

Presidential Approval, Tolerant Attitudes, and Economic Performance: The Case of Latin America

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Abstract

Due to the historical centrality of presidents in Latin America, we argue that presidential approval can be a source of group membership among citizens, creating a division between “ingroups” and “outgroups.” We test the effects of such division on tolerant attitudes toward the rights of system critics to participate in political life in four ways (from the least to the most threatening for the ingroup): voting, giving speeches on television, running for office, and demonstrating peacefully. We further argue that this effect is conditioned by the economic context, and that the ingroup/outgroup divide is activated when an economy performs poorly. Analysis of the AmericasBarometer 2018/2019 survey is consistent with our expectations. Specifically, our results suggest that the main predictor for tolerant attitudes is presidential approval, and that the individual-level effect dissipates in a context of good performance of the economy, which causes the presidential ingroup to not feel threatened by any outgroup.

Keywords

tolerant attitudes, system critics, presidential approval, economic performance, Latin American politics

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Introduction

Latin America experienced widespread social unrest throughout the year 2019. Demonstrators in each country demanded deep and systemic changes to the rules of the game—cleaner elections, lower inequality, and less corruption. In short, these protests were directly aimed to the political-economic system. The causes of social mobilization in that year have been analyzed elsewhere (Carranza, 2020). Yet our question of interest is not why people are critical and may express their criticism, but rather why Latin

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Americans tolerate the rights of citizens who are critical of the system to express themselves through different forms of political participation.

The literature on political tolerance has usually focused on the role of long-term socialization factors, such as interest in politics and support for democracy. Nevertheless, we argue that in presidential systems, tolerant attitudes can be better explained by relatively short-run factors, like presidential approval, considered a source of group membership. In addition, we assume that citizen opinions do not exist in a free and unstructured space but are shaped by all sorts of factors. In Latin America, the current socio-economic conditions are regularly powerful sources of frustration and discontent against the political system. In this sense, this research aims to combine two theoretical approaches that focus on the relationship between political tolerance and socio-political identification, on one hand, and interactions between presidential approval and economic outputs, on the other.

The objective is to ascertain, within the constraints posed by available survey data, the extent to which cross-level interaction between presidential approval (individual factor) and economic outputs (contextual factor) influences the views of citizens regarding the critics of government. We rely on the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) wave of 2018/2019, and we consider both individual- and structural-level variables to identify the determinants of tolerant attitudes toward critics during one of the most turbulent years in Latin America, in terms of mass mobilizations.

The literature has long stated that social identities might explain how self-perceived membership in a social group affects social perceptions and attitudes. We propose that in Latin America, given the enduring centrality of presidents, support for a given president splits supporters and detractors into “ingroups” and “outgroups,” respectively. It is revealing that, in Latin America, even ideologies and movements are named after presidents, from Peronism to Fujimorism to Chavism, as well as their adversary identities, for example, antiPeronism, antiChavism. We argue that this inter-group dynamic will affect perceptions of the ingroup regarding the rights of the outgroup.

To test this assumption, we focus on scenarios where a president’s supporters could conceivably feel threatened, then examine how they respond in terms of tolerance. We thus analyze tolerant attitudes toward the rights of system critics to voice their criticism in four scenarios, from the least to the most threatening (for the ingroup): voting, appearing on TV to make public speeches, running for public offices, and demonstrating. In this sense, presidential approval will correlate negatively with tolerant attitudes toward system critics.

Furthermore, we argue that this individual-level effect might be conditioned by the economic context, as measured by the economic performance of the country (i.e. the economic outputs of the political regime). Specifically, we argue that the division between president’s supporters and detractors is activated when economic performance is weak, and it loses explanatory power when the country is performing well.

The results show, first of all, that opponents of the president (outgroup) tend to be more tolerant of criticism than supporters (ingroup), except as regards tolerance of their right to vote, where there is no effect related to presidential approval. Furthermore, cross-level interactions give some insights on how the context conditions this effect. As a whole, the state of the economy makes no difference in the average level of tolerance, but it neutralizes and even reverses the individual effect of presidential approval on tolerant attitudes. When the economic outputs of the political system are good, tolerant attitudes decrease among a president’s detractors and increase among a president’s supporters.

If the economy—whether at the international (Campello and Zucco, 2016) or domestic level (Carlin and Hellwig, 2020)—determines to a great extent the chances for reelection of presidents, it also determines what their supporters and detractors will tolerate. The supporter/detractor divide dissipates when an economy is going well. Detractors, we argue, if satisfied with the economic results of the political regime, are less willing to tolerate criticism of the political system, while supporters are more confident of the strength of the president they support and are more willing to tolerate criticism. When economy is not going well, this divide emerges as the main determinant of tolerant attitudes toward system critics.

The article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical framework within which presidential support can be considered as a short-term factor conditioning tolerant attitudes. Then, the importance of socio-economic context in this relationship is developed. Second, after presenting our data and methodology, we run a mixed-effects multilevel model, and plots of cross-level interaction outputs are drawn. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of the implications of the results.

Tolerant Attitudes, Group Membership, and Presidential Approval in Latin America

In this article, we focus exclusively on tolerant attitudes toward the rights of those who criticize the system and government to express themselves in different forms of political participation (peacefully protesting, appearing on TV to make public speeches, running for public office, and voting). From the perspective of political socialization, individuals with a more liberal profile are more tolerant of groups with which they disagree (Ribeiro and Fuks, 2019). In this sense, the internalization/support for democratic norms (such as supporting freedom of the press or of association) is a strong predictor of tolerance (Burton et al., 2019; Van Doorn, 2014). Interest in politics is also positively related to tolerant attitudes, since those individuals most interested in politics possess more political information and participate more, also having greater experience with democratic norms and practices (Ribeiro and Fuks, 2019).

However, this research conducts a different explanation of tolerant attitudes by relying on Social Identification Theory (SIT), which attempts to explain how self-perceived membership in a social group affects social perceptions and attitudes. The theory holds that individuals attempt to maximize differences between the ingroup (the group to which one psychologically belongs) and the outgroup (the psychologically relevant opposition group) (Brewer, 1999). From this view, tolerant attitudes can be defined as the propensity of a person to support political rights for groups whose members hold values and/or pursue a way of life disliked by that same person (Marquart-Pyatt and Paxton, 2007; Sullivan et al., 1981). Theoretically, it may be fairly comfortable to embrace principles of democratic privileges, such as freedom of speech for all citizens. However, defending the right in actual practice to publicly express viewpoints that appear to be light-years from one's own may be considerably more demanding (Adman and Strömblad, 2018). One can be called tolerant only if she/he first rejects a group, then grants it certain political rights, despite the fact that she/he finds this group objectionable.

Thus, this theory provides a framework for understanding how members of different groups develop opposing positions on political issues. From this perspective, tolerance refers to the attitude of acceptance of the enjoyment of political rights by groups with which the individual expresses strong disagreement over political projects. Consequently,

one of the main predictors of intolerant attitudes is the perception of individual and societal threats generated by the group in disagreement (Sullivan et al., 1993). An individual who is prejudiced against a certain group but who does not perceive its members as dangerous or threatening in political terms is unlikely to exhibit intolerant attitudes (Ribeiro and Fuks, 2019). According to the SIT, those with a high identification with minority or majority groups have the inclination to interpret protests (for instance) as either a welcome form of activism or as an offense to them, respectively (Klandermans, 2014).

Partisanship or ideological positions are elements that also shape and reflect group membership. In the case of partisanship, its group nature should naturally create a bipolar partisanship where individuals characterize the political parties into *us* and *them* and exaggerate perceived differences to favor their own group. Under the SIT, bipolar partisan attitudes are a natural psychological outgrowth of self-perceived membership in a political party (Greene, 2004). In this sense, Paul (2018) and the Pew Research Center (2017) indicate that positions on who has the right to protest (and when, and how) are increasingly polarized around partisan divisions in the United States. Using the same SIT approach, Carlin and Love (2018) show, for several electoral democracies, that partisan cues influence trust decisions more than cues based on the very social cleavages that gave birth to the party system. In a similar vein, Anderson et al (2005) shows that in most countries, losers—that is, voters whose party lost in the election—feel less positive afterwards about the political system than do winners—whose party won. They are also less inclined to call elections fair, and more inclined to favor protest actions.

We know that views about the rights of critical actors in the streets, in media, or in other institutions of government are contingent upon party ties and the electoral winner–loser gap's effect (Moehler, 2009; Singer, 2018, 2021). Yet, in Latin America, the political perceptions of the ingroup and outgroup could be better explained by the identification with a leader or president than by party affiliation. Carlin and Singer (2011) suggest that specific support for the president, grounded in mixed support for polyarchy, undermines diffuse support for free contestation and participation. Although presidential supporters appear to have lower resistance to executive consolidation of authority, presidential detractors and those whose candidates have yet to win power seem to seek shelter in the rights and institutions that can prevent such consolidation. In addition, supporters of election winners and those who perceive government performance as positive would be less likely to express support for vertical accountability (protecting free speech and civil liberties, or preserving opposition party rights) (Singer, 2018). Also, they will often not even acknowledge poor institutional performance or the low level of democracy in contexts where democracy has waned (Singer, 2021).

Indeed, albeit with exceptions, Latin American politics has been characterized by weak, poorly institutionalized party systems and scant ideological structure (Lupu, 2016; Mainwaring, 2018). One of the reasons for this is the form of government that prevails in the region—the presidential system, which places centrality of power in the figure of the president, above and beyond political parties, unions, or any other actor. Consequently, in many Latin American countries, the political movements or forces around a given president can become very personalistic, even to the point of transforming the presidents' own names into movements and ideologies with followers and detractors (Kajsiu, 2019; Loxton and Levitsky, 2018). Numerous examples can be mentioned here, from older instances (Peronism, Getulism/Varguism, Cardinism, Trujillism) to newer ones (Kirchnerism, Chavism, Urubism, Lulism). In fact, Simon and Klandermans (2001) argue that leaders play a role in the politicization of social identification by emphasizing shared

grievances, identifying an external agent that is responsible, and defining how society at large is implicated. Politicians can try to persuade individuals to understand themselves and their own interests through identification with a social group (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Kranendonk et al., 2018). In this line, Carty (2020) found that both personal and group leader-based identities have an important impact on political participation. This suggests that personalistic leaders benefit not only from connecting with voters more personally in a one-on-one type of relationship, but also by creating a community of individuals who form a group identity around their shared support for that leader.

Based on this approach, we argue that in Latin America support for a president splits supporters and detractors into ingroups and outgroups, respectively. This inter-group dynamic has consequences for the political attitudes and perceptions of each group regarding the other. In this sense, we argue that supporting a president in Latin American countries can go beyond simply rating his or her job performance and in fact become a proxy of group membership. Being a prominent type of identification in this region, this emerges as a key variable in predicting attitudes of tolerance toward the rights of critics to express themselves by protests or other kinds of participation (as part of an outgroup). Those who support the president are part of an ingroup, which is unlikely to identify with a social group that openly criticizes the government. Criticism of the government is interpreted by the ingroup as a threat directly targeted at the leader of that government and therefore a threat to its permanence. Hence, identification with a group (in this case identification with the president) can be among the factors that explain whether or not citizens are more tolerant of certain political behaviors that come from those who criticize the system.

Following the SIT, if people tend to support and engage with groups that they identify with, they will tend to disapprove of criticism against these groups. Conversely, those who negatively evaluate government performance (the president's detractors) will express more tolerant attitudes toward the rights of critics to participate. That is, citizens who are not supportive of the president may sympathize with tolerance for dissenters, because they may themselves be willing to criticize the system (Salinas and Booth, 2011).

We consider presidential approval as a stronger indicator of group identification than voting, as in many Latin American democracies the relationship between voters and incumbents can be very volatile immediately after an election, especially in a context of highly dependent economic outputs. The post-election "honeymoon period" of a president can quickly come to an end due to poor economic performance, even among those who voted for that president in the past (Navia and Perelló, 2019). At the same time, out-partisans can conceivably increase their favorability rating of a newly elected president over evaluations made on election day (Castro Cornejo et al., 2022). Thus, we argue that presidential approval represents a more flexible and accurate measure of a president's present support, since negative assessments of economic conditions may drive individuals to "punish" an incumbent by withdrawing their support; on the contrary, should they form positive assessments, they can offer their support to the incumbent government (Gélineau, 2007) regardless of whether they voted for the incumbent president in the past.

The Role of Economic Performance

Given the recent prominence of protests around the rejection of specific governments, or around criticism of the policies applied by presidents in Latin America, the question arises as to whether respondents who identify with a government (measured by their

approval of its performance) are more tolerant as regards the rights of those who criticize the government.

In addition, we assume that citizen's attitudes and perceptions do not exist in a free and unstructured space, but that they are shaped by structures of all kinds. For instance, partisanship effects on trust are not constant, but rather reflect the nature of political competition. When group competition creates centrifugal forces between parties within a party system, party labels generate more partisan trust bias than when centripetal forces dominate (Carlin and Love, 2018).

In the Latin American case, the economic conditions are especially important. The economic context affects not only attitudes but also electoral outcomes and popular support among political leaders (Campello and Zucco, 2016; Cohen, 2004). Therefore, the effect of support or rejection of the president over tolerant attitudes will also depend on the outcomes of economic performance.

On the one hand, many scholars (Andersen and Fetner, 2008; Córdova and Seligson, 2010; Friedman, 2017; Polterovich, 2017) have argued that higher levels of economic development contribute to tolerant attitudes, whether by reducing the share of authoritarian citizens, by increasing levels of education (almost axiomatically found to enhance tolerance), or by promoting more widespread participative orientations and political efficacy. Córdova and Seligson (2010), for example, found that characteristics of the economic context in which citizens live—especially in terms of development or national wealth—play an important role in shaping their democratic attitudes. Singer (2018) found that when the economy or governance is good, citizens become willing to endow government actors with greater authority and influence in order to enact their agenda, even at the expense of existing institutions and rights. Social inequality, both across and within nations, must also be considered when attempting to understand national differences in tolerant attitudes (Carlin, 2006), especially in the many Latin American countries that show outstanding rates of productive development and gross domestic product (GDP) growth, but also large asymmetries in the distribution of income and in distinction of social classes (Expósito et al., 2017). In this sense, Andersen and Fetner (2008) showed that national income inequality—measured by the Gini coefficient—is negatively related to tolerance toward homosexuality. In other words, people living in less equal societies tend to be less tolerant on average than those living in relatively equal societies.

On the other hand, economic performance is among the most relevant factors impacting on presidential approval, allowing for a degree of sanction and accountability (Carlin and Singh, 2015) and, eventually, determining political survival (Pérez-Liñán, 2007). Economic conditions and especially negative income shocks affect the stability of support for incumbents in Latin America (Murillo and Visconti, 2017). One of the reasons that the state of the economy has such a major effect on presidential support is that Latin American voters are usually unable to assess the origin of domestic economic conditions, even when blaming or rewarding incumbents for the state of affairs (Campello and Zucco, 2016).

Much attention has been paid to the relationship between the economy, tolerant attitudes, accountability, and the electoral success of presidents in Latin America (Carlin and Hellwig, 2020; Campello and Zucco, 2016), but little research has been devoted to the interaction of the economy, tolerance, and presidential identification (i.e. how contextual economic factors may affect not the fate of the president, but rather the tolerant attitudes of his or her supporters and detractors). Thus, our interest lays not in addressing the aggregate-level effects of context on tolerant attitudes, but rather the effect of the

interaction between the economic context and identities created around support for (or rejection of) the president on the tolerance shown toward system critics.

Hypotheses and Theoretical Expectations

This article is centered on a specific attitude related to perceptions on the political rights of those belonging to opposing groups (ingroup versus outgroup). Hence, our dependent variables are a set of tolerant attitudes toward the rights of dissenters, but not tolerance as a core democratic norm. For that reason, tolerant attitudes in this particular case can be more volatile, being determined by a short-term factor like presidential approval. At the same time, we argue that the effect of presidential support over tolerant attitudes can vary according to different economic contexts, especially in Latin American countries, whose economies are vulnerable to external shocks (Österholm and Zettelmeyer, 2008).

We argue that people who are more supportive of the president (i.e. the leader of the government) will be less tolerant with system critics. One group is comprised of supporters (the ingroup), as opposed to the detractors of the president (the outgroup), who is generally a central actor in Latin American political systems. Thus, those who think the president is performing well would consider that critics of the government are capable of jeopardizing the positive results of the current system. Conversely, citizens unhappy with the performance of the current system—as represented by rating the president unsatisfactorily—may sympathize with tolerance for dissenters, given that they may wish to criticize the system themselves (Salinas and Booth, 2011). In this sense, we expect that:

H1. Those who positively rate the job performance of the president will express less tolerant attitudes toward participation by system critics.

The effect of presidential approval over tolerance will have divergent results depending on the economic context. In other words, the individual-level relationship expected in H1 will diminish in the event of good performance of the economy. In the eyes of supporters, objective indicators show that the country is performing well, and thus there are arguably no objective reasons to criticize the form of government; such hypothetical criticism therefore poses no threat to the president they support. For their part, in this scenario even detractors of the president will be less tolerant of system criticism, precisely because that system is producing satisfactory outcomes in terms of economic growth. Even if they do not positively rate the job performance of the president, they are less tolerant of criticism, since it may put at risk the positive economic situation (again, in countries where such good economic news may not last long). In this sense, we expect that:

H2. Positive economic outputs reduce the difference between the president's supporters and detractors in terms of tolerant attitudes.

Therefore, when the country is not performing well economically, the supporter/detractor divide (H1) re-emerges. Supporters of the president will be less tolerant, since criticism of the system may put *their* president at risk. Meanwhile, the president's detractors, since they are not satisfied with the economic outcomes, will be more tolerant of (sympathetic to) whoever is willing to criticize the government.

Data and Method

We rely on the AmericasBarometer 2018/2019 wave,¹ which includes a battery of questions on tolerance toward people who criticize the form of government: support for their rights to vote, to conduct peaceful demonstrations, to run for public office, and to appear on television to make speeches. Since we are interested in tolerant attitudes as a whole, we take all four questions as dependent variables in the analysis. Given the low correlation these variables show (below 0.5, except for “run for public office” and “appearing on television”), we decided not to add them into a single index to verify whether our expectations hold in these four different scenarios of tolerance in terms of salience. Arguably, these four scenarios can be ordered from least to most threatening/prominent as follows: voting, appearing on TV to make speeches, running for public office, and conducting peaceful demonstrations. Despite these differences in the level of prominence, we do not have distinct theoretical expectations for each question, although we might expect stronger effects in more threatening scenarios.

The wording of the battery of questions is as follows: “There are people who only say bad things about the [country] form of government, not just the current [incumbent] government but the system of government. How strongly do you approve or disapprove: (1) of such people’s right to vote; (2) that such people be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations in order to express their views; (3) of such people being permitted to run for public office; (4) of such people appearing on television to make speeches?”. The interviewee picks a number on a 10-point scale, where 1 means “strongly disapprove” and 10 means “strongly approve.”

Our main explanatory variable of interest at the individual level is support for the president, measured by the approval of the president’s job performance. We thus select the following question: “Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President [incumbent]?”. The respondent must pick a number on a scale of 1 “very bad” to 5 “very good.”²

Furthermore, we include an alternative variable to test for “closeness” to the president: having voted for the president (i.e. the winning candidate³) in the past. We do this by the way of a categorical variable with four options: did not vote in the last elections; blank/null vote; voted for the losing candidate; voted for the winning candidate (reference).⁴

Also at the individual level, the model includes a number of variables regarding socio-demographic factors, ideology, political interest, and attitudes toward the system. As socio-demographic factors, the model includes gender (binary, 1 for woman), urban/rural (binary, 1 for urban), age (continuous), and years of schooling (0 to 18). For ideology, we rely on the left–right axis, on a 10-point scale where 1 means “left” and 10 means “right.” For interest in politics, we include the following question: *How much interest do you have in politics: a lot (1), some (2), little (3), or none (4)?*. Finally, for attitudes toward the political system we include: support for the political system, respect for the political institutions, and support for democracy. All three are on a 1–7 scale, with 1 for “low support/respect” and 7 for “high support/respect.” In accordance with a comparative perspective, given the disparities both within and between countries and that we are controlling for a number of political attitudes, we did not include party identification.⁵ We believe our model and especially the main variable of interest (the president’s job approval) account for these aspects of Latin American politics.

To capture effects from the aggregate level, we are interested in the economic outputs of the system as a whole, not in a single indicator (limited to growth, inflation, or

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Right to vote	25,963	6.07	2.72	1	10
Appear on TV	26,011	5.07	2.85	1	10
Run for public office	25,904	4.94	2.78	1	10
Peaceful demonstrations	26,089	6.49	2.76	1	10
Presidential job rating	26,080	3.03	1.11	1	5
Woman	26,516	0.50	0.50	0	1
Urban	26,529	0.72	0.45	0	1
Age	26,515	39.99	16.67	16	99
Years of schooling	26,118	9.91	4.35	0	18
Ideology	22,660	5.39	2.74	1	10
Interest in politics	25,621	2.89	1.04	1	4
Support political system	25,914	4.38	2.01	1	7
Respect political institutions	26,047	4.56	1.93	1	7
Support democracy	25,740	4.77	1.71	1	7
Economic performance	26,529	6.83	1.14	5	9
Democratic institutions	26,529	6.98	1.69	3	10
Vote for candidate	Did not vote	7220	31.91 (%)	-	1
	Blank/Null vote	861	3.81 (%)	-	
	Voted winning	8751	38.68 (%)	-	
	Voted losing	5794	25.61 (%)	-	

Source: own elaboration from LAPOP and BTI.

unemployment). We thus rely on the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) and include economic performance, whose quantitative reference indicators are: GDP, GDP per capita, purchasing power parity, GDP growth, inflation, unemployment, foreign direct investment, current account balance, public debt, cash surplus or deficit, tax revenue, and gross capital formation (BTI, 2018). Although this is our aggregate level variable of interest, we further consider the stability of democratic institutions as a control variable, also from the BTI (2018). Both questions are measured on a 10-point scale, coded by country experts. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of all variables.

Because we are interested in both individual- and aggregate-level variables, and because interviewees are nested in countries, we run a multilevel mixed-effects linear regression, which better fits the structure of data. The model assumes a random intercept and a random slope for the rating of the job performance of the president. The model also includes a cross-level interaction between the economic performance and the respondents' rating of the job performance of the president. This multilevel model also allows us to assess the extent to which the associations between any individual characteristic vary depending on their higher level contexts, more specifically the aggregate effect of the economy on tolerant attitudes and its impact on the president's supporter/detractor divide.

Results

Table 2 displays the model with both individual and contextual factors,⁶ with dependent variables ordered from the least to the most threatening.

Table 2. Determinants of Political Tolerance toward System Critics' Rights.

	Vote	Make speeches on TV	Run for public office	Conduct peaceful demonstrations
<i>Individual</i>				
Presidential job rating	-0.34 (0.26)	-1.03 (0.38)***	-0.83 (0.31)***	-0.95 (0.43)**
Voted winning (ref.)				
Did not vote	-0.07 (0.05)	0.13 (0.05)**	0.03 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
Blank/Null vote	0.09 (0.11)	0.03 (0.12)	0.04 (0.12)	0.11 (0.11)
Voted losing	0.10 (0.05)*	0.19 (0.06)***	0.25 (0.05)***	0.25 (0.05)***
Woman	-0.08 (0.04)**	-0.17 (0.04)***	-0.13 (0.04)***	-0.26 (0.04)***
Urban	0.04 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)
Age	-0.01 (0.00)***	-0.02 (0.00)***	-0.01 (0.00)***	-0.01 (0.00)***
Years of schooling	0.04 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***	0.07 (0.01)***
Ideology	0.03 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)**
Interest in politics	-0.24 (0.02)***	-0.23 (0.02)***	-0.21 (0.02)***	-0.22 (0.02)***
Support political system	0.07 (0.01)***	0.09 (0.01)***	0.08 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.01)***
Respect political institutions	0.03 (0.01)**	0.03 (0.01)**	0.00 (0.01)	0.05 (0.01)***
Support democracy	0.22 (0.01)***	0.17 (0.01)***	0.17 (0.01)***	0.24 (0.01)***
<i>Aggregate</i>				
Economic performance	-0.07 (0.13)	-0.24 (0.18)	-0.24 (0.15)	-0.18 (0.19)
Democratic institutions	0.01 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.09 (0.05)*
<i>Cross-level interaction</i>				
Economic performance × Presidential job rating	0.04 (0.04)	0.12 (0.06)**	0.10 (0.05)**	0.11 (0.06)*
Constant	5.91 (0.93)***	7.67 (1.28)***	6.74 (1.05)***	8.01 (1.30)***
Groups	17	17	17	17
N	17,794	17,838	17,805	17,840

***< 0.01; **< 0.05; *< 0.1. Standard errors in parenthesis. Stata command *mixed*.
Source: own elaboration.

All things considered, at the individual level, our variable of interest (job approval rate of the president) is significant when it comes to explaining tolerance toward system critics in all types of participation, except for the least threatening scenario: the right to vote. This should come as no surprise, since the right to vote is one of the most solid and conventional forms of participation in a democratic regime and a core democratic right. However, this is not the case of other forms of participation, such as protests or media appearances, which may be more disruptive in the eyes of those who do not share the opinions of these critics. Indeed, for the other forms of participation—demonstrations, running for public office, and speeches on TV—H1 is supported. The effect of presidential approval is negative, as expected: the higher the presidential job approval, the less tolerant the attitudes.

The models also show that having voted for a losing candidate in the last presidential election increases tolerance—in all scenarios—when compared to having voted for the winning candidate. Parallel to presidential job rating, those closer to the president (who voted for him or her) are less tolerant; thus having voted in the past and current job rating are parallel phenomena.⁷ Moreover, there are no significant differences between citizens who voted for the winning candidate and those who did not vote, or who voted blank/null, except in the case of speeches on TV. In this specific scenario, citizens who did not participate in the last presidential election and those who did but voted for a losing candidate are significantly more tolerant than citizens who voted for the winner.

The effects of socio-demographic variables show that women and older citizens are less tolerant. While being more educated has a positive effect, living in an urban area has no effect. These findings are consistent with the expectations derived from the literature on political socialization, which has demonstrated that, on average, women tend to be more skeptical in their opinion of criticism of the system (Paul, 2018). Empirical evidence has also proven that education and living in an urban environment are positive indicators (Burton et al., 2019; Paul, 2018). Regarding age, there is no such consensus around its impact in these attitudes; Burton et al. (2019) find that young people are less tolerant toward peaceful demonstrations against the system, but we provide evidence that suggests otherwise.

Although not a central point of this article, it is worth highlighting that ideology is not significant for making speeches on TV and running for public office; when significant for voting and peaceful demonstrations the coefficients are rather low. There exists both leftist and rightist (in)tolerance across Latin America.

Regarding the effects of interest in politics, support for the political system (*To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of (country)*), respect for institutions, and support for democracy behave just as the socialization approach posits: the higher the values, the more tolerant are citizens of participation by system critics. The effect is comparatively high in the case of support for democracy and interest in politics (lower values mean higher interest).

At the aggregate level, economic performance does not show significance in any case, and stability of democratic institutions only exerts statistically significant effects on tolerance in the right to conduct peaceful demonstrations. The negative sign indicates that the more stable the democratic institutions, as measured by BTI, the less tolerance toward those who criticize the system if/when conducting peaceful demonstrations.

Moving to H2, in all three cases (we excluded voting in this step), the results also meet our expectations for the interaction effect, in that the supporter/detractor divide (at the individual level) is affected by economic performance (aggregate level). This reveals that

tolerant attitudes do not only correlate with support for democratic principles, as the socialization approach posits, but that citizens' tolerant attitudes are also contingent upon short-term factors such as presidential approval, as well as economic outcomes.

Figure 1 plots the cross-level interaction between presidential job rating and economic performance, specifically for the lowest (5) and the highest (9) values reported for the cases selected.⁸ The figures show how economic performance conditions the individual effect of presidential approval in the levels of tolerant attitudes, and the ingroup/outgroup divide around the president is clearly stronger in the case of negative economic outputs. This reveals that when levels of economic performance are high, those who rate the president positively are more tolerant, while citizens who evaluate the president negatively are less tolerant when socio-economic outputs are good. Therefore, H2, which speaks to the reduction of the difference between the president's supporters and detractors in terms of tolerant attitudes, is also supported.

Thus, the difference between supporters and detractors narrows when economic outputs are positive, but it sharply increases when these are negative (see Table 3). In a context with good economic performance, the levels of political tolerance are rather similar across the different opinions on the job performance of the president, and they scarcely exist in the case of the right to conduct peaceful demonstrations.

Furthermore, good economic outputs not only reduce the differences between supporters and detractors of the president, they actually reverse the effect to a certain extent: in all three cases, the slope for good economic performance is positive; that is, the higher the approval, the greater the tolerance. Therefore, in good (economic) times, a president's supporters are especially tolerant with system critics, which in turn reinforces our findings: there is no threat perceived by the ingroup, because the economic outputs are positive and true criticism is not possible. Citizens who are very critical of the president will become more intolerant when outputs are good—just the opposite of the general finding for a president's job approval rate.

Discussion and Conclusion

Literature on the explanation of tolerance has focused on both micro- and macrostructural factors, such as socio-political identification with either a leader or a political party (Brewer, 1999; Greene, 2004; Klandermans, 2014; Kranendonk et al., 2018) and positive socio-economic conditions (Andersen and Fetner, 2008), respectively.

Elsewhere, other studies have proven the effect of short-run factors like assessment of the incumbent in supporting democratic principles and civil liberties (Carlin and Singer, 2011; Singer, 2018). Indeed, we consider that in Latin America, where ideologies and social movements are named after presidents, presidential approval is not merely a positive rating of the president's job performance, but also a source of group membership.

This work aims to combine both approaches, focusing on the effects and interaction of presidential approval and socio-economic context on tolerant attitudes toward those who are critical of the system. To achieve this, we employed data from a key year—2019, defined by social mobilizations with an anti-system character and discourse in several Latin American countries.

Although we are interested in tolerant attitudes toward critics of the political system, this places a limit on the research itself. Certainly, the question of whether critics of the political system should have the right to vote, appear on television to make speeches, run for office or conduct peaceful demonstrations is a debate beyond the purview of this

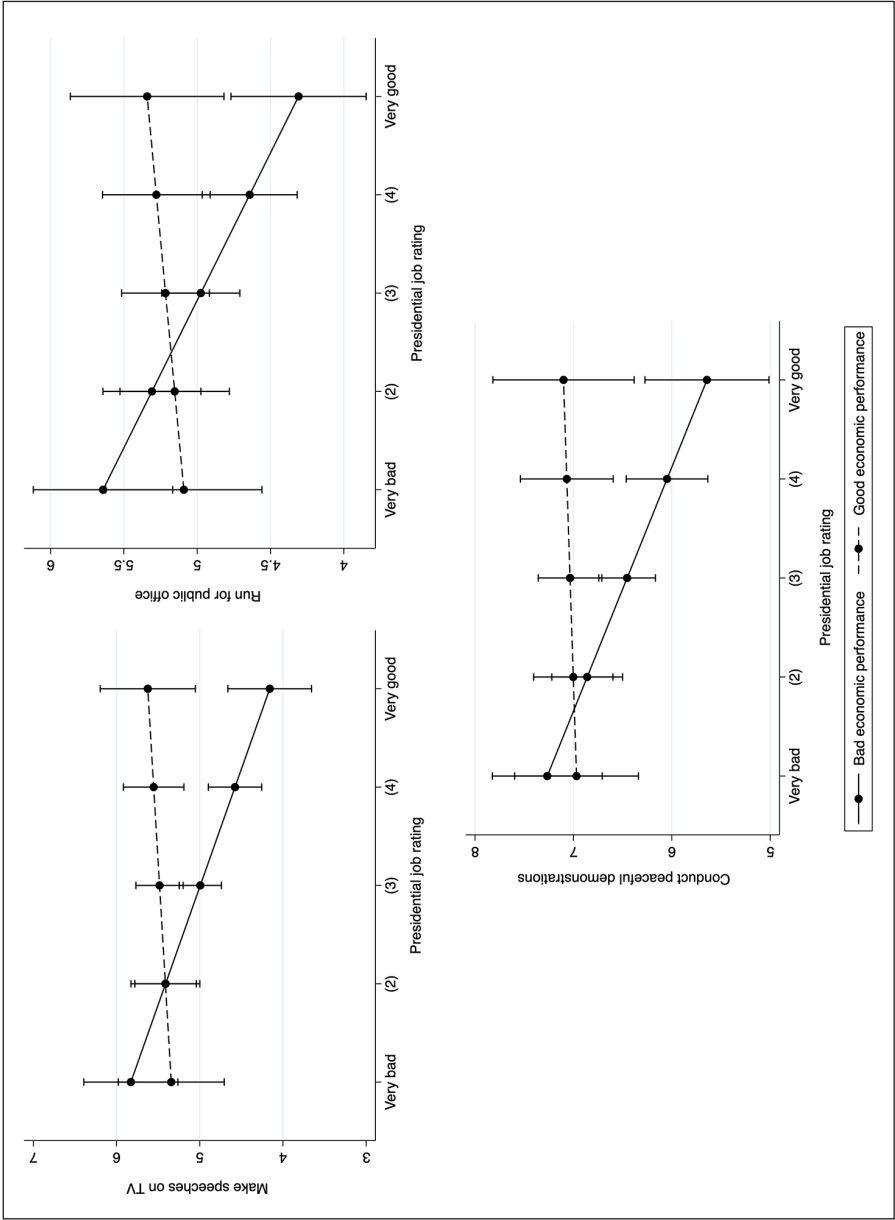


Figure 1. Marginal Effects: Presidential Approval Effects on Political Tolerance across Economic Performance. Linear predictions, fixed portions. Stata command *margins*. Adjusted predictions with 95% CIs. Source: own elaboration, from Table 2.

Table 3. Differences between the President's Detractors and Supporters' Levels of Tolerance in Different Economic Scenarios.

Linear prediction	Negative performance			Positive performance		
	Detractors (1)	Supporters (5)	Diff.	Detractors (1)	Supporters (5)	Diff.
Make speeches on TV	5.83	4.16	1.67	5.34	5.62	0.28
Run for public office	5.64	4.31	1.33	5.09	5.34	0.25
Conduct peaceful demonstrations	7.27	5.64	1.63	6.97	7.10	0.13

Source: own elaboration, from Figure 1.

article. Instead, we are interested here in a very specific set of tolerant attitudes related to acceptance of the proposal that political participation is open to every citizen.

Therefore, at the individual level, as expected, the variable exerting stronger influence is presidential approval (H1) even after controlling for past vote in presidential elections, except as regards the right to vote. Those more identified with the president (who rate the president's performance better) tend to show lower support for the idea that system critics should maintain their civil rights and be allowed to run for public office, demonstrate (even peacefully), and appear on television.

Furthermore, the causal flow for rating the president's job performance becomes more complex when cross-level interactions are considered. Results show that the effect of presidential approval on tolerance is conditioned by the socio-economic context (H2). In a scenario of positive economic outputs, a president's detractors will tend to express less tolerant attitudes toward criticism, perhaps because they consider that critics could threaten the benefits obtained during the current administration. This pattern is adjacent to the postulates of the literature on economic accountability and voting, since as long as an economy is performing well, which increases the chances for reelection of the incumbent, even the president's opponents will not tolerate criticism of the system that the president is leading. This would be the optimal scenario for a president seeking reelection: even the president's detractors do not approve of system critics holding peaceful demonstrations or running for public offices, thus elevating his or her chances of winning reelection, as the literature has long confirmed.

On the other side, in a scenario of positive economic outputs, a president's supporters tend to be more tolerant of participation by system critics. We thus argue that when economic performance is positive, those who support the president are more confident and less worried about protests against the government they defend, because objectively there is nothing to criticize, given that the economy is performing well, at least in the short term. In their view, TV speeches or critical public demonstrations would pose no threat to the government. Notwithstanding, when economy is not performing well, a president's supporter will express less tolerant attitudes, since criticism of the system may put "their" president at peril. This could imply difficulties in times of economic recession, since in this scenario intolerance would derive more from the president's supporters than their opponents, triggering political instability should the presidency change hands.

Finally, it is important to highlight that these results apply in three scenarios: the right of those who criticize the system to make speeches on TV, to run for public office, and to

conduct peaceful demonstrations. However, neither the effect of presidential approval nor the cross-level interaction in different economic contexts has been found in the case of the right to vote. Voting is the basis of an electoral democracy, outside the scope of the ingroup/outgroup divide. The other scenarios are seen by supporters as actions that might threaten the interests of the president with whom they identify, but this perception does not hold for the right to vote.

On the whole, likewise electoral winners may have less tolerance for opposition to a “losing” candidate’s criticisms in the streets, in media, or in other institutions of government (Singer, 2018), this research shows that, in contexts such as Latin America where the figure of president is pivotal, tolerance toward dissenters is also contingent upon opinions about the president’s performance. The ideological “*ismos*” that are triggered by particular presidents create groups, and this affects the perceptions of the ruling ingroup regarding the free expression of the outgroup (i.e. the opposition’s rights to criticize the government represented by the president they support). Similar conclusions are indicated by Carlin and Singer (2011) and Singer (2018), who find that short-term political and economic performance concerns can weaken citizens’ support for democratic principles in systematic ways.

This article has also found the relationship between tolerant attitudes and presidential approval to be directly affected by current economic performance. In short, a positive economic performance neutralizes the division between supporters and detractors of the president in terms of tolerance. This conclusion is particularly relevant for Latin America, where economic conditions play a fundamental role in political competition, defining the strategies of actors and voters whose pocketbooks often weigh heavily in their voting decisions.

As this article is being written, Latin America is going through a deep economic crisis accentuated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, which is hitting the region especially hard. Considering our results, we expect no lower or higher levels of tolerance on average, but rather changes at the individual level. What we can expect, based on our analysis, is less tolerant attitudes among those who feel closer to the current presidents, and lower willingness to respect actions by system critics in terms of delivering speeches on TV, being nominated for (or winning) elections, or marching on the streets.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Countries included: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.
2. Recoded from the original, where 1 = very good and 5 = very bad.
3. All presidents elected in the most recent elections were still in office at the time of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) fieldwork except for Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in Peru. For more information, see Appendix A.
4. We ran additional models with this variable as a binary, including only “winning” and “losing” and excluding “did not vote” (N = 7220) and “blank/null vote” (N = 861). In addition, in a different alternative model, we used non-voters as the baseline category and pooled together those voting blank/null with those voting for a losing candidate. Results do not significantly differ in both cases (see Appendices B and C for the full models).
5. In fact, and perhaps as an example of the weakness of parties in the region, in the AmericasBarometer 2018/2019 wave less than 25% of respondents identify with any political party at all.
6. Along with these models, we ran the same models from Table 2 with the three variables related to political support and two new variables regarding evaluation of the economy as post-treatment controls (Appendix A) and multilevel mixed-effects ordered logit regressions (Appendix D). For the evaluation of the economy, we used the respondent’s opinion on the country’s current economic situation, as well as their own situation as compared to 12 months ago (−1 “worse,” 0 “same,” 1 “better”). In the linear models with evaluation of the economy, economic performance has an aggregate significant negative effect in running for public office. In the ordered logit models, presidential job rating is significant for voting when evaluation of the economy is in the model, and economic performance has an aggregate significant negative effect in all four scenarios. Apart from these exceptions, the main findings of the article remain the same, and there are no further significant differences.
7. The correlation between presidential job rating and a binary variable of having voted for a winning/losing candidate is 0.40.
8. After running the models from Table 2 (Stata command `mixed`), and having confirmed that the interaction between presidential approval and economic performance is positive and significant (except for voting), we run the Stata command `margins` to get the slopes (i.e. linear predictions) of the presidential approval in two different economic scenarios (“good” and “bad”). Figure 1 plots such results, with a slope for each economic scenario. Table 3 displays the same scores and, in addition, the difference between the scores of supporters and detractors. In other words, this table makes explicit the differences between the slopes in values “very bad” (detractors) and “very good” (supporters). This way, we are actually focusing on the differences between president’s supporters and detractors in terms of tolerant attitudes depending on the economic outputs, and thus, testing the expectation posed by H2.

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