

Public Perception of Latin America's Judiciaries

Anne Bristol and Charlize Morrison, Martin Gandur

Department of Political Science, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL

Abstract

What factors impact Latin American citizen’s opinions of the legitimacy of their respective high courts? Tracking citizen’s perceived legitimacy of their respective high courts opens a pathway to more insight on patterns in civil interactions with the judicial system and knowledge of civil rights and civil responsibilities. Understanding citizen’s relationship with their respective judicial systems helps foment and strengthen Latin American democracies. Our data collection consisted on reviewing LAPOP AmericasBarometer and in the next step of this research we will empirically test our hypotheses.

Introduction

Background and Research Questions

- Scholars have studied public support for judicial institutions using various measures, yet the relationships between these concepts and their differences remain unclear. Our project addresses this gap by exploring the following questions:
- Do citizens evaluate high courts and the broader judicial system differently, and do different factors drive these perceptions?
- Do these patterns vary across political contexts?

Hypothesis

- We suggest that citizens evaluate high courts and the broader judicial system through distinct lenses. Specifically, we hypothesize that:
- Political sophistication and democratic values and positively associated with support for high courts, but negatively associated with support for the judicial system as a whole.
 - Support for high courts varies based on partisan factors in countries where courts are politically active.
 - Support for the judicial system will change among informed citizens following judicial reforms, depending on whether the reforms increase accountability and independence.

Data & Methods

Our data collection approach consisted of three phases:

1. We reviewed the LAPOP *AmericasBarometer* surveys conducted in Latin American countries from 2003 to 2024 and identified all judiciary-related questions. Our search revealed the following survey item:
 - Trust in the national high court
 - Trust in the national judicial system
 - Support for dissolving the national high court
2. We documented whether each of these questions was asked in the *AmericasBarometer* surveys for every country and year.
3. We supplemented this information with additional details about each survey, including question code, respondent count, and field dates.

survey	country	c_code	year	date_start	date_end
lapop	Argentina	160	2014	2014-02-28	2014-03-22
lapop	Bahamas	31	2014	2014-06-17	2014-10-07
lapop	Barbados	53	2015	2015-02-27	2015-07-27
lapop	Bolivia	145	2014	2014-03-26	2014-05-18
lapop	Colombia	100	2014	2014-03-28	2014-05-05
lapop	Costa Rica	94	2014	2014-03-04	2014-05-03
lapop	D.R.	42	2014	2014-03-11	2014-03-25
lapop	Ecuador	130	2014	2014-01-21	2014-02-15
lapop	El Salvador	92	2014	2014-03-24	2014-04-30
lapop	Guatemala	90	2014	2014-04-01	2014-05-10
lapop	Honduras	91	2014	2014-03-28	2014-05-09
lapop	Mexico	70	2014	2014-01-24	2014-02-24
lapop	Nicaragua	93	2014	2014-02-25	2014-03-22
lapop	Panama	95	2014	2014-03-13	2014-05-03
lapop	Uruguay	165	2014	2014-03-08	2014-04-23
lapop	Venezuela	101	2014	2014-03-24	2014-04-26
lapop	Guyana	110	2014	2014-06-04	2014-07-12
lapop	Peru	135	2014	2014-01-23	2014-02-08
lapop	Suriname	115	2014	2014-06-21	2014-08-25
lapop	Paraguay	150	2014	2014-01-18	2014-02-08
lapop	Chile	155	2014	2014-04-16	2014-05-22
lapop	Belize	80	2014	2014-05-02	2014-05-28
lapop	Jamaica	51	2014	2014-02-25	2014-03-20
lapop	Mexico	70	2004	2004-03-13	2004-03-17

Broader Implications & Results

- Our research highlights the distinction between public support for high courts and the broader judicial system.
- Examining how different factors shape these evaluations has important implications for understanding the dynamics between the judiciary and other branches of government as well as the public sources of judicial power and autonomy.

Discussion & Observations

In the next stage of this project, we will combine our *AmericanBarometer* data with contextual indicators from cross-national datasets, such as the *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem) project. Next, we will empirically test our hypotheses. We will already have received training in basic functions in R Programming, and we will build these analytical skills to conduct more advanced statistical research.

Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank Graduate Research Assistant Martin Gandur from the Department of Political Science at Florida State University for his guidance throughout this research project.

References

Karreth, J. (n.d.). *Country codes for international comparisons*. Retrieved March 5, 2025, from <https://www.jkarreth.net/countrycodes.html>

LAPOP Lab. (n.d.). *Argentina: AmericasBarometer insights*. Vanderbilt University. Retrieved March 5, 2025, from <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/argentina.php>

LAPOP Lab. (2023). *Fieldwork dates tables (2004–2023)*. Vanderbilt University. Retrieved March 5, 2025, from https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2023/Fieldwork_Dates_Tables_2004-2023_Eng_231127.pdf

Salzman, R., & Ramsey, A. (2013). *Judging the judiciary: Understanding public confidence in Latin American courts*. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 55(1), 73–95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43284809>

Verner, J. G. (1984). *The independence of Supreme Courts in Latin America: A review of the literature*. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 16(2), 463–506. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/157430>

Weldon, J. A. (1997). *Political sources of presidentialism in Mexico*. In S. Mainwaring & M. S. Shugart (Eds.), *Presidentialism and democracy in Latin America* (pp. 225–258). Cambridge University Press.