



*AmericasBarometer Insights: 2008**

Social Capital in the Americas: Community Problem-Solving Participation

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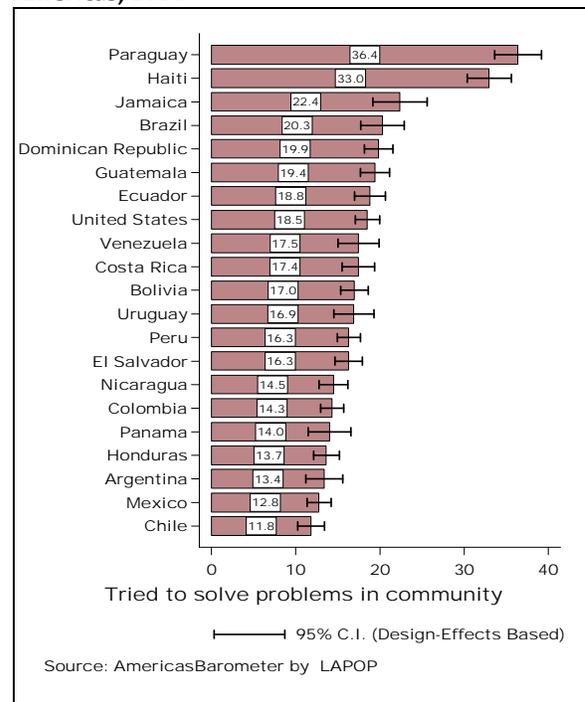
Social capital has become an important tool in the study of democratization. James Coleman defined social capital as all those relationships between people that allow them to cooperate for the purpose of achieving common goals (2000). When studying how democracy has worked in Italy, Robert Putnam demonstrated that some features of social organization, especially interpersonal trust, and social networks, can improve democracy's efficacy by facilitating coordinated action (1993). Social capital explains, according to Putnam, why some regions have more efficient political institutions than others within a country.

This *Insights* bulletin is the first in a series of reports devoted to study social capital in the Americas using the 2008 Democracy Survey of the Latin American Public Opinion Project

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(LAPOP)¹. This survey was carried out in twenty-two countries in the Americas, of which twenty-one countries, with a total of 34,469 respondents, are analyzed in this edition.² The survey included several questions that can be used as indicators of social capital, such as the one we address in this *Insights* paper: The wording of the item is as follows: CP5. "Over the last 12 months, have you helped solve a problem of your community or of the neighbors in your neighborhood?"³

Figure 1
Community Problem-Solving Participation in the Americas, 2008



This question taps into citizen behavior working collectively to solve community problems. Thus, the item is helpful to measure collective action which is aimed at addressing community issues.

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications. The data on which they are based can be found at: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets.

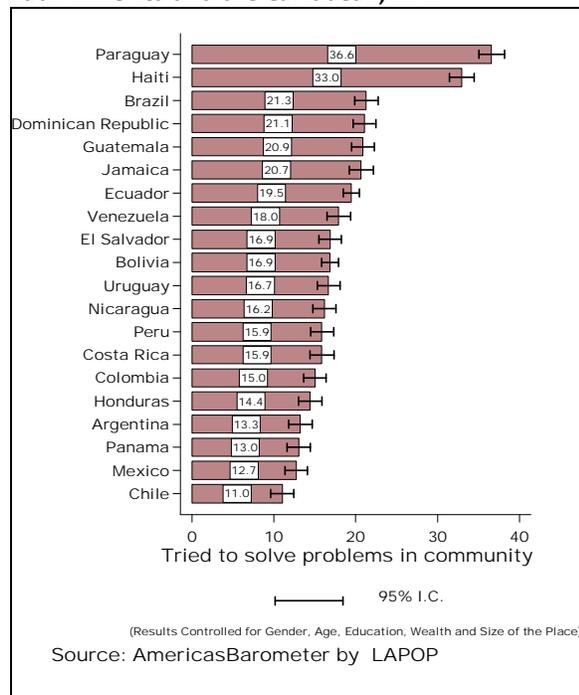
² Funding for the 2008 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Significant sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas, and Vanderbilt University.

³ The non-response rate for this question was 8.3 percent.

Figure 1 shows the results of this question, after converting the responses to a 0-to-100 scale, where 100 represents the highest level of community problem solving and 0 the lowest.

In Paraguay and Haiti, citizens tried to solve community problems more frequently than in the rest of the surveyed countries in the Americas. Most of the countries, from Brazil to El Salvador, share basically the same level of disposition to solve community problems.⁴ The lowest frequency of problem-solving engagement is found in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. Yet, it is important to note that problem-solving participation is rather low across the region. The top-ranking countries (Paraguay and Haiti) only scored in the 30s on the overall 0-to-100 scale. In other terms, of the 92.1% who responded to this question, 63.9% of the residents of the Americas did not report participation in any community problem-solving in the year prior to the survey.

Figure 2
Community Problem-Solving Participation after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



⁴ Canada did not have the full social capital series and the data from Belize are not yet available.

What might explain the variation found across countries? The standard model is to look to socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. In order to control for these possible effects, the results shown in Figure 1 were examined net of variables like age, gender, education, and wealth; and the United States was removed from the analysis.⁵ The results are shown in Figure 2.

As in Figure 1, Paraguay and Haiti remain as the countries where people are most likely to have tried to solve community problems, while Mexico and Chile remain at the bottom. In other words, the impact of controlling socio-demographic variables does not change substantively the social capital ranking of the countries as measured here. However, this does not mean that these factors and others do not have an impact.

The Determinants of Social Capital

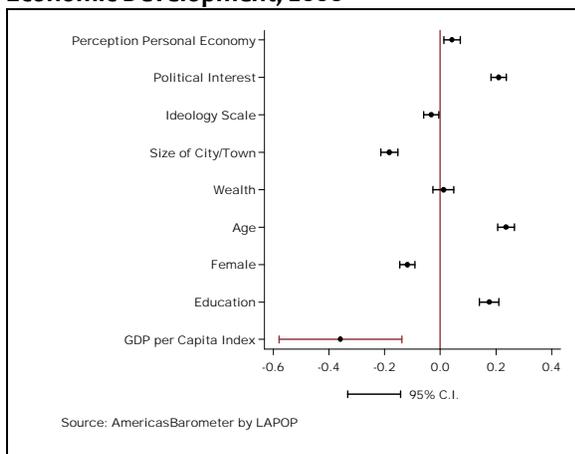
There are a number of factors that influence citizen involvement in solving community problems. A regression analysis performed on the AmericasBarometer 2008 data show that the significant predictors of this form of social capital are: a) perception of personal economic situation: citizens concerned about their personal economic situation tend to participate more in solving community problems; b) political interest: the more people are interested in politics, the more participation in community problem solving; c) ideology: people on the left tend to be more involved in solving problems in the community; c) size of city: the smaller the city in which people live, the more they are involved in solving community problems; d) age: older people tend to be more involved than younger people; e) gender: women tend to be less involved; and f) education: the more years of education, the greater the involvement in community solving.

The analysis, which was carried out using a Hierarchical Linear Model, also shows that in

⁵ The high levels of socioeconomic development in the U.S. make this country an outlier.

addition to individual variables, national context matters in explaining variation in social capital.⁶ Citizen involvement in community problems is greater in poorer countries than in richer countries. Specifically, the wealthier the countries in per capita terms, the *less* likely citizen are in trying to help solving problems in their communities.

Figure 3
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Community Problem Solving-Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of Economic Development, 2008



This can be clearly seen in Figure 4. This graph shows the predicted scores of community problem solving-participation in each country according to GDP per capita. The poorest countries in the Americas (Haiti, Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua) exhibit the highest scores on the scale of citizen involvement. Conversely, the richest countries in Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay) tend to score low on citizen involvement in community problem solving.

Similar results are obtained when regressing citizen involvement in solving problems on the community on average national growth rate from 1990 to 2005. As shown in Figure 5, a country's economic performance, measured by

⁶ Analyses in this paper were conducted using Stata v10, and they have been adjusted to consider the effects of complex sample designs.

the GDP per capita growth rate, is negatively related to citizen disposition to solve problems in the community. In other words, in those countries that have had a poor economic performance between 1990 and 2005, people have tried to help their community more frequently than in those countries with better economic performance.

Figure 4
The Impact of Economic Development on the Community Problem Solving Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008

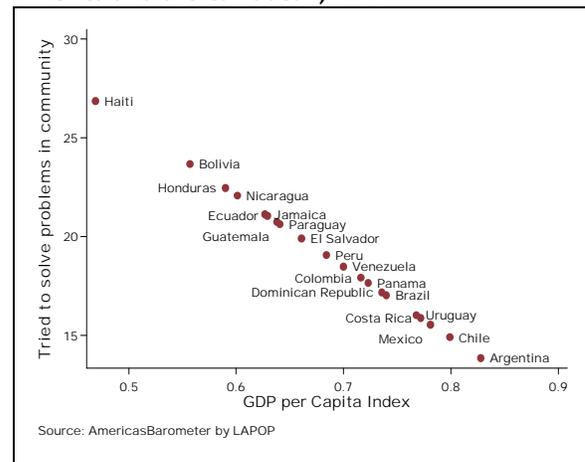
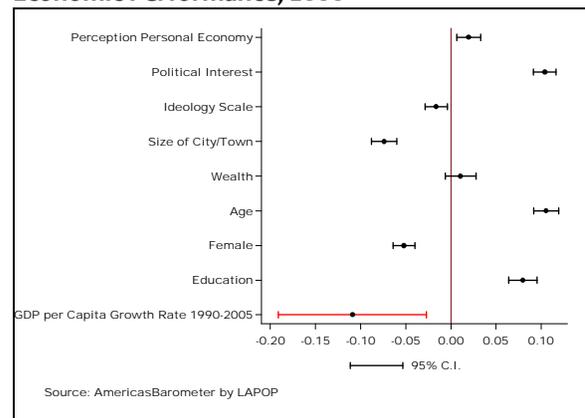


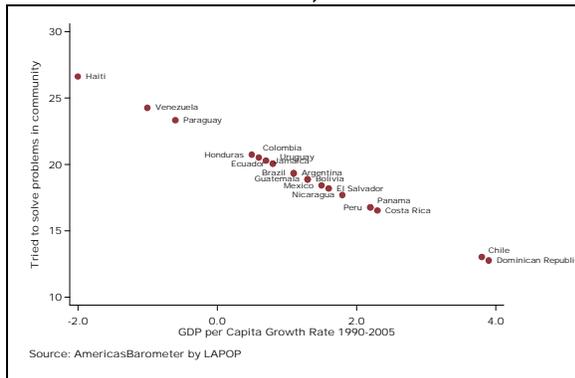
Figure 5
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Community Problem-Solving Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of Economic Performance, 2008



Hence, in countries like Haiti and Venezuela, with low rates of economic growth, the involvement of citizens helping to solve

problems is higher than in countries such as Chile and the Dominican Republic, that have been growing in the last decade (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
The Impact of Economic Performance on
Community Problem-Solving Participation in Latin
America and the Caribbean, 2008



In sum, the results of the Americas Barometer 2008, carried out in twenty-one countries in the region, show that social capital, measured as citizen participation in community problem solving, is rather low across the Americas, especially among citizens who live in richer countries. Such findings suggest that in the poorest countries, people tend to provide more support for their own communities as a means to overcome their lack of resources. Social capital, then, becomes a resource that helps people to deal with the shortages imposed by poverty and lack of development.

Policy Implications

Does this mean that countries should be poor in order to bolster social capital? The answer is clearly no. But these results are helpful to direct the search for participation models in those communities that have used social capital to overcome the lack of resources.

Democracy not only depends upon electoral participation. It also depends upon collective action aimed to solve daily problems within communities. The results shown in this paper have pointed out that education impacts the likelihood of citizen participation at the community level. Communities and neighborhoods with higher levels of education

generate more social capital and are better suited for collective action that leads to local development. Thus, the formation of *human* capital seems to be a sound basis for the development of *social* capital, which in turn, many studies have found, enhances democratic political culture and development.

These results have also shown an interesting relationship between wealth and citizen involvement in problem solving. Citizen engagement at the community level is higher in poorest countries and is higher among people concerned about their own personal economy. Collective action becomes, then, an important tool to tackle the obvious lack of resources. Hence, despite their vulnerability, deprived communities with successful strategies of collective action can also turn into models for programs and policies seeking to enhance social capital elsewhere.

References

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