

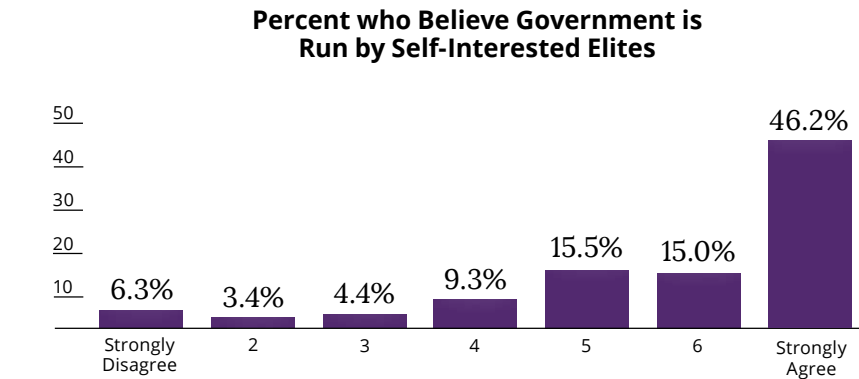
Spotlight on Anti-Elite Attitudes in Costa Rica

By Kaitlen J. Cassell¹

Populism is making a comeback in Latin America. Compared to the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, Costa Rica's 2018 presidential election barely registers in regional accounts of populism's rise. Yet, the election did feature at least one politician, Fabricio Alvarado, who displayed populist tendencies.² To what extent are Costa Ricans embracing the type of anti-establishment, anti-elite attitudes that are often championed by populist candidates? A unique battery included in the 2018 AmericasBarometer reveals that Costa Ricans display high levels of one marker of populist tendencies: anti-elite attitudes. For example, when asked whether people believe that the government is run by big interests who only look after themselves, 46.2% of respondents strongly agree, while only 6.3% strongly disagree.³

Who is more likely to agree that government is run by a cabal of self-interested elites? Analyses of the 2018 Costa Rica AmericasBarometer data reveal a generational divide: younger individuals, particularly those aged 26-45, display the highest levels of such anti-elite attitudes. Additionally, respondents with higher levels of education are likely to question elites' intentions. Perhaps in keeping with the fact that this type of anti-elite attitude is widely distributed throughout the population, there are no statistically significant differences by gender, wealth, place of residence (urban v. rural), or religious affiliation.

The implications of these findings are particularly concerning in a regional and global climate that is



struggling to maintain democratic support. Though not always explicitly anti-democratic, populists are often critical of traditional liberal democratic processes and institutions. In fact, the 2018 Costa Rica AmericasBarometer data indicate a positive relationship between anti-elite attitudes and likelihood to vote for populist Fabricio Alvarado (compared to the now-president, Carlos Alvarado). More problematic is the finding that Costa Ricans with anti-elite attitudes display somewhat lower support for the system, an important gauge of the health of democracy.⁴ Unsurprisingly, these individuals also report higher dissatisfaction with how democracy works in Costa Rica compared to individuals who view political elites in a more favorable light.

These results are particularly concerning given that Costa Rica's political situation has declined since the survey was fielded:⁵ the government of Carlos Alvarado has become increasingly unpopular and currently faces union protests and a rising unemployment rate,⁶ which will likely increase anti-elite attitudes.

Though Fabricio Alvarado lost the election, his strong candidacy and the 2018 AmericasBarometer results demonstrate that populist platforms have a broader appeal in the region than many may realize.

¹ Kaitlen J. Cassell is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University and a LAPOP-affiliated researcher

² Fabricio Alvarado lost the election after running a religious rightwing populist campaign. For more information, see <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/02/costa-rica-quesada-wins-presidency-in-vote-fought-on-gay-rights>.

³ The AmericasBarometer asks the following question in the 2018 Costa Rica survey: ANTI. The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves. (1) Strongly disagree (7) Strongly agree.

⁴ See Booth, John and Seligson, Mitchell. (2009). *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Political Support and Democracy in Eight Nations*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ This survey was carried out between September 24th and October 31th of 2018.

⁶ https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/08/09/america/1565305703_145730.html.