

Gender, Representative Bureaucracy, and Institutional Trust in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Abstract

Representative bureaucracy theory holds that the demographic composition of public organizations, or their passive representation, can shape citizens' trust through a symbolic representation mechanism, even when bureaucratic behaviour is not directly observed. This mechanism has been documented experimentally in U.S. policing, but rarely tested outside that setting. Using the World Values Survey and complementary evidence from Latinobarómetro, I show that women in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) report systematically lower institutional trust than men, a gap concentrated in institutions of coercive authority and political representation and largest for trust in the armed forces. Linking individual-level trust data to census-based measures of the gender composition of the armed forces, I show that this gap is smaller where women make up a larger share of military personnel, unexplained by governance quality or gender-equality indicators. The results extend the symbolic representation mechanism to a new bureaucratic domain, cross-national context, and empirical design.

Keywords: representative bureaucracy; passive representation; symbolic representation; institutional trust; gender; Latin America and the Caribbean.

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1 Introduction

Institutional trust is central to democratic legitimacy, compliance with public authority, and citizens' willingness to engage with the state (Levi, 1997; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Tyler, 2006; Marien, 2011). In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), this issue is especially salient: trust in public institutions has long been fragile and uneven across countries, institutions, and social groups (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018, 2023; Booth and Seligson, 2009; Power and Jamison, 2005). Existing research has extensively studied average levels of trust and their consequences for political and economic life (Knack and Keefer, 1997; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002; Algan and Cahuc, 2014), but less is known about how institutional trust is distributed within societies, whether low institutional trust in the region has a gendered dimension, and whether this dimension is concentrated in particular institutions (Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Espinal and Zhao, 2015).

Public administration research on representative bureaucracy argues that one source of institutional legitimacy is the demographic composition of public organizations relative to the population they serve (Kingsley, 1944; Mosher, 1968; Meier, 1993; Riccucci and Van Ryzin, 2017). Mosher's distinction between *passive representation*, the presence of members of a social group within an organization, and *active representation*, bureaucratic behaviour favoring that group's interests, implies that passive representation may shape citizen perceptions through a symbolic channel (Mosher, 1968). This symbolic-representation logic has been documented experimentally in U.S. policing (Riccucci et al., 2014; Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009).

Whether this mechanism extends to population-representative measures of trust, to countries outside the United States, and to coercive institutions beyond the police remains largely untested. The armed forces provide a particularly relevant case: they are a central coercive public organization, historically male-dominated, and one in which women's representation varies substantially across LAC countries. This paper uses that variation to examine whether gendered trust in a core institution of state authority is consistent with a passive and symbolic representation mechanism.

This paper asks whether the distribution of institutional trust in LAC differs systematically by gender, and whether any such gap is consistent with a passive and symbolic representation mechanism. Using the World Values Survey (WVS), I show that women in LAC report lower institutional trust than men, and that this gap is more negative than in most other world regions. The gap is not general: it is strongest for state and political institutions, weaker for interpersonal trust, and absent for non-state organizations. Within institutional trust, the gap is concentrated in institutions of authority, coercion, and political

representation (the armed forces, government, political parties, and electoral institutions) and is largest and most consistent for the armed forces, a coercive bureaucratic domain almost entirely absent from the representative bureaucracy literature, which has concentrated overwhelmingly on schools and police. I then show that the gender gap in trust in the armed forces is smaller in countries where women account for a larger share of armed-forces personnel: a one-standard-deviation increase in women’s share is associated with an approximately 0.05-point change in the LAC gender gap towards zero, roughly one-third of the baseline gap on a 1–4 trust scale. The association is institutionally specific: it is much weaker for the broad institutional trust index, becomes small and insignificant once trust in the armed forces is excluded, and is not present for most other components. The result is robust to controls for violence, military expenditure, institutional quality, inequality, women’s parliamentary representation, female labour force participation, and other development and gender-related conditions.

The analysis is descriptive. It does not identify a causal effect of women’s representation in the armed forces, and it identifies changes in the gender gap rather than the separate evolution of women’s and men’s absolute trust levels. Nevertheless, the pattern is informative: broad contextual characteristics, such as homicide rates, rule of law, corruption control, government effectiveness, political stability, voice and accountability, inequality, women’s parliamentary representation, or female labour force participation, do not systematically moderate the institutional trust gap, while women’s representation inside the one institution for which the gap is largest is strongly associated with a smaller gap towards that same institution, a pattern consistent with the organization-specific association that a symbolic representation mechanism would predict. In standardised units, the implied LAC gender gap is about 0.020 standard deviations for interpersonal trust, 0.058 for broad institutional trust, and 0.032 for core state trust. Although modest in absolute terms, the institutional trust gap is not negligible relative to conventional predictors of trust: it is roughly one-half of the high-versus-low education gradient and comparable to a one-standard-deviation change in income or ten additional years of age. The gap in trust in the armed forces is substantially larger, and is especially pronounced among respondents with lower levels of education.

The contribution is fourfold. First, the paper documents a region-specific gender gap in institutional trust. Second, it shows the gap is institutionally specific, concentrated in institutions of authority, coercion, and political representation. Third, it provides observational, cross-national evidence for a passive representation mechanism operating through a symbolic channel in a coercive state institution. Fourth, it extends the representative bureaucracy literature along three dimensions simultaneously: from single-country, almost exclusively U.S., settings to a cross-national design; from the police departments and schools that dominate

the literature to the armed forces; and from survey experiments and administrative outcome data to population-representative measures of institutional trust.

These findings contribute to four literatures. First, they contribute to research on public opinion and democratic legitimacy in Latin America by showing that institutional trust is unevenly distributed by gender (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018, 2023). Second, they contribute to work on gender and political behaviour in the region by showing that gender differences extend to evaluations of public authority (Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Espinal and Zhao, 2015). Third, and most centrally, they contribute to the public administration literature on representative bureaucracy and symbolic representation (Kingsley, 1944; Mosher, 1968; Meier, 1993; Riccucci and Van Ryzin, 2017). The paper shows that the link between passive representation and citizen trust, documented experimentally in U.S. policing (Riccucci et al., 2014; Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009), extends to a different bureaucratic domain, country set, and empirical design (An et al., 2022). Finally, the findings contribute to research on representation and institutional legitimacy more broadly by suggesting that representation may matter beyond elected institutions (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1995; Mansbridge, 1999).

The regional nature of the gap matters for two reasons. First, it suggests gender differences in trust are shaped by institutional and social context rather than being universal regularities, consistent with work showing that trust and civic values reflect historical, cultural, and institutional environments (Tabellini, 2010; Nunn and Wantchekon, 2011; Alesina and Giuliano, 2015). Second, because institutional trust is closely linked to compliance, perceived fairness, and citizens’ willingness to accept public authority (La Porta et al., 1997; Feld and Frey, 2002; Torgler, 2003; Aghion et al., 2010), a gender gap may indicate that public authority does not command legitimacy equally among women and men, especially where coercion, protection, and representation are most salient.

The remainder of the paper develops the conceptual framework linking gender, institutional trust, and representative bureaucracy, then describes the data, empirical strategy, WVS results, institutional specificity, complementary Latinobarómetro evidence, the passive/symbolic representation mechanism, discussion, and conclusion.

2 Gender, Trust, and Institutional Legitimacy in Latin America

2.1 Institutional trust as legitimacy of public authority

Institutional trust is more than a general attitude towards public organizations. It captures how citizens evaluate the authority, fairness, responsiveness, and legitimacy of the institutions that govern them (Easton, 1965, 1975; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Norris, 2011), and is therefore closely connected to democratic support, compliance, and citizens' willingness to engage with formal channels (Levi, 1997; Tyler, 2006; Marien, 2011). In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), where democratic regimes coexist with persistent inequality, uneven state capacity, insecurity, and widespread dissatisfaction with public institutions, the distribution of institutional trust is especially important (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Power and Jamison, 2005; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2013; Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2018, 2023).

Low average trust may indicate a broad legitimacy problem, but it does not reveal whether distrust is shared equally across social groups. This matters because public institutions do not all perform the same functions. Some, such as the armed forces, police, and justice system, embody state authority, coercion, security, and the rule of law (Brinks, 2008; Malone, 2013; Bateson, 2012); others, such as governments, parties, parliaments, and electoral institutions, structure representation and accountability (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2013); bureaucratic institutions such as the civil service are associated with administrative capacity. Citizens may therefore evaluate different institutions through different dimensions of legitimacy: whether institutions protect them, treat them fairly, represent their interests, or exercise authority in acceptable ways.

This domain-specific view is central to the analysis. If a gender gap appears across all forms of trust, it may reflect a general difference in trusting attitudes; if it is concentrated in state institutions associated with authority and representation, it is more consistent with a gendered evaluation of public authority. The empirical analysis therefore distinguishes among interpersonal trust, broad institutional trust, core state trust, non-state or associational trust, and individual institutional components, allowing the paper to ask not only whether women and men differ in trust, but what kind of institutions account for the difference.

2.2 Gendered evaluations of state institutions

A gender perspective is important for understanding the social distribution of institutional trust. Existing research on gender and politics in Latin America shows that women and men differ in political participation, civic engagement, representation, and policy preferences (Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Espinal and Zhao, 2015; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010), largely focused on participation and representation. The present analysis complements that work

by examining whether gender differences also appear in citizens' evaluations of the state itself.

There are several reasons why women and men may evaluate state institutions differently. Women may face distinct forms of insecurity, unequal access to institutional protection, or different experiences interacting with police, courts, or political authorities; research on crime, insecurity, and democratic legitimacy in Latin America shows that exposure to violence and evaluations of state protection shape institutional support (Malone, 2013; Bateson, 2012; Brinks, 2008). In contexts marked by inequality, insecurity, and uneven state capacity, these differences may be particularly salient (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Molyneux, 2000; Htun, 2016).

At the same time, the relevant mechanism need not be limited to direct personal experience. Institutional trust may also reflect broader perceptions of whether institutions are socially inclusive and politically representative. This is especially true for institutions historically male-dominated or associated with masculine authority. The paper does not claim to identify all causal mechanisms behind gender differences in trust; instead, it uses the domain and institutional composition of the gap to discipline the interpretation. If the gap is absent for non-state organizations and weak for interpersonal trust, it is unlikely to reflect a general tendency for women to report lower trust; if it is concentrated in institutions of authority and representation, it points toward the gendered legitimacy of state institutions; if it is largest among less-educated respondents, it may also reflect the intersection of gender and socioeconomic position.

2.3 Passive representation, symbolic representation, and coercive institutions

The distinction between authority and representation is particularly important in the Latin American context. Institutions such as the armed forces and the police embody coercive authority, security, and protection; political institutions such as governments, parties, parliaments, and electoral bodies structure representation, accountability, and democratic responsiveness (Booth and Seligson, 2009; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, 2013). These institutions may command legitimacy unevenly if citizens perceive them as distant, exclusionary, or insufficiently representative. Although the armed forces are often studied in civil-military relations and security studies, they are also large, rule-bound public organizations, staffed by public personnel and governed by recruitment, promotion, and personnel systems. They therefore provide a theoretically relevant, but rarely examined, case for representative bureaucracy theory.

This argument builds on the theory of representative bureaucracy. Kingsley’s original formulation held that a bureaucracy mirroring the social composition of the society it serves is more likely to be responsive and legitimate (Kingsley, 1944). Mosher’s influential distinction separates *passive representation*, defined as the presence of members of a social group within an organization, from *active representation*, understood as bureaucratic behaviour that advances the interests of the group bureaucrats descriptively represent (Mosher, 1968). Subsequent work has extended this framework empirically, primarily in U.S. schools, police departments, and administrative agencies, using administrative outcome data such as discipline rates or use-of-force incidents (Meier, 1993; Riccucci and Van Ryzin, 2017). This paper focuses on a narrower question within that tradition: whether passive representation is associated with ordinary citizens’ trust in the institution in settings where bureaucratic behaviour is not directly observed.

The relevant mechanism is *symbolic representation*: the presence of members of a social group within an institution can shape how that group, and potentially the wider public, perceive the institution’s legitimacy and openness, independent of any demonstrated behavioural change (Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009). The clearest precedent comes from policing: Riccucci et al. (2014) show, using a survey experiment, that passive representation of women in police departments is associated with greater perceived legitimacy among the public, a symbolic effect operating independently of active representation, and Theobald and Haider-Markel (2009) find a comparable symbolic channel for the racial composition of police forces. These studies focus on a single country, a single bureaucratic domain, and typically rely on survey experiments rather than population-representative data.

This paper extends the symbolic-representation logic along three dimensions: from the United States to a cross-national, comparative setting, where recent work shows that representative bureaucracy patterns established in single-country studies do not travel automatically (An et al., 2022); from policing and schools to the armed forces, a coercive institution that is historically male-dominated and almost entirely absent from this literature; and from survey experiments and administrative data to population-representative survey measures of trust collected across countries and decades.

Women’s representation in the armed forces does not imply electoral representation or political accountability; in Mosher’s terms, it is a measure of passive representation within a coercive, non-elected institution. If passive representation operates through a symbolic channel similar to the one documented in policing, greater female presence within the armed forces should be associated with higher trust in that institution, concentrated in trust in the armed forces itself rather than distributed uniformly across unrelated institutions. This differs from broad measures of gender equality: women’s parliamentary representation or

female labour force participation capture general gender inclusion in society, conceptually distinct from passive representation within a specific organization. The prediction is therefore institution-specific.

The analysis treats this relationship as exploratory and descriptive. A higher share of women in the armed forces may reflect reforms, recruitment patterns, professionalization, or unobserved institutional change; the empirical strategy does not isolate these channels, nor does it manipulate passive representation experimentally as in [Riccucci et al. \(2014\)](#). The goal is more limited: to assess whether the strongest institutional gender gap in the data is smaller where women are more represented within that same institution, in a real-world cross-national setting.

This framework leads to three empirical expectations. First, if the LAC gender gap reflects a gendered evaluation of public authority, it should be stronger for institutional trust than for interpersonal or non-state trust. Second, within institutional trust, the gap should be concentrated in institutions of authority, coercion, and political representation. Third, if passive representation operates through a symbolic mechanism, the gender gap in trust in the armed forces should be smaller where women account for a larger share of personnel, and this association should be stronger for trust in the armed forces than for unrelated outcomes.

3 Data and Measurement

The analysis uses two cross-country survey datasets. The main analysis relies on the World Values Survey (WVS), which provides comparable measures of interpersonal and institutional trust across world regions ([Inglehart et al., 2014](#)). I start from all available WVS waves from Wave 1 to Wave 7, covering surveys fielded between 1981 and 2023.¹ Wave 1 does not enter the baseline estimation sample because the institutional trust items and baseline covariates required for the main specification are not jointly available, so the effective WVS estimation sample for institutional trust covers Waves 2–7.² As complementary regional evidence, I also use Latinobarómetro, which provides comparable trust measures for Latin American countries from 1995 to 2023.

The unit of observation is the individual respondent. The main explanatory variable, *Female*, is an indicator for the respondent’s reported sex/gender. In the WVS analysis, I interact this indicator with an indicator for countries in Latin America and the Caribbean

¹The WVS waves cover the following periods: Wave 1, 1981–1984; Wave 2, 1990–1994; Wave 3, 1995–1998; Wave 4, 1999–2004; Wave 5, 2005–2009; Wave 6, 2010–2014; and Wave 7, 2017–2023.

²Supplementary Table A.1 reports the number of countries contributing to the baseline institutional-trust sample by WVS wave and world region.

(LAC).³ This interaction captures whether the gender gap in trust differs in LAC relative to other world regions. In Latinobarómetro, where the sample is restricted to countries in the region, the coefficient on *Female* directly captures the within-sample gender gap.

The main outcomes measure different dimensions of trust. Interpersonal trust, based on the generalized trust question, is coded on a 1–2 scale in both surveys, where higher values indicate that most people can be trusted. I construct a broad institutional trust index (in the WVS, averaging trust in the armed forces, police, justice system, government, political parties, parliament, civil service, and elections), a core state trust index (police, justice system, government, parliament, and political parties), and a non-state or associational trust index (churches, the press, television, labour unions, universities, major companies, banks, environmental organizations, women’s organizations, charitable organizations, and regional organizations). Institutional trust items are measured on a 1–4 confidence scale. Because interpersonal trust and institutional confidence use different scales, I analyze interpersonal trust separately and rely on standardised outcomes when comparing magnitudes across domains. For Latinobarómetro, I construct analogous indices whenever possible: the institutional trust index averages trust in the armed forces, police, judiciary, government, political parties, congress, public administration, and electoral institutions; the core state index averages police, judiciary, government, congress, and political parties; and the non-state index averages trust in churches, the press, television, community associations, private and large firms, radio, banks, newspapers, student organizations, media, labour unions, public hospitals, and private clinics. Latinobarómetro institutional variables are also coded on a 1–4 scale.

To examine whether the gender gap in trust towards the armed forces is related to passive representation within that institution, I construct a country-level measure of women’s representation in the armed forces using IPUMS International census microdata (Ruggles et al., 2024). For each country, I use the most recent available census or census-based sample with harmonized occupation codes. I identify individuals employed in armed-forces occupations and compute the weighted share of women among them. This measure is based on census microdata rather than administrative military records. Supplementary Table A.2 reports census years, sample densities, and country coverage. In the LAC countries used in the representation analysis, women’s share among individuals classified in armed-forces occupations ranges from approximately 2 to 30 percent, providing substantial cross-country variation in passive representation within the armed forces. The variable has two limitations:

³Because only a small number of Caribbean units appear in the WVS estimation sample, the results are driven primarily by mainland Latin American countries and should be interpreted as providing limited independent evidence on the Caribbean.

it does not distinguish branches, ranks, or command positions, so it cannot separate passive representation in the rank and file from positions of authority; and it does not capture citizens’ perceptions of women’s presence in the armed forces. I therefore treat it as a contextual measure of passive representation, not a direct measure of individual exposure or awareness.

The contextual heterogeneity analyses also use country-level and country-year covariates from World Bank indicators, including the World Development Indicators and Worldwide Governance Indicators (World Bank, 2025, 2026). These variables capture violence and military context, institutional quality, inequality, women’s political representation, women’s labour-market participation, and broader indicators of women’s social, health, and economic vulnerability. Specifically, they include homicide rates, military expenditure, rule of law, control of corruption, government effectiveness, political stability, voice and accountability, the Gini coefficient, women’s parliamentary representation, female labour force participation, adolescent fertility, maternal mortality, poverty, and female school enrolment. These variables are matched to WVS observations by country and survey year when time-varying, and are standardised in the estimation sample so that coefficients report changes in the gender gap associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in the contextual variable.

The analysis includes individual-level controls for age, income scale, employment status, education, marital status, race or ethnicity when available, and parental status. The baseline WVS specification includes country-year fixed effects; standard errors are clustered at the country level, and survey weights are used throughout. Supplementary Table A.3 reports descriptive statistics for the WVS sample in LAC by gender. Men and women are broadly similar in age and marital status but differ in employment and family composition; average interpersonal, institutional, and core state trust are slightly lower among women, while non-state trust is slightly higher. These raw differences are descriptive; the main analysis below compares gender gaps after accounting for individual controls and country-year fixed effects.

4 Empirical Strategy

The main specification uses the WVS to compare gender gaps in trust in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) with the corresponding gaps in other world regions, comparing women and men within the same country-year and asking whether this gender gap differs in LAC relative to other regions:

$$Trust_{ict} = \alpha + \beta Female_i + \gamma(Female_i \times LAC_c) + X_i'\delta + \mu_{ct} + \varepsilon_{ict}, \quad (1)$$

where $Trust_{ict}$ is a trust outcome for individual i in country c and survey year t , X_i includes individual controls, and μ_{ct} denotes country-year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the country level, and survey weights are used in the baseline specifications.

The coefficient β captures the gender gap in trust outside LAC and γ the differential gap in LAC relative to the rest of the world, so the total gender gap within LAC is $\beta + \gamma$. Because the LAC indicator is constant within country-year cells, its main effect is absorbed by the fixed effects; the specification therefore asks whether the within-country-year gender gap differs in LAC relative to other regions, not whether average trust levels differ.

For Latinobarómetro, restricted to Latin American countries, I estimate:

$$Trust_{ict} = \alpha + \beta Female_i + X_i' \delta + \mu_{ct} + \varepsilon_{ict}, \quad (2)$$

where β directly measures the gender gap within the Latinobarómetro sample, with the same controls, weights, and clustering as the WVS analysis.

To examine whether the gender gap varies with contextual characteristics, I extend Equation 1 by interacting *Female* and the LAC-specific female indicator with a contextual variable Z_c or Z_{ct} :

$$\begin{aligned} Trust_{ict} = & \alpha + \beta Female_i + \gamma(Female_i \times LAC_c) \\ & + \theta(Female_i \times Z_{ct}) + \lambda(Female_i \times LAC_c \times Z_{ct}) \\ & + X_i' \delta + \mu_{ct} + \varepsilon_{ict}. \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Z_{ct} varies at the country-year level for the contextual indicators described above; for women's representation in the armed forces, Z_c is the time-invariant, census-based country-level measure. Country-year fixed effects absorb the main effect of Z , leaving θ as the change in the gender gap outside LAC associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in Z , and λ as the LAC-specific difference in that relationship. The parameter of interest for LAC is:

$$\theta + \lambda, \quad (4)$$

the change in the implied LAC gender gap associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in Z ; a positive value indicates the gap becomes less negative as women's representation in the armed forces increases. I also report the implied LAC gender gap at the contextual mean,

$$\beta + \gamma. \quad (5)$$

Together, $\beta + \gamma$ and $\theta + \lambda$ summarize the level of the LAC gender gap at the contextual mean and how it changes as the contextual variable increases.

The analysis is descriptive throughout. The estimates should be interpreted as adjusted descriptive associations rather than causal effects; in particular, the armed-forces representation analysis does not identify the causal effect of female military representation on trust, but tests whether the gender gap in trust towards the armed forces is smaller where women account for a larger share of personnel, after accounting for individual controls, country-year fixed effects, survey weights, and clustered standard errors.

5 Main Results: A Region-Specific Gender Gap in Institutional Trust

This section establishes the main empirical fact: the gender gap in trust in LAC is concentrated in institutional trust. Figure 1 presents the gender gap in institutional trust by world region, reporting the coefficient on *Female* from separate region-specific regressions with individual controls. LAC has the clearest and most precisely estimated negative estimate; corresponding estimates in most other regions are closer to zero, less precise, or positive. This motivates the pooled specification in Equation 1. Pairwise comparisons between LAC and each world region confirm that the negative LAC gap is not driven by a single comparison group (Supplementary Table A.4).

Table 1 reports the main WVS estimates. Women in LAC report lower institutional trust than men: the implied gender gap within LAC ($Female + Female \times LAC$) is negative and significant for the broad institutional trust index, and the $Female \times LAC$ interaction is negative and significant, indicating the institutional gender gap in LAC is more negative than outside the region. The same pattern appears for core state trust.⁴

This is not a general gender gap in trust. The $Female \times LAC$ interaction is small and insignificant for interpersonal trust, so the LAC-versus-elsewhere difference is not concentrated in generalized trust in other people; for non-state trust, the implied LAC gender gap is not statistically different from zero. Supplementary Table A.12 confirms this pattern using standardised outcomes, and Supplementary Table A.13 benchmarks the institutional trust gap against individual-level correlates: smaller than the education gradient but comparable to income and age effects, suggesting the gap is neither large nor negligible in absolute terms.

Taken together, Figure 1 and Table 1 establish the first core result: women in LAC report

⁴The main WVS result is robust to a series of checks reported in the Supplementary Material: excluding individual controls, alternative fixed effects, omitting survey weights (Supplementary Table A.5); equal country-year weighting (Supplementary Table A.6); a balanced institutional trust index (Supplementary Table A.7); standardised or PCA-based measures (Supplementary Table A.8); leave-one-country-out (Supplementary Table A.9); leave-one-year-out (Supplementary Table A.10); and additional controls for political attitudes, voting, religiosity, happiness, perceived insecurity, and victimization (Supplementary Table A.11).

lower institutional trust than men, more negative than in most other regions, concentrated in institutional and core state trust rather than a general gender difference in trust. The next section examines which institutions account for this pattern.

6 Institutional Specificity: Authority and Representation

This section examines which institutions account for the LAC gender gap. Figure 2 presents the implied LAC gender gap ($Female + Female \times LAC$) for the aggregate institutional trust index, individual components, and a version excluding the armed forces. Trust in the armed forces displays the largest gender gap by a substantial margin; a large negative gap also appears for electoral institutions, with smaller negative gaps for the police, government, political parties, and parliament, while the justice system and civil service are close to zero and statistically weaker. Supplementary Table A.14 reports the component-level regressions.

The gap is not mechanically driven by a single item. Excluding the armed forces reduces the aggregate LAC gender gap but does not eliminate it, indicating that the armed forces account for an important share of the pattern while other institutions also contribute. The gender gap is strongest for institutions that embody coercive authority or political representation, including the police and armed forces, as well as government, parties, parliaments, and elections. It is weakest for the justice system and civil service. This pattern suggests that the gap is not simply a general tendency to report lower confidence in any public institution, but is concentrated where state authority and representation are especially salient. This institutional specificity does not support the alternative view that women in LAC are simply less trusting in general. The next sections use Latinobarómetro as complementary evidence and then examine whether trust in the armed forces, the strongest case in the WVS, is consistent with a passive and symbolic representation mechanism.

7 Complementary Evidence from Latinobarómetro

Because Latinobarómetro is restricted to countries in the region, the coefficient on *Female* directly measures the gender gap within Latin America; these results are complementary regional evidence rather than a one-to-one replication of the WVS estimates, given differences in country coverage, years, question wording, and outcome availability. Table 2 reports the gender gap in the main trust domains. Women report lower interpersonal, institutional, and core state trust than men; the non-state trust gap is small and insignificant. As in

the WVS, Latinobarómetro points to a negative gender gap in institutional trust and weaker evidence for non-state institutions, though the relative magnitudes differ across surveys. The interpersonal trust gap is more visible in Latinobarómetro, reflecting differences in scales, wording, and coverage rather than contradicting the WVS pattern.

Supplementary Table A.15 decomposes the Latinobarómetro institutional trust index. The strongest point of agreement with the WVS is trust in the armed forces, where women report substantially lower trust in both datasets; Latinobarómetro also shows negative and significant gaps for government, political parties, public administration, and electoral institutions, consistent with the broader interpretation that the gap relates to authority, representation, and democratic legitimacy. Component-level patterns are not identical across surveys (e.g., the WVS shows a negative police gap, largely absent in Latinobarómetro; Latinobarómetro shows a negative public-administration gap where the WVS civil-service estimate is weaker), plausibly reflecting differences in items, wording, and country-year coverage. The convergence on the armed forces across both datasets motivates the next section, which tests whether a passive representation mechanism operating through a symbolic channel documented in U.S. policing extends to this coercive institution and this set of countries.

8 Passive Representation and Symbolic Trust: Women in the Armed Forces

This section tests whether the institutionally specific gender gap in trust in the armed forces is consistent with the passive/symbolic representation mechanism documented experimentally in U.S. policing (Ricucci et al., 2014; Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009), extended here to a different coercive institution and a cross-national, observational setting. I first show that broad contextual moderators do not explain the LAC gender gap, then examine whether women’s representation inside the armed forces is associated with a smaller gap towards that institution, and finally assess robustness and scope.

8.1 Broad contextual moderators do not explain the gap

If the LAC gender gap were mainly driven by broad country-level conditions, it should vary systematically with indicators such as homicide rates, rule of law, corruption control, government effectiveness, political stability, voice and accountability, income inequality, women’s parliamentary representation, or female labour force participation. Estimating the contextual heterogeneity specification in Equation 3 for each of these (Supplementary Table A.16), the estimated changes in the LAC gender gap are generally small, statistically insignificant,

and inconsistent in sign; the gap also does not vary systematically with broader indicators of women’s social, health, and labour-market vulnerability. This is itself consistent with a passive representation account, which predicts an organization-specific association tied to the composition of a particular bureaucracy rather than a diffuse function of governance quality or society-wide gender equality. The analysis therefore turns to a more institution-specific mechanism.

8.2 Women’s representation in the armed forces

I use the contextual heterogeneity specification in Equation 3, where Z_c is the standardised, census-based share of women among armed-forces personnel described in Section 3. Table 3 reports the results: at the mean level of women’s representation, the LAC gender gap in trust in the armed forces is approximately -0.149 , and a one-standard-deviation increase in women’s share is associated with a 0.049 -point increase in the gap (less negative). This is roughly a one-third reduction relative to the baseline gap. The estimate reflects a change in the gender gap, not the separate absolute trust levels of women and men, and does not distinguish passive from active representation, since the measure captures presence rather than behaviour.

The institutional specificity of the result is precisely what a symbolic representation account predicts. The association is much weaker for the broad institutional trust index and becomes small and insignificant once trust in the armed forces is excluded, indicating an organization-specific association rather than a broad reduction in gender gaps in institutional trust. Component-level estimates in Table 3 show that the moderating association is largest and most precisely estimated for trust in the armed forces itself. The corresponding estimates are close to zero for the police, justice system, political parties, elections, and civil service. Trust in parliament also shows a positive association, which I interpret cautiously as possibly reflecting broader elite-inclusion patterns rather than a direct mechanism.⁵

8.3 Robustness and scope of the representation mechanism

The result remains robust to interactions between gender and alternative contextual variables, such as homicide rates, military expenditure, rule of law, corruption control, government effectiveness, political stability, voice and accountability, income inequality, women’s parliamentary representation, female labour force participation, adolescent fertility, mater-

⁵Supplementary Table A.17 examines heterogeneity by education: the baseline gap is largest among low-education respondents, but the estimated change associated with women’s representation does not differ statistically across education groups.

nal mortality, poverty, and female school enrolment (Supplementary Table A.18). These results indicate that the mechanism is not absorbed by standard measures of violence, military context, institutional quality, development, or gender inclusion. Excluding one LAC country at a time (Supplementary Table A.19), the estimated gap remains negative and the change associated with women’s representation remains positive and significant across all exclusions, so the result is not driven by a single country.

The evidence does not identify a causal effect and cannot distinguish passive from active representation. A higher share of women in the armed forces may reflect reforms, professionalization, or other unobserved country characteristics, and the measure does not distinguish ranks, branches, or command positions, nor citizens’ awareness of female representation. Nevertheless, the pattern is informative: the largest gender gap in the data is systematically smaller where women are more represented within the armed-forces occupation category, robust to contextual controls and leave-one-country-out checks, and institutionally specific, consistent with the passive/symbolic representation mechanism documented experimentally in U.S. policing generalizing to a different coercive bureaucracy, country set, and research design.

9 Discussion

The evidence points to a region-specific, institutionally structured gender gap in trust: women in LAC report lower trust than men in state and political institutions, weaker for interpersonal trust, absent for non-state trust, and concentrated in institutions of coercive authority and political representation. This section discusses implications for institutional legitimacy, representative bureaucracy theory, and future research.

9.1 Gendered legitimacy of coercive and representative institutions

If institutional trust captures whether citizens see public institutions as legitimate, responsive, protective, and representative, the gender gap documented here implies that women and men in LAC relate differently to core institutions of the state, especially those connected to coercive authority and political representation: the armed forces, electoral institutions, government, parties, and, to a lesser extent, the police. Because these institutions perform central functions in democratic life (coercive institutions providing security and order, representative institutions channeling accountability) the gap may reflect more than dissatisfaction with performance; it may indicate that public authority does not command

legitimacy equally among women and men. The institutional specificity of the gap supports this reading: if women were simply less trusting than men, similar gaps should appear across interpersonal trust, non-state organizations, and all public institutions, which the evidence does not show. The armed forces are the clearest example: a central, historically masculinized institution of state authority, where the largest gender gap suggests women may evaluate coercive state authority differently from men, consistent with institutions associated with protection, coercion, hierarchy, and masculine authority being perceived differently by women and men.

9.2 Passive representation beyond U.S. policing and domestic bureaucracies

The clearest existing evidence linking passive representation to citizen trust comes from survey-experimental studies of U.S. police departments ([Riccucci et al., 2014](#); [Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009](#)) and single-country administrative studies of schools and other bureaucracies ([Meier, 1993](#)). Whether passive representation shapes trust outside experimental settings, outside the United States, and beyond policing and education has remained open, a gap recently highlighted by cross-national work showing that representative bureaucracy patterns do not automatically generalize across contexts ([An et al., 2022](#)).

The evidence here speaks directly to that gap. The gender gap in trust towards the armed forces, which is structurally similar to the police in its coercive function, but historically even more male-dominated and largely unstudied in this literature, is smaller where women account for a larger share of personnel; the association is institutionally specific, strongest for the armed forces, weaker or absent elsewhere, and small once the armed-forces item is excluded from the institutional index. This is consistent with a passive representation mechanism operating through a symbolic channel similar to the one documented experimentally in U.S. policing, observed here with population-representative survey data across a comparative, non-U.S. sample of countries. The mechanism need not operate identically across domains: in policing, symbolic effects have been linked to expectations about procedural fairness and use of force, while in the armed forces the relevant channels may instead involve institutional openness, professionalization, or a weakening of exclusively masculine institutional identities. The available data cannot separate these channels, but the cross-national, cross-domain replication of the basic pattern is itself informative for a literature that has relied heavily on single-country, single-domain evidence. The result also distinguishes institution-specific passive representation from broad gender equality. General measures such as women’s parliamentary representation or female labour force participation

do not explain the LAC gender gap, whereas women’s representation inside the armed forces does. This is consistent with Mosher’s insight that passive representation is a property of a particular organization rather than a diffuse feature of society ([Mosher, 1968](#)).

9.3 Implications for theory and public management practice

For representative bureaucracy theory, observing a parallel symbolic-representation pattern using population-representative data, in a different bureaucratic domain, and across a comparative set of countries strengthens the case that passive representation carries a trust-relevant signal to citizens, even when changes in active representation or service delivery are not directly observed. At the same time, the fact that the association is concentrated in trust towards the armed forces, rather than extending uniformly to other institutions, is consistent with a literature emphasizing that representative bureaucracy effects are conditional on organizational visibility, salience, and the social meaning attached to the represented group’s presence ([Riccucci and Van Ryzin, 2017](#)).

For practice, the results suggest that personnel composition inside a specific security-sector organization may be a tractable lever for building institutional trust, distinct from broader gender-equality gains elsewhere in government or society, and within reach of defense ministries and civil-military reform programs even where economy-wide governance or gender-equality improvements move slowly. Because the evidence is observational and country-level, it does not evaluate any specific gender-integration policy or establish that citizens are aware of, or respond directly to, the gender composition of their armed forces; administrative evaluations of specific recruitment reforms, ideally combined with survey measures of citizens’ awareness, would be needed to translate this pattern into an operational recommendation.

9.4 Limits and future research

The analysis has several limitations. First, the estimates are descriptive. The paper shows that the gender gap in trust towards the armed forces is smaller where women are more represented, but it does not identify whether female military representation causes this reduction. Countries with more women in the armed forces may differ in institutional reforms, professionalisation, civil-military relations, gender norms, or broader state capacity in ways that robustness checks cannot fully rule out.

Second, the measure of representation is based on census microdata rather than administrative military records. It identifies women among individuals classified in armed-forces occupations, but it does not distinguish branches, ranks, command positions, or specific

military roles. This distinction matters for symbolic representation theory, since passive representation in the rank and file may differ from passive representation in positions of visible authority. The measure also does not capture whether citizens are aware of women’s presence in the armed forces.

Third, the paper cannot directly observe the mechanisms through which trust forms, or distinguish passive from active representation. More detailed measures of institutional contact, perceived responsiveness, perceived discrimination, and knowledge of institutional composition would be needed to separate these channels. Relatedly, the analysis identifies changes in gender gaps, but cannot determine whether a smaller gap reflects higher trust among women, lower trust among men, or both.

Finally, LAC is internally heterogeneous in histories of military rule, armed conflict, policing, civil-military relations, and gender regimes. The leave-one-country-out results show that the pattern is not driven by a single country, but they do not imply that the mechanism operates identically across the region.

Future work could examine whether more direct measures of active or visible representation, such as women’s presence in command positions rather than only in the rank and file, moderate the pattern documented here. It could also adapt the symbolic-representation design in [Riccucci et al. \(2014\)](#) to observational, cross-national data for policing itself, mirroring the extension carried out here for the armed forces. More broadly, if gender gaps in trust are concentrated in institutions of authority and representation, future research should examine how institutional design, recruitment, visibility, accountability, and service delivery shape state legitimacy among different social groups. This would extend representative bureaucracy theory to courts, bureaucracies, and other state agencies beyond the police, schools, and armed forces considered so far.

10 Conclusion

This paper documents a region-specific, institutionally structured gender gap in trust in Latin America and the Caribbean. Using the World Values Survey, women in the region report lower institutional trust than men, more negative than in most other world regions; the gap is weaker for interpersonal trust, absent for non-state trust, and concentrated in state and political institutions, especially those associated with coercive authority and political representation. The largest and most consistent gap appears for trust in the armed forces; negative gaps also appear for electoral institutions, government, political parties, and the police, with weaker evidence for the justice system and civil service. Complementary Latinobarómetro evidence supports the broader pattern and confirms that trust in the armed

forces is the most consistent component-level result across datasets.

The paper also provides observational, cross-national evidence for the passive/symbolic representation mechanism first documented experimentally in U.S. policing ([Riccucci et al., 2014](#); [Theobald and Haider-Markel, 2009](#)): the gender gap in trust towards the armed forces is smaller where women account for a larger share of personnel, an association that is institutionally specific, robust to contextual controls and leave-one-country-out checks, though not causally identified.

These findings have three broader implications. First, they provide observational, cross-national evidence for a symbolic representation mechanism that has, until now, rested mainly on U.S. survey-experimental studies of policing. Second, institutional legitimacy should be understood not only as an aggregate property of political systems, but as something that can vary systematically across social groups and institutional domains. Third, passive representation may matter beyond the police departments and schools that dominate the existing literature: the presence of women inside other non-elected, coercive state institutions may be associated with how citizens evaluate the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and authority of those institutions.

The analysis is necessarily limited: the estimates are descriptive, the representation measure is based on census occupation data, and the paper cannot observe whether respondents are aware of women’s presence in the armed forces, distinguish passive from active representation, or separate changes in women’s and men’s absolute trust levels. Future research should examine the mechanisms more directly, using data on institutional contact, perceived responsiveness, discrimination, visibility, rank structure, and military or police reforms, and should clarify how historical experiences with coercive institutions shape gendered trust in the state, and how the mechanism documented here compares to the one previously documented in U.S. policing.

Overall, the gender gap in institutional trust in Latin America and the Caribbean is not simply a matter of women trusting less. It is a structured difference in how women and men evaluate institutions of public authority and political representation. Representative bureaucracy theory offers a useful explanation for this pattern, and the armed-forces results provide observational cross-national support consistent with it, with implications for research on trust, representation, democratic legitimacy, and broader debates in public administration about how states can build institutions that are effective, inclusive, and legitimate across gender.

Data Availability Statement

The analysis uses data from the World Values Survey, Latinobarómetro, IPUMS International, and World Bank indicators. Replication code and derived analysis files are available from the author upon reasonable request, subject to the access conditions of the original data providers.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding statement

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Ethics statement

The study uses publicly available, anonymised secondary data and did not require ethics approval.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to assist with manuscript organization and language editing. The author critically reviewed, verified, and revised all AI-assisted material and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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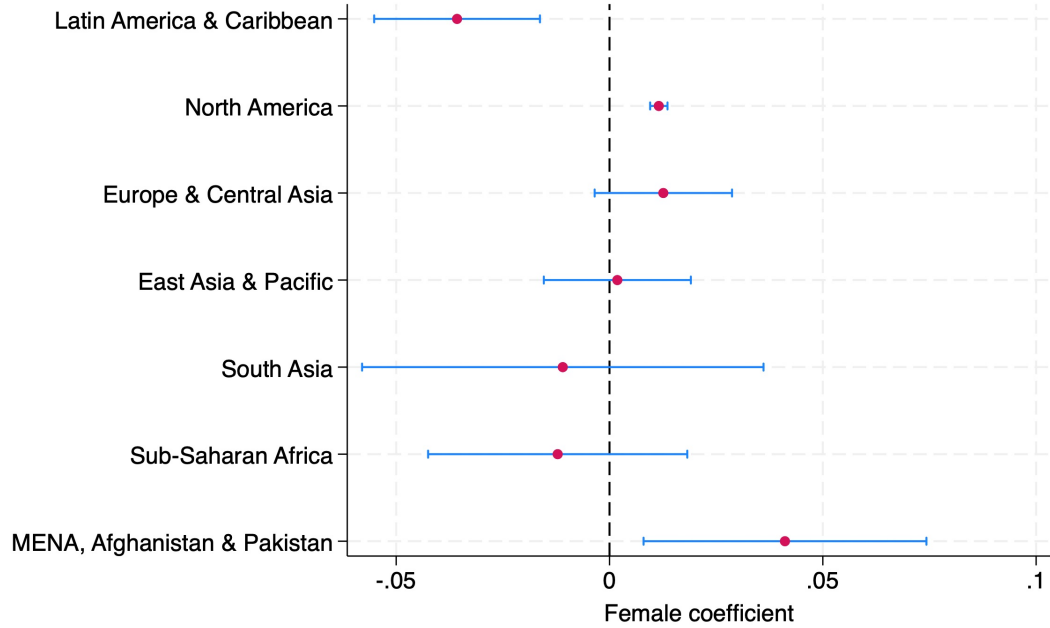
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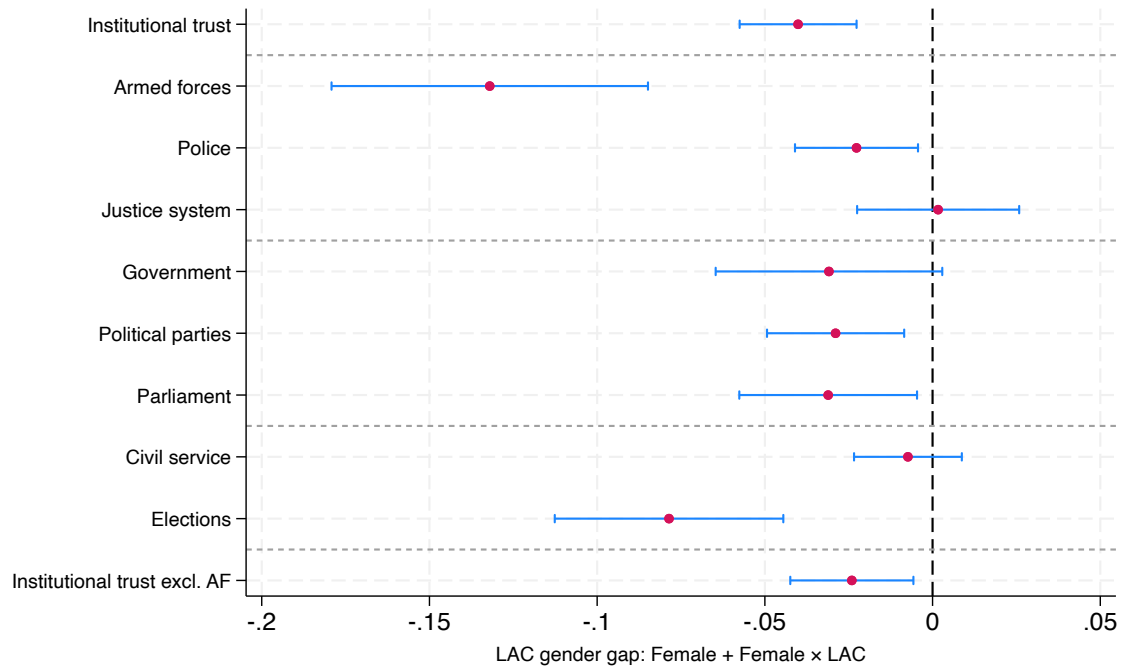
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Figure 1: Gender Gap in Institutional Trust by Region



Notes: The figure reports the coefficient on *Female* from separate region-specific OLS regressions using World Values Survey data. The dependent variable is the institutional trust index, coded so that higher values indicate higher trust. All regressions include the baseline individual controls listed in Section 3, country-year fixed effects, and survey weights. Standard errors are clustered at the country level. Bars denote 95 percent confidence intervals. The number of countries by region is: North America, 2; Latin America and the Caribbean, 16; Europe and Central Asia, 37; East Asia and Pacific, 16; Sub-Saharan Africa, 14; MENA, Afghanistan and Pakistan, 10; South Asia, 2.

Figure 2: Anatomy of the LAC Gender Gap in Institutional Trust



Notes: The figure reports the implied gender gap within Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), estimated as $Female + Female \times LAC$, for aggregate trust indices and individual institutional components. Negative values indicate that women report lower trust than men. Bars denote 95 percent confidence intervals. All models include individual controls, country-year fixed effects, survey weights, and standard errors clustered at the country level.

Table 1: Gender Gap in Trust, World Values Survey

	Interpersonal Trust	Institutional Trust	Core State Trust	Non-State Trust
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	-0.006** (0.003)	0.009* (0.005)	0.019*** (0.006)	0.057*** (0.005)
Female $\times$ LAC	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.049*** (0.010)	-0.042*** (0.012)	-0.044*** (0.010)
Female + Female $\times$ LAC	-0.009** (0.003)	-0.040*** (0.009)	-0.024** (0.010)	0.013 (0.009)
Observations	278,003	264,134	263,160	258,937
R^2	0.363	0.261	0.256	0.195

Notes: The table reports OLS estimates using World Values Survey data. Dependent variables are listed in the column headers and coded so that higher values indicate higher trust. “Female” is an indicator for female respondents. “Female $\times$ LAC” interacts this indicator with an indicator for Latin America and the Caribbean. The row “Female + Female $\times$ LAC” reports the implied gender gap within LAC. All specifications include the baseline individual controls listed in Section 3, country-year fixed effects, and survey weights. Standard errors are clustered at the country level and reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2: Gender Gap in Trust, Latinobarómetro

	Interpersonal Trust	Institutional Trust	Core State Trust	Non-State Trust
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	-0.023*** (0.002)	-0.030*** (0.007)	-0.017** (0.006)	0.008 (0.009)
Observations	393,158	396,127	396,860	240,029
R^2	0.043	0.109	0.115	0.082

Notes: The table reports OLS estimates using Latinobarómetro data. Dependent variables are listed in the column headers and coded so that higher values indicate higher trust. “Female” is an indicator for female respondents and reports the gender gap within LAC. Interpersonal and institutional trust are measured on different scales, so coefficients are not directly comparable across these domains in levels. All specifications include individual controls, country-year fixed effects, survey weights, and standard errors clustered at the country level. The sample includes 20 countries/clusters. Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3: Women’s Representation in the Armed Forces and the Gender Gap in Institutional Trust

Outcome	LAC gender gap at mean	Change in LAC gap per 1 SD	Obs.	R^2
<i>Aggregate Institutional Trust Indices</i>				
Institutional Trust	-0.041*** (0.008)	0.013** (0.006)	64,193	0.219
Institutional Trust excl. Armed Forces	-0.021** (0.009)	0.006 (0.006)	63,861	0.206
<i>Security and Coercive Institutions</i>				
Armed Forces	-0.149*** (0.014)	0.049*** (0.011)	63,786	0.171
Police	-0.029*** (0.010)	-0.004 (0.010)	64,238	0.175
Justice System	0.013 (0.009)	0.001 (0.008)	47,448	0.173
<i>Political and Representative Institutions</i>				
Government	-0.034** (0.015)	0.012 (0.011)	62,255	0.139
Political Parties	-0.017** (0.008)	0.000 (0.004)	61,862	0.121
Parliament	-0.019 (0.013)	0.027*** (0.009)	63,322	0.153
Elections	-0.057*** (0.018)	0.004 (0.025)	22,517	0.142
<i>Administrative Institution</i>				
Civil Service	-0.008 (0.013)	0.000 (0.014)	63,237	0.197

Notes: The table reports OLS estimates using World Values Survey data. Each row corresponds to a separate outcome. The contextual variable is the standardised share of women in the armed forces. “LAC gender gap at mean” reports the implied LAC gender gap when this variable equals zero. “Change in LAC gap per 1 SD” reports how the gap changes with a one-standard-deviation increase in women’s share in the armed forces; positive values indicate a less negative gap. All specifications include controls for age, income, employment, education, marital status, race/ethnicity, and parental status, as well as country-year fixed effects, survey weights, and country-clustered standard errors. Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.