

Latinobarómetro Poll: Latin Americans, Despite Stereotype, Are Political Moderates

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Bush and Chávez Are Both Given Low Ratings

George Bush and Hugo Chávez have one thing in common, as far as the Latin American public is concerned. They are viewed equally negatively. Only Fidel Castro received lower marks among the ten leaders rated by the publics of 18 countries in the latest Latinobarómetro survey.

The portrait of Latin America that emerges from the poll is of a region whose citizens, overall, place themselves at the center of the political spectrum, despite the victory of leftist candidates in some recent presidential elections.

[Latinobarómetro](#), based in Santiago, Chile, interviewed at least 1,000 people in each of the 18 countries polled (20,234 in all) between Oct. 3 and Nov. 5. It has conducted similar polls for the past decade, beginning with an eight-country poll in 1995.

Political Ideology

The findings about the region's ideological leanings indicate that public opinion tends toward the center, shunning either leftwing or rightwing positions.

Latinobarómetro Executive Director Marta Lagos said that such centrism had remained fairly constant in recent years, adding that generally Latin Americans "identify the left with change and the right with the status quo."

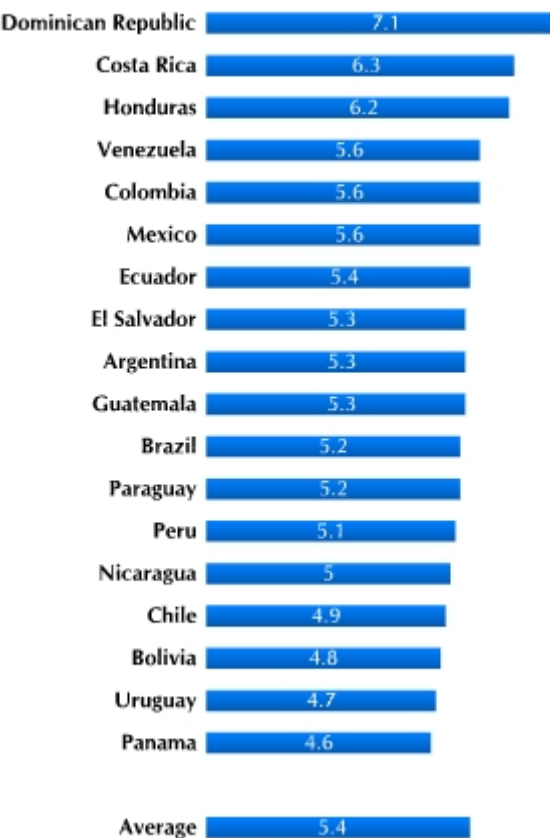
Overall, the Latin American public identifies itself as politically moderate, very slightly to the right of center. Asked to situate their own beliefs on a scale where 0 is the most leftwing position and 10 the most rightwing, Latin American respondents on average give themselves a 5.4. A plurality of 44 percent overall identified with the center (4-6) range, while a third (32%) identified with the right (7-10) and a quarter (24%) with the left (0-3). (Those who offered no response or said don't know were excluded).

Central America is the region where the largest proportions of the population identify themselves as politically to the right. El Salvador has the highest percentage of respondents (50%) situating themselves on the right (from 7-10), though the average score there is a centrist 5.3. Next is the Dominican Republic, where 45 percent identify themselves as to the right (average score 7.1) followed by Honduras where 44 percent do so (average 6.2).

Despite the left's recent electoral victories in many Latin American countries, it attracts far smaller percentages. The highest is in Uruguay where about a third of respondents (34%) identify with the left side of the spectrum (from 0 to 3) for an average score of 4.7.

Left-Right Scale

In politics, one normally speaks of "left" and "right." On a scale where 0 is the left and 10 is the right, where would you locate yourself? (Average rating by country)



Latinobarómetro 2006

Next comes Nicaragua (32%, average score 5), Bolivia (29%, average 4.8) and Venezuela (28%, average 5.6).

But both Nicaragua—which recently elected Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega president—and Venezuela—where President Hugo Chávez just won a second term—have higher proportions identifying with the right than the left. Forty-three percent of Nicaraguans identify themselves as right and 33 percent of Venezuelans do.

Lagos said the fact that most Venezuelans support Chávez, even though they tend to regard themselves as centrist, suggested that his popularity transcends ideological labels.

“Venezuelans don’t necessarily see Chávez as a leftist, they see him as someone who has brought change,” she said, pointing out that the Venezuelan leader is especially popular among sectors of the population that had felt excluded by the traditional parties.

In Bolivia, President Evo Morales became the country’s first indigenous president last year and confirmed his radical credentials shortly after taking office by nationalizing the country’s natural gas fields. Nonetheless, Bolivians, on average, consider themselves centrist (average 4.8). Slightly less than a third (29%) identifies with the left and about a fifth (21%) identifies with the right.

Views of Leaders in the Hemisphere

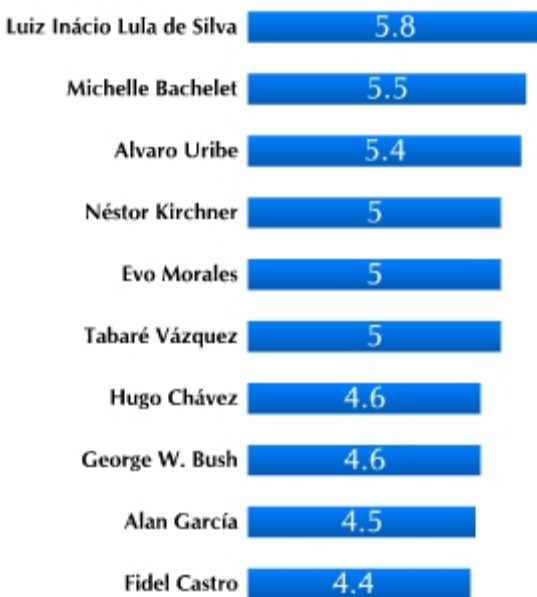
Latinobarómetro asked respondents to rank nine Latin American heads of state and President Bush on a 0-10 negative to positive scale, with ratings from 0 to 3 considered negative and from 7 to 10 positive.

The survey found that moderate leaders in the hemisphere received the highest average ratings and the highest percentages of favorable scores. Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was first with an average score of 5.8, the highest positive ratings—37 percent—and the lowest negatives—16 percent (49% did not know or respond). Chilean president Michelle Bachelet is next with an average score of 5.5. Thirty-two percent rated her positively and only 18 percent negatively (64% did not respond).

Although both Lula and Bachelet lead leftist parties, they have eschewed the radical economic policies favored by Latin American socialists in the past. They have also been careful to cultivate cordial, if not close, relations with the U.S. government.

Image of Leaders

To continue, I will name a series of leaders of foreign countries. I want you to evaluate them on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that your evaluation is very bad and that 10 that is very good.



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Cuban leader Fidel Castro not only gets the lowest average score (4.4) but also the highest percentage of negative ratings (41%). Less than a third (27%) rates him positively. Castro is the best known of the Latin American leaders rated, with only 21 percent saying they did not know or would not respond.

Peruvian president Alan García has the second most negative average rating at 4.5. Thirty-three percent, overall, view him negatively and 19 percent positively (64% do not respond). García was elected president of Peru in June for the second time. During his first term, from 1985 to 1990, Peru suffered through a severe economic crisis and rising political violence. García faced charges of corruption (later dropped) while living in exile in the 1990s.

Chávez and Bush tie for third from the bottom with average scores of 4.6. They also get the same percentage of positive ratings (39%) and are viewed negatively by 28 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Both Chávez and Bush are relatively well known with only 29 percent and 21 percent, respectively, not responding.

Bush is more popular in Central America than elsewhere, getting his highest percentage of positive responses in Panama (61%). Central America is enjoying closer economic relations with the United States following ratification of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2005. In addition, the region benefits from the remittances sent there from the large Central American immigrant community living in the United States.

The U.S. president is also relatively popular in Colombia (39%), whose conservative president, Álvaro Uribe, has received substantial economic and security assistance from Washington for counter narcotics operations.

The U.S. president is least popular in the southern cone, especially in Argentina where only 6 percent give him a positive score and his average rating is 1.9. Bush also receives few accolades in Venezuela (22% positive), Bolivia (22%) and Ecuador (24%), all of which have elected populist presidents who have publicly defied U.S. policies.

Chávez and Castro, not surprisingly, are most popular where Bush is least popular. The Venezuelan and Cuban leaders both get their highest scores in Venezuela (7.1 and 6.6, respectively) and their lowest in Costa Rica (3 and 2.4). Chávez also gets a 3 in Peru, where he was widely criticized for his comments on Peruvian politics during last year's presidential campaign.

Latinobarómetro's findings on the relative popularity of Chávez and Bush are confirmed by [Gallup](#) polls in Latin America. Gallup found similarly low levels of approval for the two leaders in surveys of 18 Latin American countries, conducted in May 2006 and

December 2005, which found that 26 percent approved of Chávez and 27 percent of Bush. Chávez had lower levels of disapproval (30%) than did Bush (42%), however.

The Venezuelan leader's approval was highest in his own country (49%), Uruguay (47%), Bolivia (43%) and Argentina (38%), Gallup found. It was lowest in Nicaragua (10%), Mexico (10%), and El Salvador (13%). Bush was most popular in Panama (44% approval), Colombia (39%) and Honduras (36%), least in Argentina (9%), Paraguay (12%) and Brazil and Uruguay (21% both).