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Popular Support for Executive Limits on Opposition Parties

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One of the deepening concerns about democratization in Latin America is the apparently growing support for government executives who try to limit those who oppose "the people's will" (Hawkins 2003; Seligson 2007; Weyland 2001). Consequently, it is important to understand the extent to which citizens are willing to support executive limits on the opposition, given that the protection of such rights is central to the sustainability of liberal democracy (Gibson 2006). After all, when opposition parties are muzzled, competitive democracy no longer is possible.

This paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insights Series* looks at one of a series of questions on citizen support for the concentration of executive power asked in the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project survey (others will be examined in future *Insights* studies)¹. This survey involved face-to-face interviews conducted in 23 nations in Latin America and the Caribbean, and a web survey in the United States². Data from 21 of

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¹ Prior issues in the Insight series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>.

The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

² Funding for the 2008 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American

Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

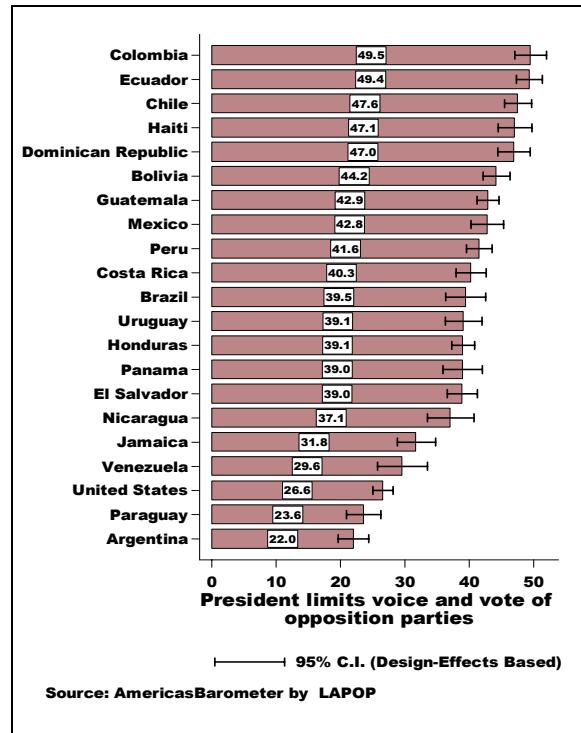
POP101. It is necessary for the progress of this country that our president [prime minister] limits the voice and vote of opposition parties. How much do you agree or disagree with that view?

Responses were based on a 1-7 scale, where 1 meant "strongly disagree" and 7 meant "strongly agree."⁴

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Strongly disagree			Strongly agree			Doesn't know	

Figure 1.

Average Support for the President Limiting the Voice and Vote of Opposition Parties in the Americas, 2008



Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

³ This question was not asked in Canada and the Belize data are not available as of this writing.

⁴ In order to make comparisons across questions and survey waves simpler, these responses were recoded on a 0-100 scale.

Figure 1 exhibits national averages for the 21 countries in the sample.⁵ We first note that in no country in the Americas does average support for limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties exceed 50 on a 0-100 scale. Yet, some countries come close, especially Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, and Haiti, which show the highest levels of support for concentration of executive power, having averages above 47 points in a scale 0-100. At the other extreme, the citizens of United States, Paraguay and Argentina express the lowest levels of such support in the Americas with 27, 24 and 22 points, respectively. It is worthy of note that Venezuela, a country where the executive concentration of power has increased noticeably in recent years (Hawkins 2003), and in which there is currently no opposition member in the national legislature, citizen support for the president in limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties is quite low (29.6) in comparison to the rest of the countries in the sample. This finding might well reflect citizen concern over the exclusion of opposition parties.

Predicting Support for the Executive Power in Limiting the Voice and Vote of Opposition Parties

What explains these differences across countries? We first examined contextual factors that might explain some of the national-level variation we found. However, multilevel analyses predicting support for the president in limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties with conventional national characteristics such as GDP, economic growth, and level of democracy did not reach statistical significance. It may be the case that other national-level characteristics (especially historical factors) explain the cross-national variation we found here, but such analyses are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, to explain variation in attitudes toward executive dominance we focus here on individual-level factors, beginning with traditional socio-economic and demographic

variables: age, levels of education, gender, wealth, and size of the city/town.⁶

Figure 2.

Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Average Support for Presidential Limits on the Voice and Vote of Opposition Parties in the Americas, 2008

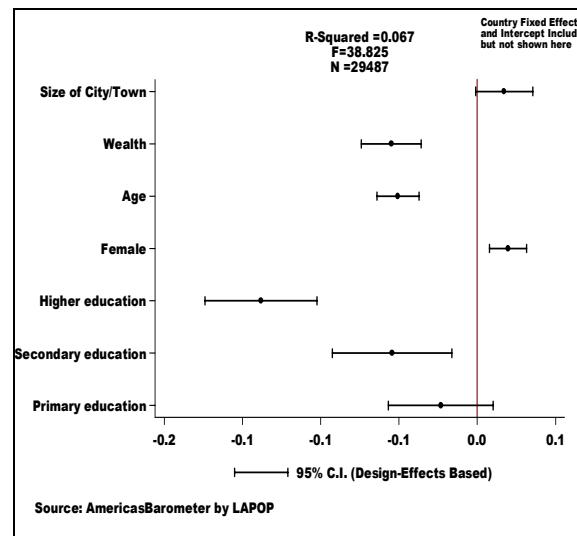


Figure 2 demonstrates the importance of socio-economic and demographic variables in explaining support for concentration of the executive power when related to limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties. Each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical "0" line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left of the "0" line a negative effect. If the effects are statistically significant, they are shown by confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot that do not overlap the vertical "0" line (at .05 or better). If they overlap the vertical line, the effects are statistically insignificant. For instance, females show higher levels of support for executive limits on the voice and vote of opposition parties. In contrast, *ceteris paribus*, wealthier, more educated, and older citizens show significantly lower levels of support for this undemocratic belief.

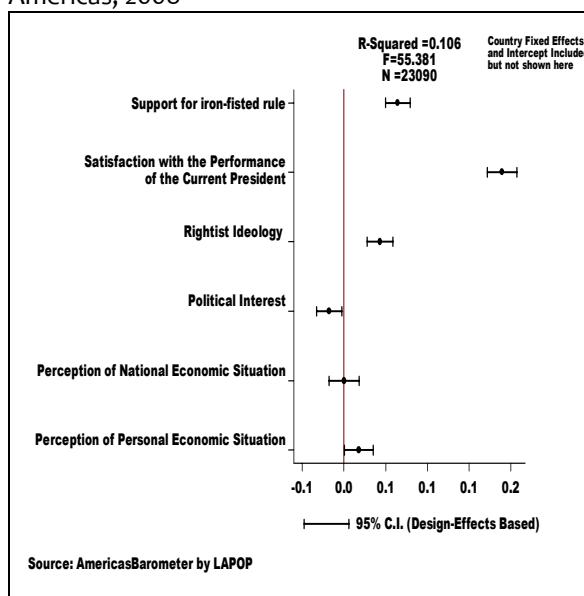
⁵ Non-response was 13% for the sample as a whole.

⁶ Because the average citizen in the United States scores very high on socio-economic characteristics compared to those in the rest of the countries in the sample, we exclude this case from the analysis.

It is noteworthy that those with higher (i.e., university) education demonstrate much lower support for limiting opposition parties compared to the other levels of education. The effect of all these socio-economic and demographic factors, however, is not large, as is shown in the figure. For that reason, we expect that political attitudes and behaviors also play a central role in support for concentration of executive power.

Figure 3.

Determinants of Average Support for Executive Limits on Voice and Vote of Opposition Parties in the Americas, 2008



It is possible that with the rise of governments with higher executive concentration of power in Latin America, there are some individuals who are “more likely to support strong leaders who offer weak support or even hostility to the checks, balances, and procedures that mark liberal democracy” (Seligson 2007: 93), because citizens may have been influenced by their leaders’ public rhetoric, and thus supporting violations of liberal democracy. In this paper, we look at some of these issues. Specifically, we expect that those who have a higher support for government to rule with an “iron fist” and/or are especially satisfied with the performance of the current president will express greater support for executive concentration of power. Other variables included in this analysis are

ideology,⁷ political interest, and perception by the respondent of personal and national economic situation.

Figure 3 displays the influence of political attitudes on support for concentration of executive power. Not surprisingly, these results indicate that those who support a government with an “iron fist”⁸ are those who also express higher support for the president in limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties, rendering support for the notion that those with “authoritarian personalities” are more willing to sustain undemocratic practices (Altemeyer 1996). Similarly, those who are more satisfied with the performance of the current president and who perceive more positively their personal economic situation tend to show higher support for the concentration of executive power.

Furthermore, those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum are those who have a higher support for the president in limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties, but it could be that this relationship is dependent on the country (Seligson 2007). Yet a deeper evaluation of this relationship is beyond the scope of this paper. Finally, we look at the role of interest in politics. Those who show high interest in politics exhibit lower levels of support for the concentration of executive power. This is an encouraging finding since it suggests that the more politically attentive are not happy with restricting liberal democracy. It is noteworthy that all of these attitudinal variables are statistically significant even after controlling for country effects and the traditional socio-economic

⁷ Ideology was measured by: L1. (Left-Right Scale) On this card there is a 1-10 scale that goes from left to right. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those on the left and those on the right. In other words, some people sympathize more with the left and others with the right. According to the meaning that the terms “left” and “right” have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?

⁸ This attitude was measured by: “Do you think that our country needs a government with an iron fist, or that problems can be resolved with everyone’s participation?” The item was recoded into (1) indicating support for a government with an iron fist and (0) indicating otherwise.

and demographic variables analyzed previously in this paper.⁹

Policy Implications

With the recent rise of governments increasing executive concentration of power in Latin America, it is important to know the extent to which citizens are willing to support the concentration of executive power. In this paper I found that countries vary sharply on this dimension, but in no country does the average citizen support these limitations. The analysis shows that females express higher levels of support for the concentration of executive power, while more educated, wealthier, and older people express lower levels of support.

The AmericasBarometer data further suggest that citizens, when satisfied with the incumbent government's performance in general and when perceiving more favorably their personal economic situation, are more willing to support limits on the voice and vote of the opposition. In other words, it appears that when people feel that their needs have been met, they are more willing to allow their national leaders to muzzle the opposition by imposing restraints on opposition parties. However, as the old saying goes, "you may get what you wish for," so that we find that in those countries in which civil rights and freedoms of expression have already been limited and there exists strong concentration of executive power, people express reduced support for illiberal democracy. This finding is well illustrated by the very low support for the president in limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties in Venezuela, quite possibly as a result of the dramatic political changes experienced there during the last decade in this country (Hawkins 2003).

In conclusion, higher support for executive power concentration seems to be driven by the satisfaction with incumbent government performance as well as high support for authoritarian values. However,

⁹ Refer to the Appendix for a detailed display of those effects.

once the concentration of executive power is furthered and freedoms and rights of minorities are hindered, people's support for these limits decline, as revealed by the Venezuelan case.¹⁰

The results in this paper also demonstrate that higher levels of education lower citizen's support for limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties, highlighting the dominant role that education plays in reducing intolerant attitudes (Golebiowska 1995; Orcs 2008; Seligson, Cordova, and Moreno 2007). Therefore, it is important that democracy promotion programs in the region aim to increase levels of education that in turn will allow for a more democratic political culture in the region.

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¹⁰ An example of Venezuelans' decline of support for Chavez is illustrated by the results of the recent regional and municipal elections taken place on Nov 23, 2008. The opposition won 5 states, where the majority of the population resides, compared to 2 states in 2004. See http://www.infolatam.com/entrada/venezuela_oposicion_se_atribuye_un_triumf-11367.html

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Appendix

Table 1. Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Average Support for Presidential Limits on the Voice and Vote of Opposition Parties in the Americas, 2008

	Coefficient.	t
Primary education	-0.023	(-1.37)
Secondary education	-0.054*	(-2.79)
Higher education	-0.138*	(-7.59)
Female	0.020*	(3.26)
Age	-0.051*	(-7.43)
Wealth	-0.055*	(-5.63)
Size of City/Town	0.017	(1.85)
Guatemala	-0.014	(-1.47)
El Salvador	-0.030*	(-2.85)
Honduras	-0.038*	(-3.79)
Nicaragua	-0.049*	(-3.57)
Costa Rica	-0.010	(-0.96)
Panama	-0.022	(-1.73)
Colombia	0.038*	(3.38)
Ecuador	0.057*	(4.02)
Bolivia	0.007	(0.51)
Peru	-0.003	(-0.26)
Paraguay	-0.108*	(-10.26)
Chile	0.038*	(3.64)
Uruguay	-0.018	(-1.63)
Brazil	-0.026*	(-2.04)
Venezuela	-0.074*	(-5.14)
Argentina	-0.119*	(-11.02)
Dominican Republic	0.019	(1.70)
Haiti	0.002	(0.14)
Jamaica	-0.070*	(-5.64)
Constant	0.013	(1.31)
R-Squared	0.067	
Number of Obs.	29487	

* p<0.05

Education level of Reference: None

Country of Reference: Mexico

Table 2. Determinants of Average Support for Presidential Limits on the Voice and Vote of Opposition Parties in the Americas, 2008

	Coefficient.	t
Perception of Personal Economic Situation	0.018*	(2.05)
Perception of National Economic Situation	0.000	(0.01)
Political Interest	-0.018*	(-2.27)
Rightist Ideology	0.043*	(5.54)
Satisfaction with the Performance of the Current President	0.190*	(21.11)
Support for iron-fisted rule	0.064*	(8.57)
Age	-0.070*	(-9.46)
Wealth	-0.056*	(-5.53)
Female	0.025*	(3.74)
Education	-0.100*	(-10.73)
Size of City/Town	0.011	(1.16)
Guatemala	-0.016	(-1.52)
El Salvador	-0.023*	(-2.26)
Honduras	-0.028*	(-2.78)
Nicaragua	-0.021	(-1.32)
Costa Rica	-0.014	(-1.15)
Panama	-0.004	(-0.27)
Colombia	0.011	(0.93)
Ecuador	0.047*	(3.21)
Bolivia	0.015	(1.04)
Peru	0.007	(0.63)
Paraguay	-0.075*	(-6.67)
Chile	0.037*	(3.47)
Uruguay	-0.020	(-1.72)
Brazil	-0.027*	(-2.15)
Venezuela	-0.061*	(-4.19)
Argentina	-0.117*	(-10.13)
Dominican Republic	0.005	(0.39)
Haiti	0.057*	(4.36)
Jamaica	-0.051*	(-4.01)
Constant	0.041*	(4.14)
R-Squared	0.106	

Number of Obs.	23090	
* p<0.05 Country of Reference: Mexico		