

The indigenous in Latin America: 45 million with little voice

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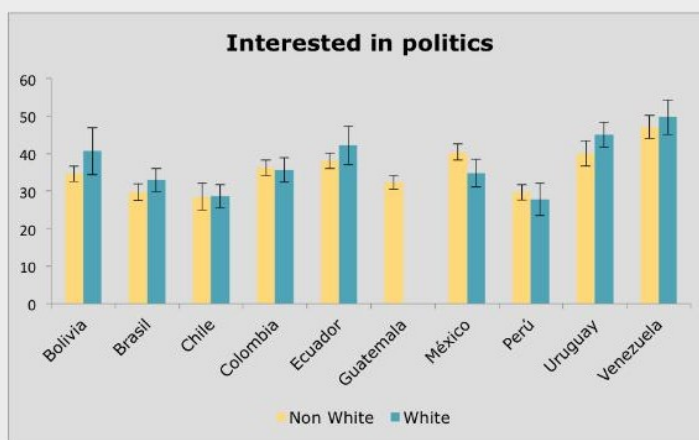
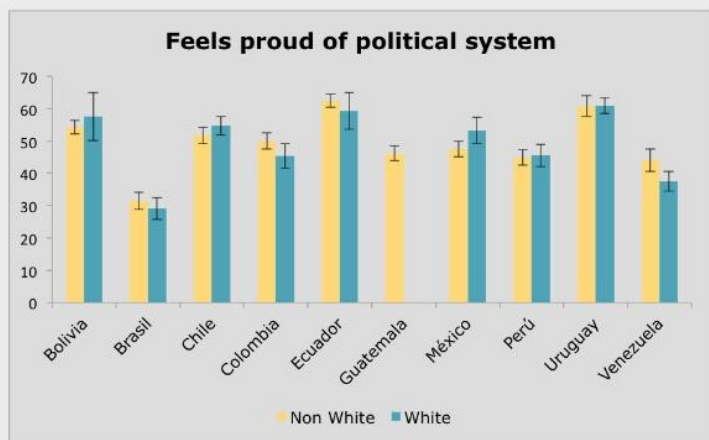
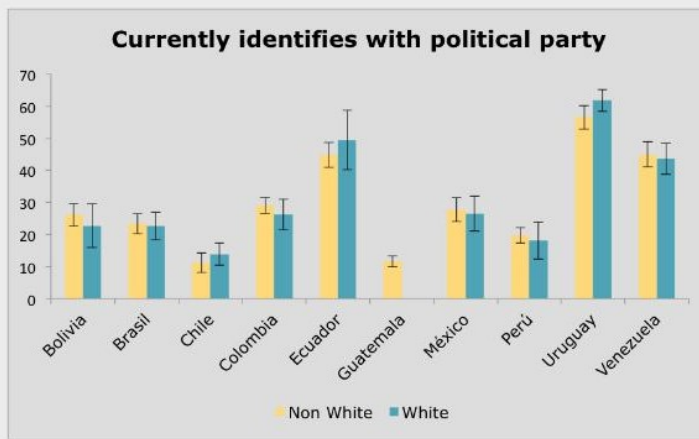
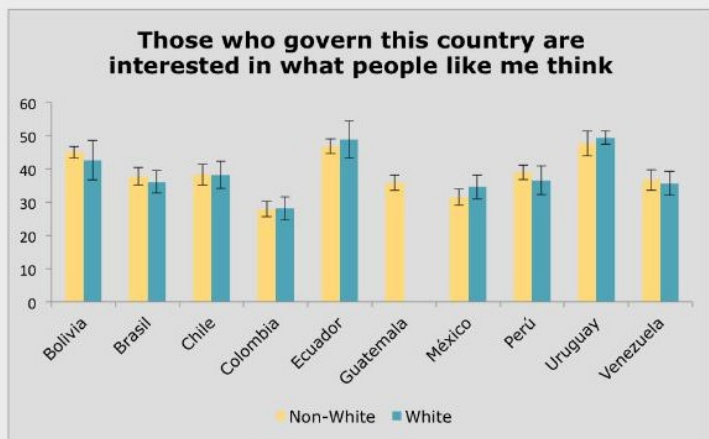
By Mercedes Hoffay and Sofia Rivas / August 31, 2016 [Click to read this article in Spanish](#) [Click to read this article in English](#)

Political representation of Indigenous peoples

	Indigenous population (%)	Total indigenous seats	% of total seats	Representation gap	Affirmative action	ILO 169 (year of ratification)	Prior Consultation
Bolivia	41%	41 out of 166	24.7%	40%	Yes	1991	Yes: Law 222 and Consitution
Brazil	0.5%	0 out of 594	0%	100%	No	2002	Yes: Art. 231 of Consitution
Chile	4.6%	0 out of 158	0%	100%	No	2008	Yes: Supreme decree 66
Colombia	3.3%	3 out of 268	1.12%	66%	Yes	1991	Yes: Jurisprudence
Ecuador	7%	7 out of 137	5.11%	27%	No	1998	Yes: Executive decree 1247
Guatemala	41%	20 out of 158	12.66%	69%	No	1996	No
Mexico	15%	14 out of 500	2.8%	81%	No, but created indigenous districts	1990	No
Peru	26%	9 out of 130	6.92%	73%	No	1994	Yes: Law 29785
Uruguay	4.8%	0 out of 130	0%	100%	No	No	No
Venezuela	2.8%	3 out of 165	1.82%	35%	Yes	2002	Yes: Constitution and Law 38.344

Sources: For indigenous population: World Bank 2015. For total indigenous seats and percentages: Mala Hunt 2016 (Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Venezuela); UNDP 2013 (Bolivia and Peru); own research (Uruguay). Representation Gap: our own calculations (difference between the percentage of indigenous population and the percentage of seats in Congress held by indigenous people). For Affirmative Action: UNDP 2013 and own research. Prior Consultation: UNDP 2013 and DPLF 2015.

Perceptions about politics and participation



Source: LAPOP 2014

Latin America is home to over 800 different indigenous peoples, with a total population of **45 million people**. In some countries, such as Bolivia or Guatemala, between 41 and 60 percent of the population is indigenous (depending on the statistic used). In Peru, around 26 percent of the population is indigenous and in Mexico 15 percent, though the latter has the largest absolute population of indigenous in the region with over 7.5 million.

Their population size raises a question: how well represented are they in elected office?

The answer: barely at all, and in many cases when they are elected to office, it's because of specifically reserved seats.

The reasons are multiple—economic, geographic, organizational, and cultural—and point to the many ways governments, civil society and political parties will need to tackle this problem if democracy in the region is to address this severe representational imbalance.

Latin America's indigenous peoples lag behind non-indigenous in terms of poverty, healthcare and access to justice. One example: on average, **43 percent of the indigenous peoples live in poverty** (surviving on less than \$4 a day) while only 21 percent of non-indigenous live on the same meager earnings in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru.

And while there have been advances in the past 20 years in terms of recognizing their legal rights to self-determination and prior consultation, most of these advances have taken place in international forums, oftentimes with little impact in the daily lives of most indigenous people. Since the mid-1990s, when the Zapatista movement in Mexico first brought indigenous issues to international attention, indigenous leaders have been increasingly

recognized as important political actors. But that recognition has not translated in any great numbers in terms of their presence in national legislatures or even national parties.

The three countries that fare best in proportion of political representation are Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. In contrast, Mexico, the country with the largest absolute indigenous population, has one of the highest representation gaps. As we can see in the chart above, Ecuador has an indigenous population of 7 percent and 5.11 percent of its parliament seats (7 out of 137) are occupied by indigenous legislators, a gap of 27 percent between the seats in parliament and the total indigenous population. Similarly, Venezuela—with a much smaller proportion of indigenous peoples overall—has a gap of 39 percent between its indigenous population and the number of seats they have in Congress. Bolivia is a paradigmatic case, since it is the only country with an indigenous political party (MAS, or *Movimiento al Socialismo*) in power and has the largest absolute number of indigenous congressmen, with 41 indigenous representatives. However, the overall gap between indigenous population and the seats in Congress is still 39.76 percent. Mexico's two chamber legislature only has 14 indigenous representatives, which translates into a representation gap of 81.33 percent.

We also analyzed whether the countries with higher representation also had affirmative action policies for indigenous peoples, by which some seats in congress would be reserved for indigenous legislators. Only three countries have reserved seats and two of them fare well in terms of representation (Bolivia and Venezuela). But Colombia, the third country with affirmative action, still has a 66 percent gap. And in [Venezuela](#), the Supreme Court has suspended one of the indigenous representatives from the Amazon region (along with two more legislators from the same area), based on (unproven) fraud allegations by the government.

Mexico does not demand ethnic-based quotas in their political parties' lists, but since 2001, they take indigenous populations into consideration when drawing electoral districts. Since then, the electoral authorities created 28 districts which are 40 percent indigenous or more. However, their representation in Congress is still one of the lowest in the region.

Reserved seats may be a good starting point but they are not likely to solve the issue of representation. As the Ecuadorian case—with no affirmative action and the lowest representation gap—proves, national organization and mobilization matters more at the national stage than set-asides.

We also examined whether higher representation of indigenous in national legislatures meant more legal recognition of indigenous rights and issues. Once again, the results were mixed. Most countries have ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 that recognizes the right for self-determination and prior consultation of indigenous peoples. At the national, constitutional level Bolivia and Ecuador are leaders in terms of recognizing that they are multi-national or pluri-national countries. However, this hasn't translated into real consultation and respect for indigenous rights, in spite of the legal documents and rhetoric. In the case of [Ecuador](#), the government recently imprisoned indigenous leaders for protesting against extractive projects on their lands.

Finally, we looked at whether the indigenous populations felt represented by the politicians in their country. We analyzed data from Vanderbilt University's Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) on how much individuals feel that those who govern their country are interested in what they think, whether they identify with a political party, if they were proud of their political system, and whether they were interested in politics. Subdividing the data between white and non-white population demonstrated virtually no difference between these groups in each country. There was, however, some variation country by country, but this is probably guided by specific national contexts. For example, in Bolivia 34.5 percent of the non-white and 40.6 of the white people expressed interest in politics. In Peru the numbers were even closer, 29.5 percent for non-white people and 27.7 percent for whites. In fact, in almost all cases, the confidence intervals were greater than the differences between white and non-white responses, meaning that the differences may not vary at all.

The division between white/non-white may leave some confusion on the inclusion of groups—such as Afro-descendant and mestizo populations—beyond indigenous. However, in some countries with higher percentage of indigenous populations, like [Guatemala](#) and [Bolivia](#), LAPOP specifically breaks out indigenous responses from binary

white/non-white category. In Guatemala there is little difference between indigenous responses and the responses of white or non-white. According to the [2014 LAPOP report](#), being indigenous is not a determinant factor for having higher or lower support for the political system.

The [LAPOP Bolivia](#) report shows that those who identify as indigenous sharply increased their support for political institutions between 2006 and 2010, coinciding with the election of the first indigenous president—Evo Morales—and his indigenous political platform. It is worth noting that non-indigenous also increased their support for political institutions, but not by such a high percentage. In 2012, however, this support started to ebb, more sharply among indigenous than non-indigenous. So much so that, in 2012, indigenous attitudes helped explain the overall decreased support for the political system. LAPOP explains this tendency by highlighting that the indigenous movement has progressively lost power over the years within MAS, and they point out to specific scandals, like the [handling of the construction of a highway through the TIPNIS](#), that threatened to affect many indigenous peoples living there. But the situation is probably more complex, and we shouldn't pool together all indigenous as a single electorate. In an in-depth, municipal analysis of MAS electoral support, [Miguel Centellas](#) found that political support for the government among Aymaras (Morales' ethnic group) has declined while the support of Quechua (the other large indigenous group in Bolivia) is on the rise.

On the whole, LAPOP's surveys reveal that while the indigenous are vastly underrepresented, they don't seem any more dissatisfied with their political systems than their European-descended compatriots, who have been traditionally more privileged. One explanation for this phenomenon could be that, after centuries of exclusion, persecution and even genocide in many countries, indigenous peoples are starting to be recognized, and perhaps value this as a positive step toward more inclusion. The latter remains to be seen.