

Insights Series #165

What Factors Create Differences in Electoral Participation among Citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean?

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Key Findings:

- Reported intention to cast a valid vote in a hypothetical upcoming election varied widely by country in the 2023 AmericasBarometer
- Age, wealth, and education are significantly and positively associated with vote intention
- Being a woman and living in an urban area predict lower electoral participation
- Skin tone, but not experiences with discrimination based on skin color, is a predictor of voting intentions



Citizen participation in politics has been linked to the health of democracies, with lower participation rates suggesting relatively weaker democracies.¹ Political participation includes a range of different actions that citizens take to influence their governments.² Voting is the most fundamental, and most common, way in which ordinary citizens influence politics in democracies.³ What is more, citizens believe that voting matters: the plurality of citizens in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region say that voting is the best way to institute political change.⁴

Because democracies rely on elections to select leaders, it is important to understand who turns out to cast valid votes. To address this topic, this *Insights* report analyzes answers to a survey question which asks how citizens in the LAC region would vote in a hypothetical election. The full question wording from the 2023 LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey is as follows:

VB20. If the next presidential elections were being held this week, what would you do?⁵

- (1) Wouldn't vote
- (2) Would vote for the current (incumbent) candidate or party
- (3) Would vote for a candidate or party different from the current administration
- (4) Would go to vote but would leave the ballot/vote/ticket blank or would purposely cancel my vote

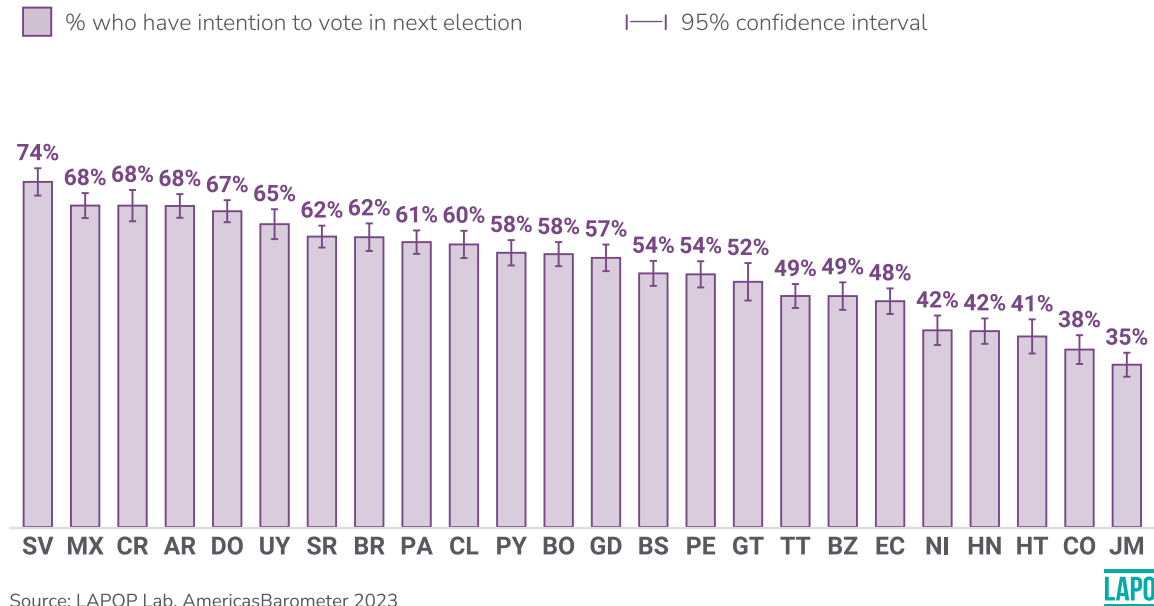
Patterns of Electoral Participation Differ Substantially across the LAC Region

Figure 1 presents the percentage of citizens in each of the surveyed countries who report that they would turn out and cast a valid vote if the election were held this week. In this case, a “valid vote” means one for a particular candidate or party; this includes response options (2) and (3) and excludes those who would not vote or would cast a blank or null ballot. The highest percentage, 74%, is held by El Salvador, ahead of Mexico, Costa Rica, and Argentina by a significant margin (all 68%). In comparison, turnout intentions are the lowest in Jamaica, where just over one in three (35%) citizens intend to vote. Colombia has the second-lowest turnout intention (38%), slightly behind Haiti (41%), Nicaragua (42%), and Honduras (42%).

Many factors could explain these cross-country differences, but research on voter turnout consistently finds that mandatory voting and national wealth are associated with electoral participation. In countries with enforced compulsory voting, citizens turn out at higher rates to avoid penalties associated with failing to participate.⁶ Turnout also tends to be higher in wealthier democracies, perhaps owing to the costs incurred by turning out to vote.⁷

Figure 1.

El Salvador leads prospective voter turnout, while Jamaica is at the bottom



The AmericasBarometer data show that citizens in the region’s wealthier countries express significantly higher intentions to vote. The average rate of turnout in the twelve wealthier countries is 60%, compared to an average of 52% in the less wealthy countries.⁸ Intentions to turn out and cast a valid vote are also significantly higher in countries where voters are legally required to participate in elections: 59% of respondents in compulsory vote countries reported intent to turn out and cast a valid ballot, compared to 54% in countries where voting is voluntary.⁹

The next section turns to the question of *who* intends to turn out in Latin American democracies.

Older, Wealthier, and More Educated Individuals Are More Likely to Intend to Vote in Presidential Elections

Demographic and socioeconomic variables shape electoral participation. Around the world, voters tend to be older, wealthier, and more educated. Older individuals are generally observed to participate more in voting.¹⁰ Older citizens may be more politically socialized than younger people, and are more likely to participate through voting rather than other political activities.¹¹ As previously stated, voting can incur costs, making wealthier people more likely to turn out.¹² And research has found a strong causal link between formal education and voting, possibly driven by higher competence with bureaucratic and government processes, increased interest in politics, or expanded social networks and capital.¹³

I therefore assess the relationship between intention to vote for a candidate and these three characteristics (age, education, wealth), as well as two other demographic variables, gender and urban/rural location, which have a less clear and consistent effect in the literature.¹⁴ Figure 2 shows how each factor predicts intent to vote in a hypothetical election in the LAC region via an OLS regression analysis. The model also includes country fixed effects.

All five independent variables are statistically significant. Age, wealth, and education are positive predictors of intent to vote. As theory suggested, the oldest citizens (66+) are sixteen percentage points more likely to say they would vote in a hypothetical election than the youngest citizens (16-25). Socioeconomic status matters quite a lot: citizens with the highest wealth are six percentage points more likely to have intentions to vote compared with those with the lowest wealth. Additionally, education has a significant and positive effect on intention to vote.

Gender and urban/rural location also have a relatively small but still significant effect on intentions to turnout. Women are five percentage points less likely to intend to turn out than men. Citizens who live in urban environments are three percentage points less likely to say they will cast a valid vote in an upcoming election than those in rural environments.

Figure 2.

Gender, age, education, wealth, and place of residence all predict turnout



Source: LAPOP Lab, AmericasBarometer 2023

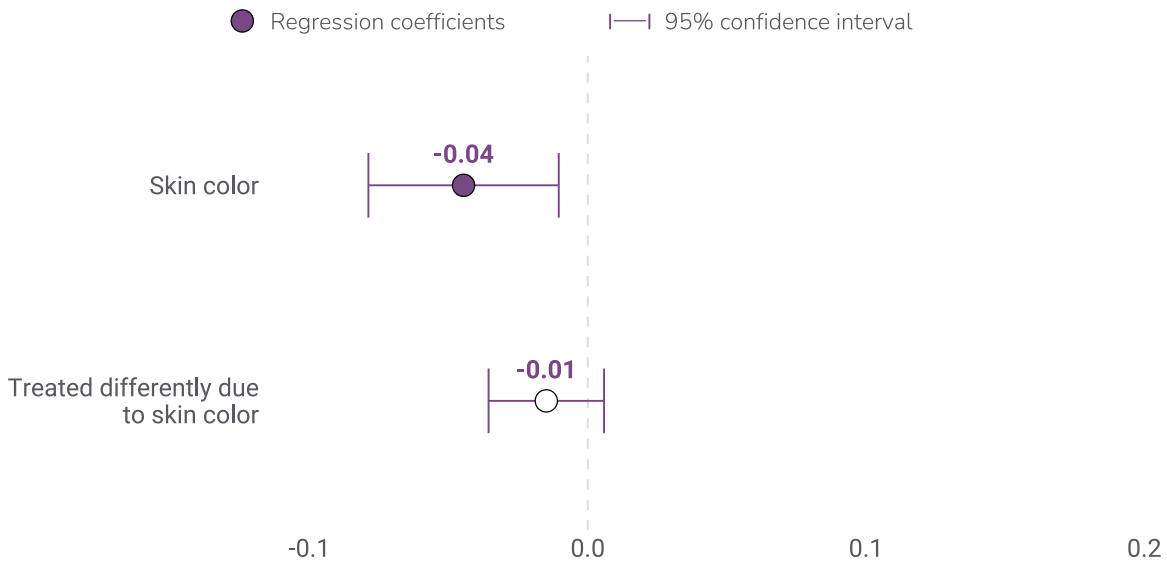


Skin Tone Matters, but Experiences of Colorism Do Not Have a Statistically Significant Relationship with Intentions to Vote

Does discrimination based on skin color affect individuals' propensity to turn out? Citizens with darker skin tones regularly face discrimination and disadvantages with respect to life outcomes in Latin America, including increased exposure to physical violence,¹⁵ lower education,¹⁶ access to wealth,¹⁷ and other socioeconomic outcomes.¹⁸ Further, Latin American citizens with darker skin tones express greater distrust of their governments.¹⁹ If the discrimination faced by Latin Americans with darker skin tones results in disaffection with the political system, individuals with darker skin may be less likely to participate in elections as an expression of this alienation and/or these individuals may be less engaged by those seeking to turn out the vote.

Figure 3.

Skin tone is associated with voter turnout



Source: LAPOP Lab, AmericasBarometer 2023



To investigate the effect of colorism, I estimated another regression model with the following variables as predictors of whether an individual would cast a valid vote in an upcoming election: shade of skin color and experienced colorism.²⁰ Figure 3 presents the outcomes of this analysis, controlling for the same variables shown in Figure 2 (as well as country fixed effects).

As expected, skin tone has a significant relationship with intended voter turnout; the darker one’s skin color, the less likely one is to report intention to vote. The effect is modest, at least relative to the other demographic factors shown in Figure 2: those with the darkest skin tone are four percentage points less likely to vote than those with the lightest skin tone. Contrary to expectation, experiencing colorism does not seem to have a statistically significant relationship with intentions to vote. Further research needs to be conducted to better understand why darker-skinned individuals seem less inclined to participate in the electoral process.

Conclusion

This *Insights* report establishes that there are important differences in voting intentions in a hypothetical upcoming election. Based on the present data, experiences of colorism do not predict an individual's inclination to politically participate. Instead, socioeconomic and demographic factors such as age, gender, education, wealth, urban/rural location, and skin tone are strong predictors of one's reported tendency to cast a valid vote in the next election.

Older individuals are more likely to vote in the upcoming presidential election than their younger counterparts. The difference is likely due to older individuals being more likely to be politically socialized. As noted earlier, the political expression of older individuals is more often in the form of voting than any other type of political expression such as protest or boycotts. With wealth, wealthier citizens are more likely to intend to vote than their poorer counterparts. This could be due to the need for poorer individuals to work longer or unusual hours to support their family; more research should consider this dynamic. With education, educated individuals are more likely to intend to vote than those who are less educated, likely because their increased political knowledge leads them to participate in politics more.

On the other hand, women are less likely to have intentions to vote than men; this may be related to gender-based discrimination in society, but testing that mechanism is outside the scope of this report. With urban or rural citizens, urban citizens are less likely to intend to vote than those in rural areas. This could be due to the strong community bonds and social or political pressure to vote in rural areas. Finally, though perceived discrimination based on skin color within the past five years was not found to be significant, related factors could lead people with darker skin tones to be less inclined to vote, including structural racism that is based on ethnic identity rather than skin tone (e.g., anti-indigenous bias) and/or began more than five years ago (as the survey question asks only about recent experiences with discrimination).

In brief, the findings in this report underscore the significance of understanding citizens in the LAC region regarding their intentions to vote in upcoming presidential elections, while also investigating the role that skin tone, race, and experiences of colorism play – or do not play - in the electoral participation of these citizens. Given the central role that elections and electoral participation play in democracy, these findings may point to avenues through which practitioners can work to reduce inequalities in who turns out to cast a valid vote.

Notes

1. Deneulin, 2009; Warren, 1992, as cited in He et al. 2022.
2. Verba and Nie 1972, as cited in Weiss 2020, p. 2.
3. Armingeon 2007.
4. Boidi and Zechmeister 2023.
5. In parliamentary systems, such as those in the Caribbean, the question asks “if the next general elections were being held...”
6. Fowler 2013.
7. Blais 2006; Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Foucault 2019.
8. “Wealth” is measured as GDP per capita in PPP in 2023. The twelve wealthier countries, in order, are: Panama, Bahamas, Uruguay, Chile, Trinidad & Tobago, Argentina, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Suriname, and Colombia. The difference is significant according to a t-test ($p < 0.01$).
9. The mandatory vote countries in 2023 are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. In several Latin American countries (e.g., Mexico, Panama), there is a legal mandate for voter turnout, but there are no sanctions through which this mandate is enforced. This report treats voting as voluntary in countries where there are no enforcement mechanisms for the legal mandate to vote. Intentions to turn out and cast an *invalid* vote are significantly higher in mandatory vote countries in this sample—34.9%, compared to 18.5%—in voluntary vote countries), as expected (see e.g., Cohen 2024).
10. Goerres 2007, as cited in Kulachai et al. 2023.
11. Kulachai et al. 2023.
12. Nadeau, Lewis-Beck, and Foucault 2019.
13. Sondheimer et al. 2010.
14. Coded age from scale of 0-1; education on a scale from 0 to 1 based on no, primary, secondary, or Superior educational attainment; wealth scaled from 0-1 based on household wealth with lowest being 0 to 1 being highest; gender coded 0 for men and 1 for women; Urban based on whether respondent lives in a rural area (0) or urban area (1).
15. Mitchell & Wood 1999.
16. Telles et al. 2015.
17. Zizumbo-Colunga and Flores Martínez 2017.
18. Paredas 2018.
19. Aguilar 2011.

20. Shade of skin color is coded from 0 to 1, where 0 is the lightest skin color and 1 is darkest skin color, based on an assessment of respondents' facial skin tone by interviewers using a color palette of 11 color options. Experienced colorism is based on the following question: "And thinking about the last five years, have you ever felt discriminated against or have you been badly or unjustly treated: Because of your skin color? Would you say this has happened many times, sometimes, a few times, or never?" I recode the answers from 0 to 1, where 0 is no experience of colorism and 1 is "many times".

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