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# Is democracy overrated?

## Latin American students' support for dictatorships


### SUMMARY

Results from the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2016 show that more than two-thirds of the students in the participating Latin American countries reported that they would support a dictatorship as a form of government if it brought order and security, or if it brought economic benefits. This brief looks closer at these findings in order to identify possible explanations and potential policy implications. Families and formal education have a potential role in instilling democratic values in future citizens, but it is clear that not all depends on schools and families. In failing democratic systems, where informed citizens do not trust their institutions, there is a need to improve transparency, and eradicate corruption in order to promote support for democratic values.


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### IMPLICATIONS

- In all the Latin American countries that participated in ICCS 2016, students with higher levels of civic knowledge tended to be less likely to support a dictatorship. Therefore:
  - Schools may be able to contribute to the promotion of democratic values by improving the quality of civic education.
- In all the countries analyzed, students who reported speaking more frequently with their parents about social and political issues, also tended to be less likely to support a dictatorship. Therefore:
  - Families that hold democratic values may be able to improve support for democratic systems by discussing social and political issues with their children.
- In countries with democratic systems that are perceived to be failing, students with higher levels of civic knowledge tended to be more critical and report lower levels of trust in institutions. Therefore:
  - Civic institutions within countries may be able to support the development of democratic values in young people by improving their transparency and eradicating corrupt practices.

## INTRODUCTION

Results from ICCS 2016 show that, in participating Latin American countries, 69 percent of students viewed order and security as an acceptable justification for a dictatorial government, while 65 percent would tolerate a dictatorship if it brought economic benefits (Schulz et al. 2018a).

Previous results from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 showed that the majority of lower-secondary students in the Latin American countries that participated in 2009 also considered that dictatorships were justified if they brought economic benefits or greater security (Schulz et al. 2011). A recent Latinobarómetro opinion survey[1] indicated that almost half of the adult population of the countries surveyed tended to show support or indifference to undemocratic governments (Latinobarómetro 2018).

To some extent, these figures indicate the failure of democratic systems in the region. While Latin American countries are experiencing the longest uninterrupted period of democracy in their respective histories, very few of these democratic systems are thriving economically or socially, and, most importantly, in their institutional life. In fact, political observers suggest that democracy has collapsed in several Latin American countries, giving way to either authoritarian regimes or enclaves within weak democratic systems (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2015). Criminal organizations rule the poorer parts of many cities and even whole municipalities in several Latin American countries (see, for example, Gallardo-Gómez 2018). For example, data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project[2] show that, in most of the countries in the region, democracy is weaker than it has been for decades. Public support for and satisfaction with democracy is also fading, according to the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).[3] In this complex political climate, it becomes important to identify the factors that are associated with students' support for dictatorships, and examine the ways schools, families, and political institutions can contribute to encouraging democratic values in future citizens.

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

IEA's ICCS is a comparative research program that investigates the ways in which grade eight students are prepared to undertake their roles as citizens. ICCS 2016 collected data in five Latin American countries: Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Peru.

We focused on two questions included in the ICCS 2016 Latin American student questionnaire concerning potential justifications for dictatorial rule. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements that said the establishment of dictatorships was justified when they brought: (1) "order and safety" and (2) "economic benefits." In the five Latin American countries that participated in ICCS 2016, high proportions of students agreed with these two statements (on average 69% and 65%, respectively), meriting further analysis of the underlying factors prompting these results.

Using the data from ICCS 2016, our analyses were guided by the following question: Can schools, families, and institutions play a role in decreasing the levels of support for dictatorships reported by students? To answer this question, we undertook a series of comparisons, using one school-related variable (students' civic knowledge), one family-related variable (the reported frequency with which students talk to their parents about political and social issues), and one variable related to institutions (students' trust in civic institutions). [4]

## RESULTS

### CAN SCHOOLS PLAY A ROLE IN DECREASING STUDENTS' LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR DICTATORSHIPS?

To answer this question, we compared the average civic knowledge of the students who justified dictatorial rule with those who did not[5] across the five Latin American countries participating in ICCS 2016. We separated the results for the two questions of interest. On average, students who justified dictatorships tended to also have lower civic knowledge scores (Figure 1).

The differences between the two groups are statistically significant in nearly all cases; Peru was the only exception, where there was no statistically significant difference in the civic knowledge scores of students who agreed and students who disagreed that dictatorships that brought "order and safety" were justified. This finding suggests that schools could contribute to decreased student support for dictatorships by increasing their students' levels of civic knowledge.

1 Latinobarómetro is an annual public opinion survey applied to nationally representative samples in 18 Latin American countries. It observes the development of democracies, and economies and societies, using indicators of attitude, opinion, and behavior.

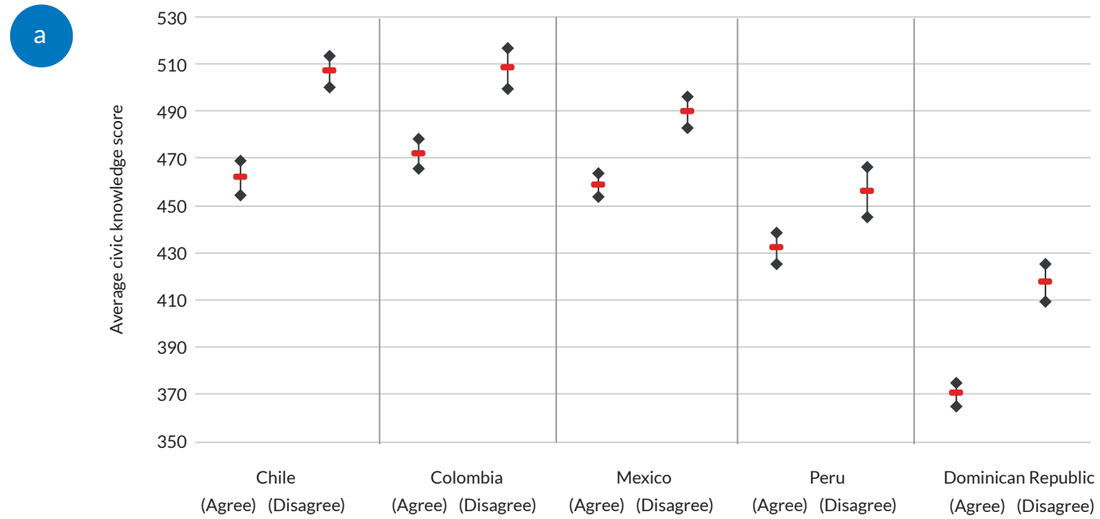
2 See https://www.v-dem.net/en/ for more information.

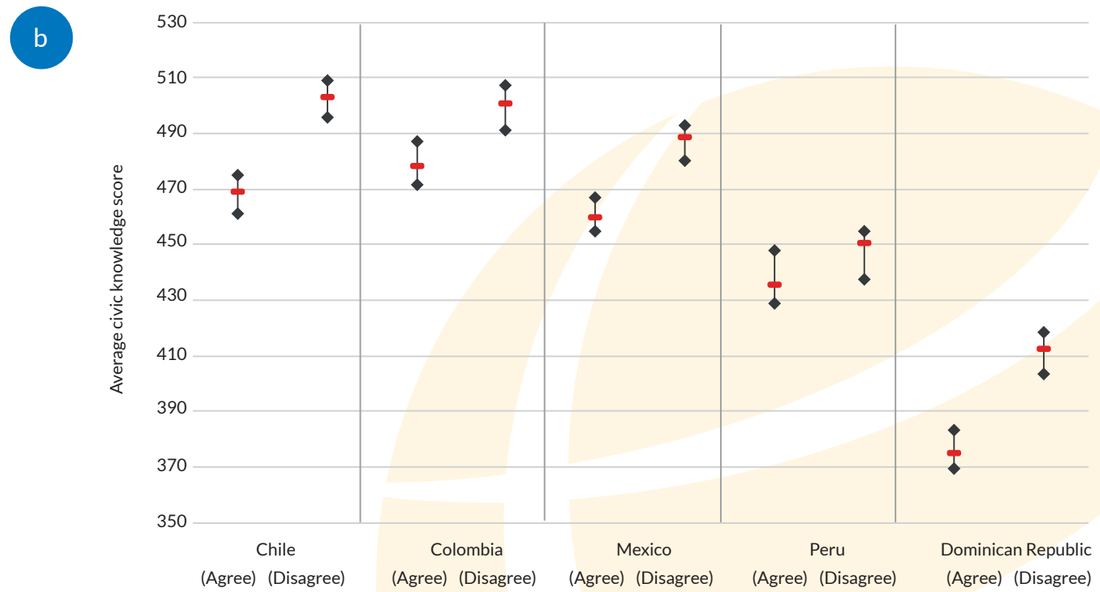
3 See https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ for more information.

4 Detailed information about all the variables used for these analyses, including the index "Students' trust in civic institutions" can be found in the ICCS 2016 assessment framework (Schulz et al. 2016) and the ICCS 2016 technical report (Schulz et al. 2018b).

5 The original question had four response options: (1) "strongly agree," (2) "agree," (3) "disagree," and (4) "strongly disagree." For a clearer graphical representation and an easier interpretation of the results, we recoded the first two options as "agree" and the last two as "disagree" in all the subsequent analyses.

*Figure 1: Average civic knowledge scores of students who agree or disagree that dictatorships are justified when they (a) bring economic benefits, and (b) bring order and safety*



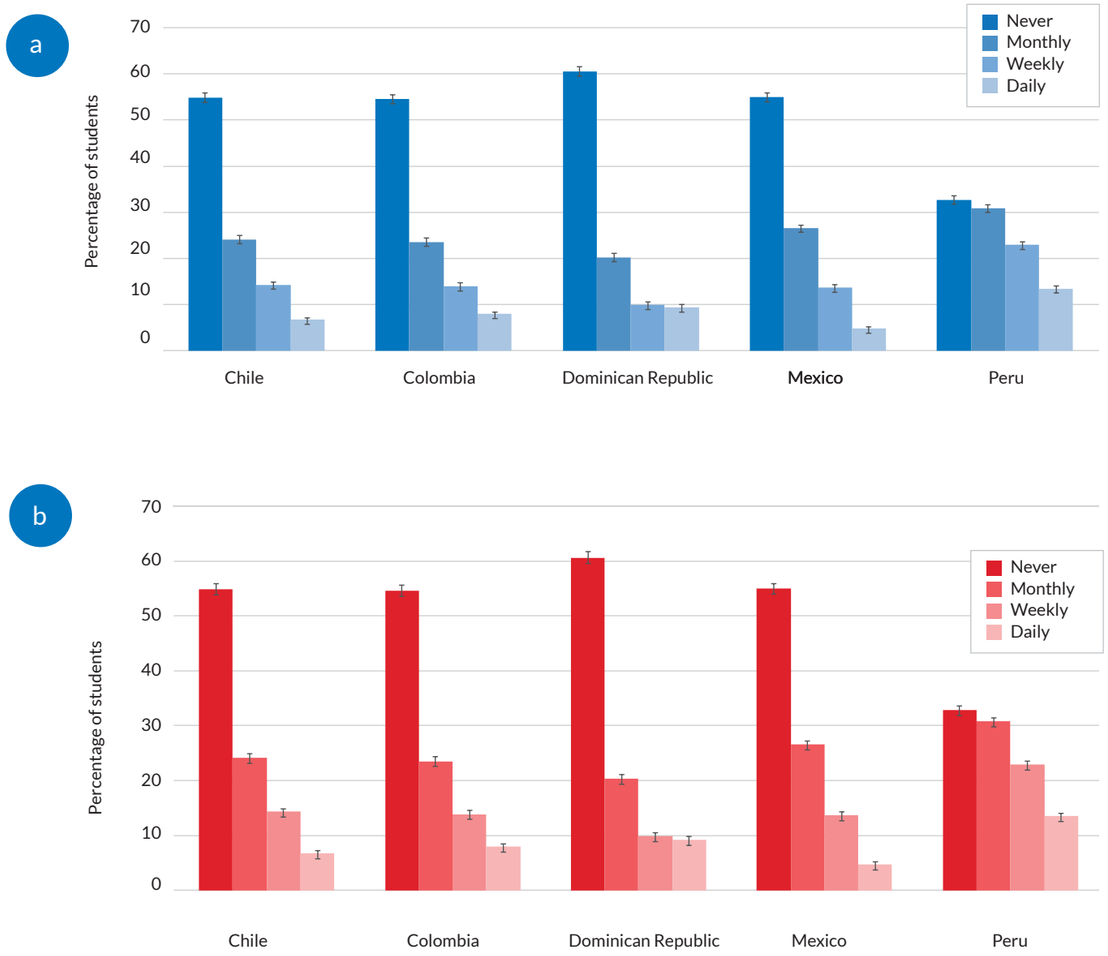

Notes: Red bars indicate the average civic knowledge scores for the students in that country, and black diamonds denote the 95% confidence intervals.

## CAN FAMILIES PLAY A ROLE IN DECREASING STUDENTS' LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR DICTATORSHIPS?

To answer this question, we separated those students who agreed dictatorial rule was justified under certain conditions from those that did not and compared the frequency with which both groups reported talking to their parents about political and social issues. Within each country, ICCS collected data on the percentage of students who reported talking to their parents about social and political issues daily, weekly, monthly, or never. On average, students who agreed that dictatorships were justified by certain conditions tended to talk less frequently to their parents about social and political issues (Figure 2).

The differences between the three frequency groups were statistically significant in most cases; there was no statistical differences between the categories "never" and "monthly" in Peru, or between the categories "weekly" and "daily" in the Dominican Republic (this was true whether a dictatorship brought economic benefits or order and safety). These results provide evidence to suggest that families that hold democratic views could contribute toward decreasing students' support for dictatorships by increasing the frequency with which they discuss social and political issues with their children.

*Figure 2: Percentage of students who agree dictatorships can be justified when they (a) bring economic benefits, and (b) bring order and safety, by frequency with which they talk to their parents about social and political issues*

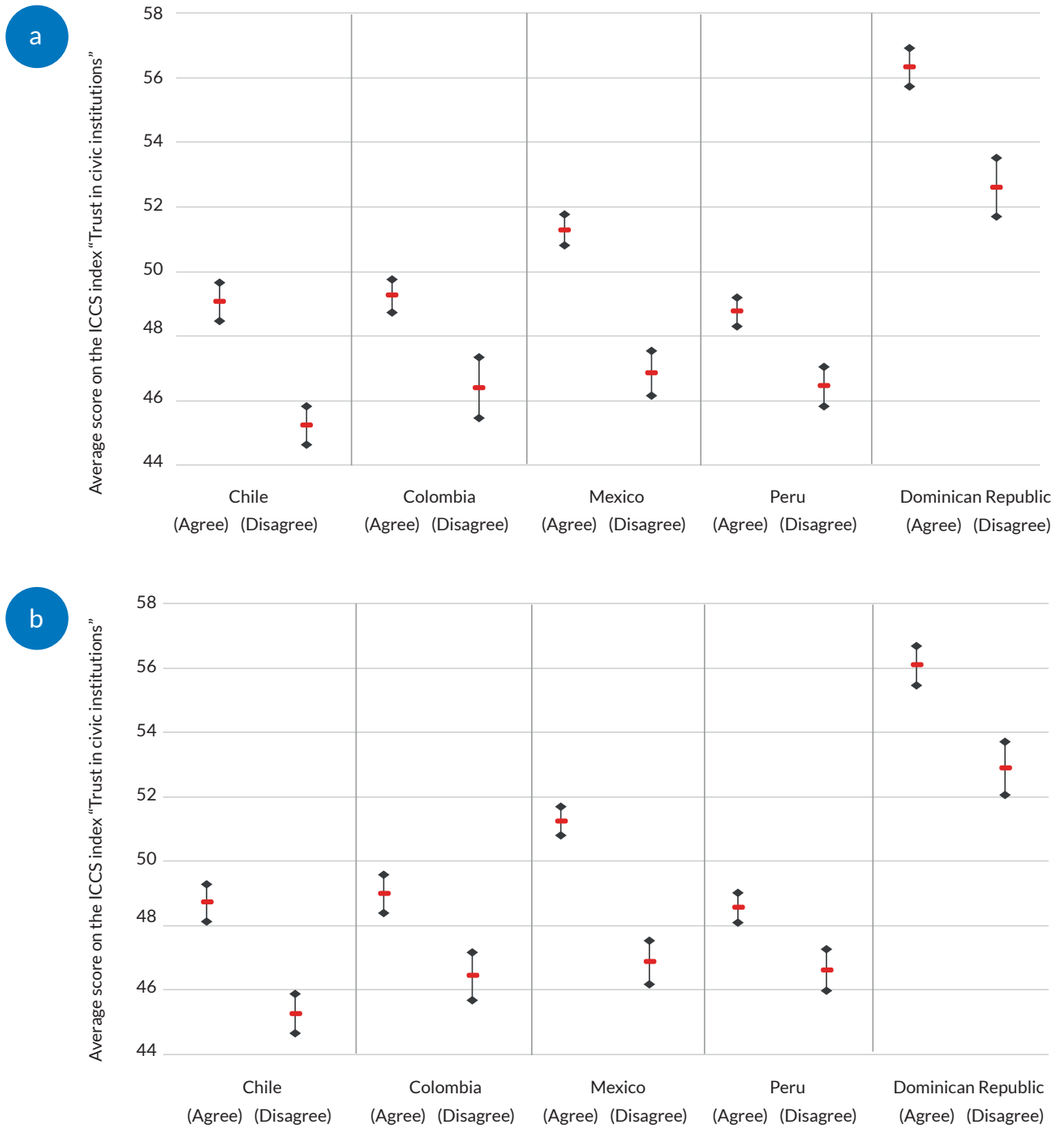



Notes: Black bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

## CAN INSTITUTIONS PLAY A ROLE IN DECREASING STUDENTS' LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR DICTATORSHIPS?

To answer this question, we separated those students who agreed dictatorial rule was justified under certain conditions from those that did not, and established their average scores for the index "Trust in civic institutions." On average, students who agreed that dictatorships were justified by certain conditions tended to report higher levels of trust in civic institutions (Figure 3). The differences between the two groups are statistically significant in all cases.

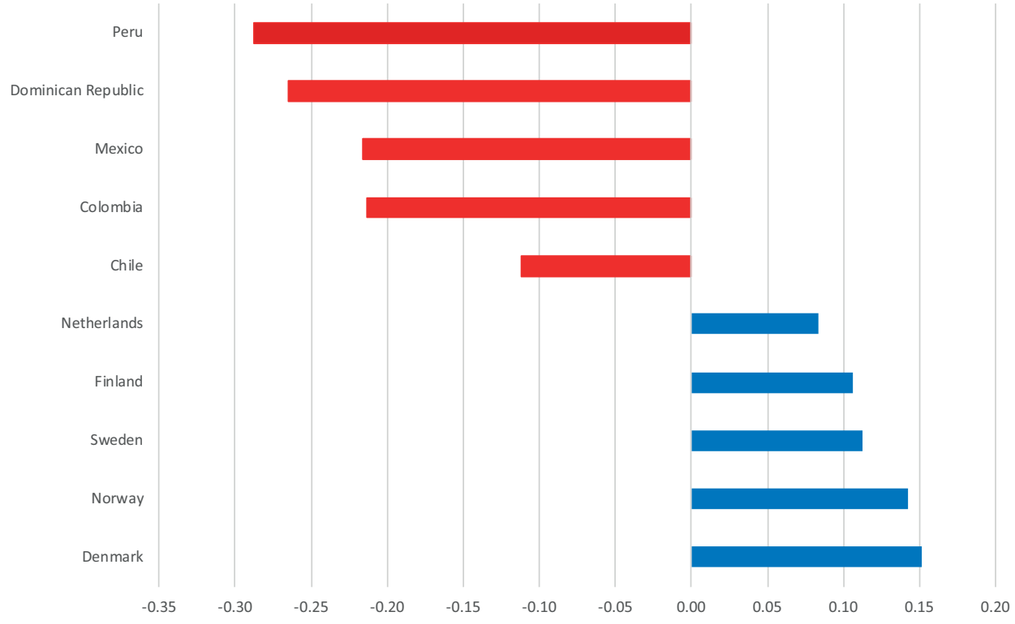
*Figure 3: Average score on the ICCS scale for students' trust in civic institutions for students who agree or disagree that dictatorships are justified when they (a) bring economic benefits, and (b) bring order and safety*




Notes: Red bars indicate the average scores on the students' trust in civic institutions scale and black diamonds denote the 95% confidence intervals.

In order to disentangle this finding, we undertook an additional analysis. One possible explanation for this counterintuitive finding would be that those students who disagreed that dictatorships are justified under certain conditions reported lower levels of trust in civic institutions because they are better informed about their political systems and are therefore more critical of them. If this is the case, we would expect students with higher levels of civic knowledge to have lower levels of trust in civic institutions in countries with democracies that are perceived to be failing (such as in the Latin American countries), but higher levels of trust in civic institutions in the countries where democracies are well established (Lauglo 2013). We therefore used the well-known corruption perception index (Transparency International 2019) to select the five countries that participated in ICCS 2016 that are perceived as least corrupt; we then compared the results for these five additional countries with the analysis for the five Latin American countries (Figure 4).

*Figure 4: Correlation between civic knowledge and students' trust in civic institutions for the five Latin American ICCS countries and the five ICCS 2016 countries with the lowest levels of perceived corruption according to the corruption perception index*




We found evidence to support our hypothesis that, in countries with stronger democracies (lower levels of perceived corruption being an indicator), students with high civic knowledge tend to have greater trust in their institutions (correlation coefficients ranged from 0.08 to 0.15). Conversely, in the Latin American countries, where democracy is perceived as weaker (higher levels of corruption), students with high civic knowledge tended to be more critical and to report lower levels of trust (correlation coefficients ranging from –0.29 to –0.11). All correlation coefficients were statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

Both schools and families can contribute to decreasing the worrisome levels of support for dictatorships reported by students in the Latin American countries participating in ICCS 2016. In agreement with previous research (Schulz et al. 2011), our analyses provide additional evidence to suggest that students who justify dictatorships under certain conditions tend to have lower levels of civic knowledge. Since civic knowledge as measured in ICCS is closely linked to curricula, this finding suggests that education systems would have opportunities to decrease students' support for dictatorships by increasing the overall levels of civic knowledge of their students. Our results show that families also have an important role to play, since students who talk more often with their families about social and political issues tend to be less supportive of dictatorships. Parents who hold democratic views could contribute toward promoting students' adherence to democratic values by discussing social and political issues with their children.

Finally, our results demonstrate that support for dictatorships is also associated with trust in institutions, but that this relationship is complex. We found that students with higher levels of civic knowledge tend to report higher levels of trust in institutions in countries with strong democracies, while in countries with weak democracies, high-achieving students tend to have lower levels of trust in institutions. For this reason, we argue that civic and political institutions also have a fundamental role to play in instilling democratic values in our future citizens. Our results suggest that failing democratic systems, where civically-informed young people do not trust their institutions, need to improve transparency and eradicate corrupt practices in order to promote support for democratic values.



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## FURTHER READING

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