political knowledge.

grows to 9 (only one in the opposite direction). We also get improvements regarding free trade (15 countries versus 4). Furthermore, R-squared values are higher among those with higher political knowledge than among the less knowledgeable.[12] Therefore, the economic meaning of the ideological scale is to some extent related to levels of political knowledge. In short, we find both differences across countries and within countries in the economic content of the left-right semantics in the Americas in 2008.

## Conclusion

This new *Insights Series* report has provided some evidence related to the different meanings that the left-right semantics hold for citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean. On the basis of these results (and prior studies), we assert that it would be an error to assume shared economic content to left-right labels in all countries. We have seen that, contrary to the classic expectation, in some countries supporting an active state role in economic policy does not translate into a leftist position. Likewise, attitudes toward free trade policies do not always predict a rightist placement on the left-right continuum. In some countries, only one or neither of these factors is related to left-right placements and in some countries one of the variables predicts left-right positions in exactly the opposite way one would expect.

Further, we have demonstrated that levels of political knowledge have an impact on the economic meaning of left and right. Citizens with higher levels of political knowledge seem to attach a more robust economic content to their ideological self-identification, compared to citizens with lower levels of political knowledge. In other words, the classic expectations hold better, but still far from perfectly, among those more informed about politics.

While the results presented in this *Insights* report caution against assuming the terms "left" and "right" relate to economic policies in all countries, and among all individuals, we also caution against an interpretation that the terms lack meaning altogether. Rather, the fact that a majority of people can place themselves on the left-right scale indicates that the terms are generally meaningful. As other studies have demonstrated, left-right stances are consequential to Latin American public opinion, for example as predictors of party preference and democratic values (Seligson 2007). Understandings of the terms, though, vary. Some (in particular more sophisticated people and in some countries) understand the terms to refer to economic policy preferences. Others likely understand the terms to refer to other policies. Still others may understand the terms to reference different groups, parties, or peoples. And, finally, some may attach purely affective content to the terms "left" and "right", considering one to be a positive referent and the other a pejorative label (see the discussions in, for example, Zechmeister 2003, 2006). An assessment of these different meanings goes beyond the scope of this short report but we plan to provide more evidence in further analyses.

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[12] See Appendix IV for R-squared values.

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## Appendix I. Percentage of Non-Response (Ideological Self-placement)

| | |
|---|---|
| Argentina | 13.79 |
| Belize | 41.82 |
| Bolivia | 23.04 |
| Brazil | 23.65 |
| Chile | 19.84 |
| Colombia | 16.77 |
| Costa Rica | 24.87 |
| Dominican Republic | 22.03 |
| Ecuador | 32.73 |
| El Salvador | 8.45 |
| Guatemala | 25.35 |
| Guyana | 19.89 |
| Haiti | 20.70 |
| Honduras | 17.41 |
| Jamaica | 16.68 |
| Mexico | 14.61 |
| Nicaragua | 29.87 |
| Panama | 15.62 |
| Paraguay | 25.90 |
| Peru | 10.27 |
| Uruguay | 8.27 |
| Venezuela | 24.4 |

## Appendix II. Scale Reliability Coefficients for ROS questions

| | Scale reliability coefficient |
|---|---|
| Argentina | 0.7152 |
| Belize | 0.7100 |
| Bolivia | 0.8233 |
| Brazil | 0.6857 |
| Chile | 0.8162 |
| Colombia | 0.7769 |
| Costa Rica | 0.7123 |
| Dominican Republic | 0.5300 |
| Ecuador | 0.8709 |
| El Salvador | 0.6719 |
| Guatemala | 0.8693 |
| Guyana | 0.6467 |
| Haiti | 0.8003 |
| Honduras | 0.8519 |
| Jamaica | 0.7690 |
| Mexico | 0.8257 |
| Nicaragua | 0.7767 |
| Panama | 0.8030 |
| Paraguay | 0.8157 |
| Peru | 0.8404 |
| Uruguay | 0.6740 |
| Venezuela | 0.7054 |
| Whole Sample | 0.7935 |

## Appendix III. Economic Content of Left-Right Scale.

|  | Role of State | Free Trade | Adjusted R-squared |
|---|---|---|---|
| Argentina | Y | Y | 0.018 |
| Belize | - | - | 0.000 |
| Bolivia | Y | N.a | 0.009 |
| Brazil | - | - | 0.000 |
| Chile | Y | - | 0.003 |
| Colombia | - | Y | 0.014 |
| Costa Rica | - | Y | 0.048 |
| Dominican Republic | - | Y | 0.010 |
| Ecuador | Y | Y | 0.029 |
| El Salvador | Y | Y | 0.11 |
| Guatemala | - | Y | 0.015 |
| Guyana | - | Y(opposite) | 0.001 |
| Haiti | Y | N.a | 0.010 |
| Honduras | Y(opposite) | Y | 0.074 |
| Jamaica | Y | Y(opposite) | 0.030 |
| Mexico | Y(opposite) | Y | 0.046 |
| Nicaragua | - | - | 0.000 |
| Panama | - | - | 0.000 |
| Paraguay | Y | Y | 0.016 |
| Peru | - | Y | 0.011 |
| Uruguay | Y | Y | 0.031 |
| Venezuela | - | - | 0.028 |

# Appendix IV. Economic Content of Left-Right Scale by Levels of Political Knowledge

| | Lowest Level | | | Highest Level | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Role of State | Free Trade | Adjusted R-squared | Role of State | Free Trade | Adjusted R-squared |
| Argentina | - | Y | 0.06 | Y | Y | 0.021 |
| Belize | - | - | 0.000 | - | Y | 0.193 |
| Bolivia | Y | N.a | 0.015 | Y | N.a | 0.10 |
| Brazil | - | Y | 0.06 | - | Y | 0.022 |
| Chile | - | - | 0.000 | Y | - | 0.014 |
| Colombia | - | - | 0.000 | - | Y | 0.2247 |
| Costa Rica | - | - | 0.000 | - | Y | 0.11 |
| Dominican Republic | Y(opposite) | - | 0.021 | - | Y | 0.055 |
| Ecuador | Y | Y | 0.014 | Y | Y | 0.056 |
| El Salvador | - | - | 0.000 | Y | Y | 0.28 |
| Guatemala | - | - | 0.014 | - | Y | 0.022 |
| Guyana | - | - | 0.000 | - | - | 0.000 |
| Haiti | Y | N.a | 0.006 | - | N.a | 0.000 |
| Honduras | Y(opposite) | - | 0.004 | Y(opposite) | Y | 0.10 |
| Jamaica | - | - | 0.000 | Y | - | 0.027 |
| Mexico | Y(opposite) | Y | 0.029 | - | Y | 0.182 |
| Nicaragua | - | - | 0.000 | - | - | 0.000 |
| Panama | - | - | 0.000 | - | - | 0.002 |
| Paraguay | - | - | 0.000 | Y | Y | 0.040 |
| Peru | Y | - | 0.007 | Y | Y | 0.033 |
| Uruguay | Y(opposite) | Y(opposite) | 0.100 | Y | Y | 0.08 |
| Venezuela | - | Y(opposite) | 0.01 | - | - | 0.000 |