

# ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS ON POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

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## Do the region's new middle classes think and behave in ways that will strengthen, or undermine, democracy?

Ever since Aristotle, conventional wisdom has been that a robust middle class is a *sine qua non* for stable democracy. Put simply: no middle class, no democracy.

For decades, modernization and democratization theorists believed the prospects for stable democracy were grim in Latin America since there was “no middle class to speak of.”<sup>1</sup> Conversely, others found evidence of a growing middle class, but warned about the potential for political destabilization in the face of middle-class mobilization<sup>2</sup> and the breakdown of cross-class alliances.<sup>3</sup> And more recently, multilateral banks and the media have hailed the growth of the middle class in Latin America, attributing it to a felicitous mix of economic stability, economic growth and innovative social programs.

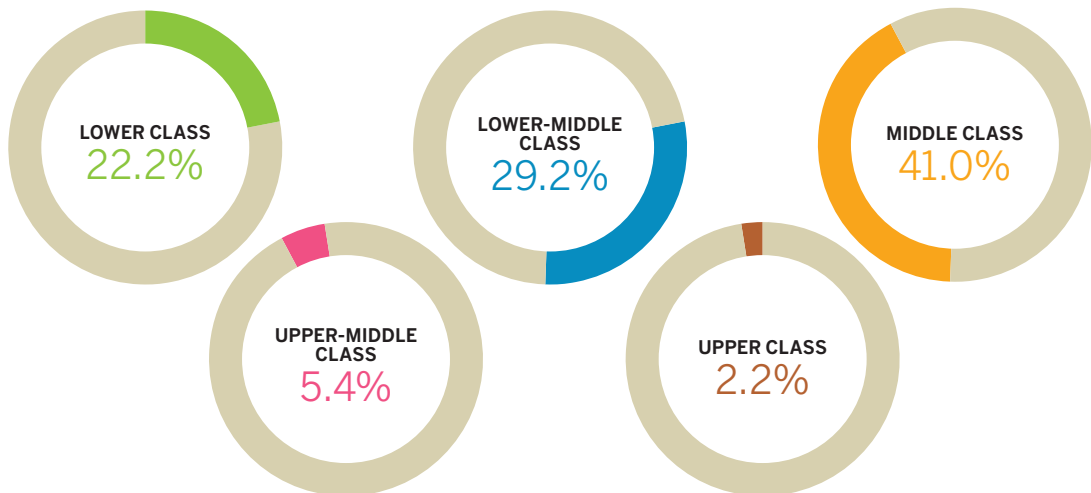
These competing views raise two questions: 1) How large is the group of individuals who consider themselves to be middle class in Latin America and the Caribbean today? 2) Will this group be a force for democratic stability or political decay?

Our analyses below suggest that Aristotle was not always right. Using a preliminary dataset from the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University, which included over 41,000 interviews in 26 countries, we found that the self-defined middle class has become the largest class grouping in the Americas today. But their political and democratic attitudes and practices are not that different from those who identify with the lower classes, and, in one case, are even less democratic.



**HOW LARGE?** The data show that a plurality of citizens of the Americas (41.0%) perceive themselves as belonging to the middle class. When we combine that with those who identify themselves as lower-middle class (29.2%), we see that a large portion of Latin American societies (70.2%) consider themselves broadly in the middle class.

These figures are based on a question from the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey, which asked respondents to identify themselves as belonging to one of five class categories: lower class, lower-middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class.<sup>4</sup> This is the measurement of class used for the analyses that follow.



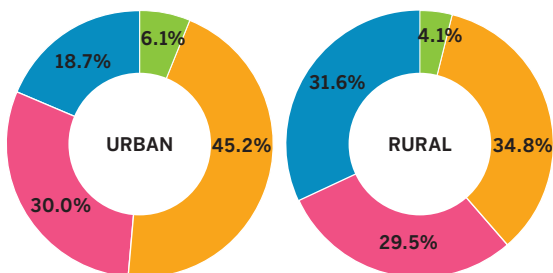
Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2012 (24 countries included)



The term “class” is often associated with economic circumstances. While there are many ways to measure middle class (including those discussed in this issue by Lopez-Calva, p.52), comparisons of our survey data with other research indicate that individuals across the Americas tend to qualify themselves as middle class at a greater rate than do objective measures such as income or possession of electronic consumer goods.

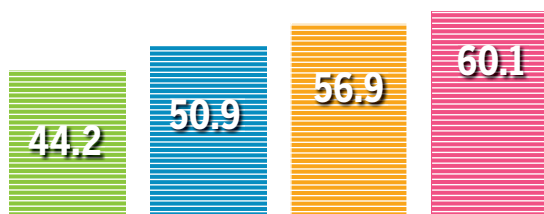
**WHERE?** Since John Johnson’s 1958 work on the “middle sectors” in Latin America, most research has shown a link between urbanization and the middle class.<sup>5</sup> Our results confirm that this connection still exists; those living in urban areas are more likely to identify themselves as middle class (45.2%) than those in rural areas (34.8%).

Our analyses also find support for another widely accepted conclusion of Johnson’s study: those with higher levels of education tend to identify with the middle and upper classes.



## ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

We find that the higher the class with which respondents identify, the more positive they are in their assessments of their personal economic situations (on a 0-100 scale). This positive relationship between class membership and positive outlook supports classic research attributing self-esteem, feeling in control and optimism to the middle and higher classes.<sup>7</sup>



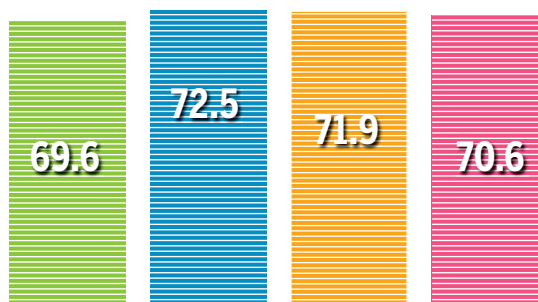
## MATERIAL GOODS

To measure how class self-identification compares to ownership of specific products and services in the Americas, we created an index of “consumer electronic goods.” The measure is based on questions about whether each respondent’s household owns a flat panel/LCD television, a computer and/or has access to the Internet at home. The index runs from 0 to 3. We find that ownership of these modest measures of consumer goods is correlated with class identification. In short, “to have is to be” (or at least “feel”) middle class in the Americas.<sup>6</sup>



## SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

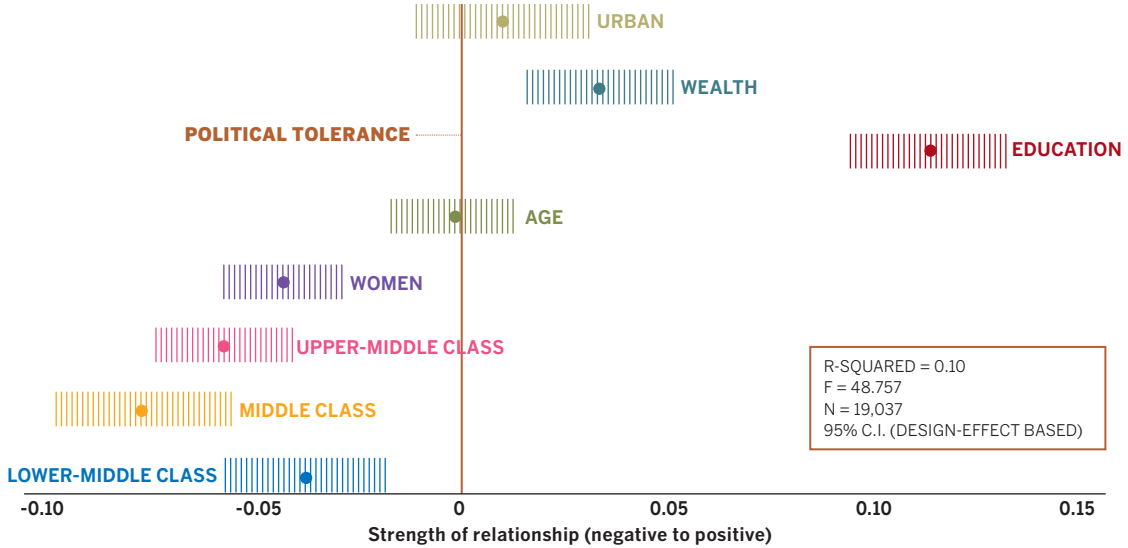
But what about democratic attitudes? Despite the belief held by many in the 1960s and 1970s that the middle class favors democracy more than other groups, we find only slight evidence that the middle classes support democracy to a greater degree than those who consider themselves part of the lower class. This is seen in the table below, which shows average levels of agreement (on a 0-100 scale) with a question that asks whether democracy, despite its problems, is the best form of government. The high levels of agreement across all groups suggest that belief in democracy has become near-universal.



# POLITICAL TOLERANCE

We find evidence that the self-identified middle class is actually less politically tolerant than those who report belonging to the lower class, measured by the responses to questions about support for dissenting political views. As the figure here shows, this is true even controlling for place of residence, age, gender, education, and material wealth (number of household items owned).

While the self-identified middle classes have a negative relationship to political tolerance, material wealth itself is a positive predictor, as is education and urban residence. We also see that women in Latin America and the Caribbean are less politically tolerant of dissent; age has no statistically significant effect.

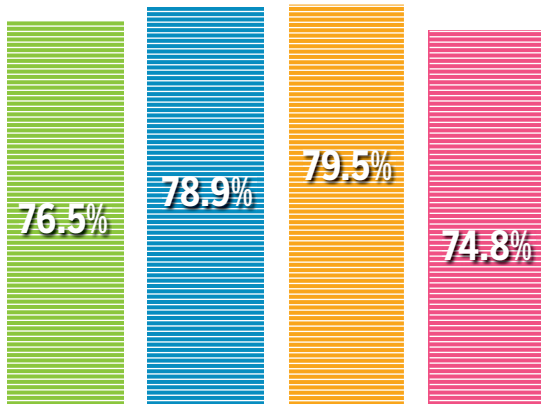


■ LOWER CLASS ■ LOWER-MIDDLE CLASS ■ MIDDLE CLASS ■ UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The level of political participation of the new middle class is also not significantly greater than that of other classes. There is a difference, however, between protest-oriented behavior and electoral participation. The self-identified middle class tends to participate less in protests, once we control for standard socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. But when we turn to conventional participation (voting), both the lower-middle and middle classes are comparatively more likely to participate than the lower and upper-middle classes. In sum, those who identify with the middle class are marginally more likely to vote, as opposed to taking to the streets or gathering signatures.

## ELECTORAL TURNOUT



# POLITICAL INTEREST

The self-identified middle classes are only somewhat more interested in politics than the lower class. In responses to a question asking how much interest the individual has in politics—none, little, some, or a lot—the average level of political interest, on a 0 (no interest) to 100 (a lot of interest) scale, among those who report belonging to the lower class is 31.1. Among those who consider themselves part of the upper-middle class, this mean number is 40.4. The values for those in the lower-middle and middle classes fall in between, at 35.6 and 38.7, respectively.



# CONCLUSION

Despite assertions about the limited size of the middle class and its relationship to dramatic political change (positive or negative), the fact is that the middle class in the Americas is a broad and a diverse group. And despite research and theories on the importance of the middle class for democratic development and stability, differences with other classes seem small—and in the case of tolerance, the opposite of what had been expected.

FOR SOURCE CITATIONS SEE: [WWW.AMERICASQUARTERLY.ORG/LAPOP](http://WWW.AMERICASQUARTERLY.ORG/LAPOP)