

AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – June 17, 2013

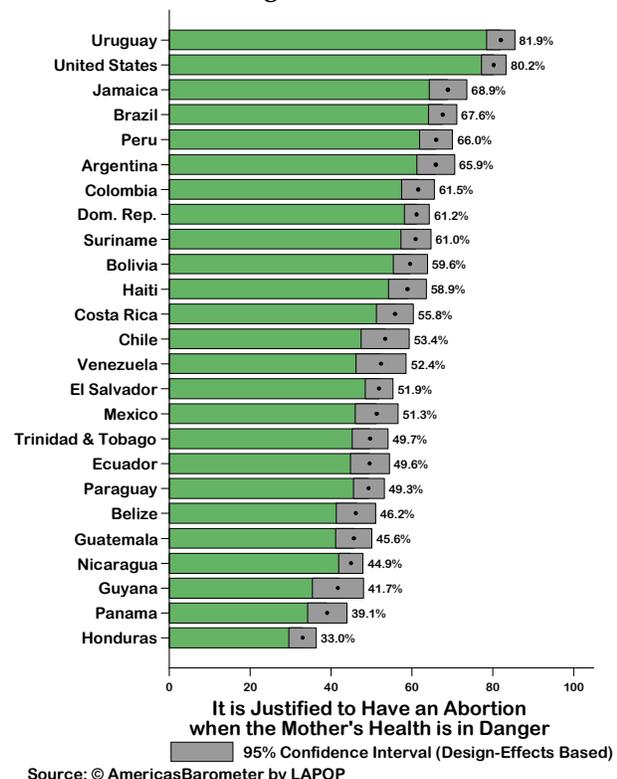
Public Opinion and Abortion Rights in the Americas

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The Brazilian Congress is currently considering a new abortion law under a heated debate that involves an active opposition by Catholic and Evangelical churches.¹ On June 23, Uruguayans will vote on a pre-referendum that challenges last year's law decriminalizing abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. In other countries across the region, the issue of abortion also has been placed in the spotlight by recent events. In the Dominican Republic in 2012 and in El Salvador last month, media attention worldwide focused on cases in which petitions for exceptions to strict abortion laws were denied despite serious health risks to the mother. In the former case, both mother and unborn child died and in the latter case, the infant (who had developed without a complete brain) died after doctors were able to perform an early C-section.²

In this *Topical Brief*, we ask to what extent citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean support permitting abortion when the mother's health is in danger. Figure 1 shows

Figure 1. Support for Abortion when the Mother's Health is in Danger in the Americas, 2012



¹http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/06/05/actualidad/1370458661_856676.html

² See <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201305/noticias/12231/>; <http://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2012/08/17/joven-dominicana-embarazada-muere-en-medio-de-debate-sobre-el-aborto/>. These are only two of many examples in a region that also has one of the highest rates of unsafe abortions according to the World Health Organization (http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/75173/1/WHO_RHR_12.01_eng.pdf).

results from the 2012 AmericasBarometer³ survey by LAPOP, which asked a split sample

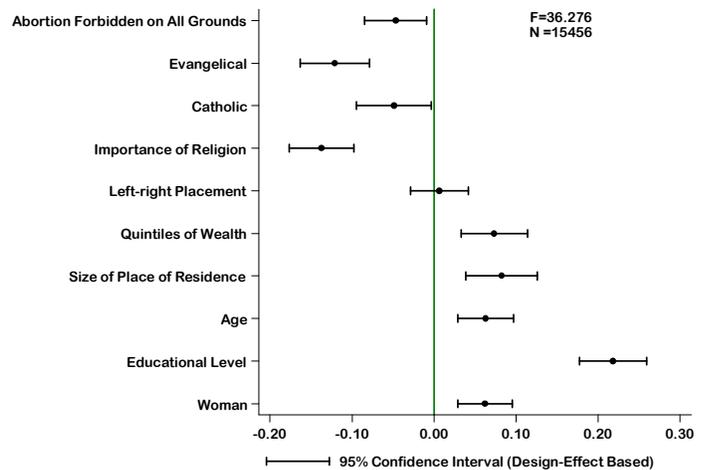
³ Funding for the 2012 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations

of respondents in 25 countries “Do you think it’s justified to interrupt a pregnancy, that is, to have an abortion, when the mother’s health is in danger?” The question thus captures attitudes towards abortion under one extreme circumstance.

The figure shows wide variation across countries.⁴ Uruguay has the largest percentage of citizens supporting abortion when a mother’s health is in danger (81.9%), while in Honduras only 33% do so. In sixteen countries the percentage exceeds 50%. El Salvador, Chile, Honduras, Nicaragua and Dominican Republic are the Latin American countries with the most restrictive abortion legislation, forbidding pregnancy termination on all grounds and with no exceptions.⁵ Only the latter – the Dominican Republic – is found in the upper-half of the ranking of countries.

To explain these attitudes in the Latin American and Caribbean region, Figure 2 shows results from a logistic regression. At the country level, living in a context in which abortion is forbidden on all grounds predicts lower support. For those having a Catholic and especially an Evangelical identity (as opposed to anything else) and for those who feel religion is important in their lives, support for abortion is lower, as one would expect. We also see that women, wealthier citizens, and those living in urban settings are more likely to report that abortion is justified when the mother’s health is in danger. Interestingly, those who are older are more supportive and

Figure 2. Determinants of Support for Abortion when the Mother’s Health is in Danger, Latin American and Caribbean Region, 2012



education has an especially substantial positive effect. In sum, individual characteristics as well as country context matter when it comes to predicting attitudes toward abortion across the Americas. At the individual level, two of the most important factors are religion and education.

In Uruguay’s pre-referendum on June 23, if enough affirmative votes (25% of the electoral body) are cast, the law will be submitted to a referendum later this year. While we see comparatively liberal views in Uruguay (Figure 1), it is important to note that these refer only to the exceptional case in which a mother’s health is in danger and, moreover, what is a stake in the June vote is not only support of the law, but the right of the citizenry to decide on it.⁶ What we can conclude with more confidence is that, as the public across the region continues to be drawn into debate and discussion over the topic, attitudes will continue to shift and evolve on this issue in the months and years to come.

Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

⁴ Item nonresponse was 7%; those who did not answer are not analyzed in this report.

⁵ United Nations, World Abortion Policies 2011 <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/2011abortion/2011wallchart.pdf>. The UN report categorizes Honduras as allowing abortion when the mother’s health is at risk, but this is anchored in the Honduran Medical Ethics code. Honduran laws forbid abortion on all grounds.

⁶ The current Uruguayan abortion law was enacted by President José Mujica, who has expressed that the the issue is important enough to allow a popular vote on the matter. <http://diario.laprensa.com.uy/index.php/nacionales/33789-mujica-apoya-referendum-sobre-ley-del-aborto>

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Full results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer - survey and the AmericasBarometer 2012 comparative study can be consulted on-line at www.LapopSurveys.org. The full data set is available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.