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AmericasBarometer Insights: 2009 (No.12)* Do Parties Listen to the People? Views from the Americas

By Margarita Corral
Margarita.corral@vanderbilt.edu
Vanderbilt University

Both old and new democracies are facing growing political dissatisfaction characterized by a lack of confidence in political institutions (UNDP 2004, Dalton 2004, Torcal and Montero 2006). This distrust is especially evident in the case of political parties. In order to better understand this type of dissatisfaction, the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* reports have analyzed several facets of citizens' perceptions of political parties. Here we look at citizens' opinions concerning whether or not political parties listen to the people.¹ We again query the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys.² In this survey 36,021 respondents from 22 nations in North, Central, South America and the Caribbean were asked the same question³:

EPP3. How often do political parties listen to the average person?

* The *Insights Series* is co-edited by Professors Mitchell A. Seligson and Elizabeth Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* 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.

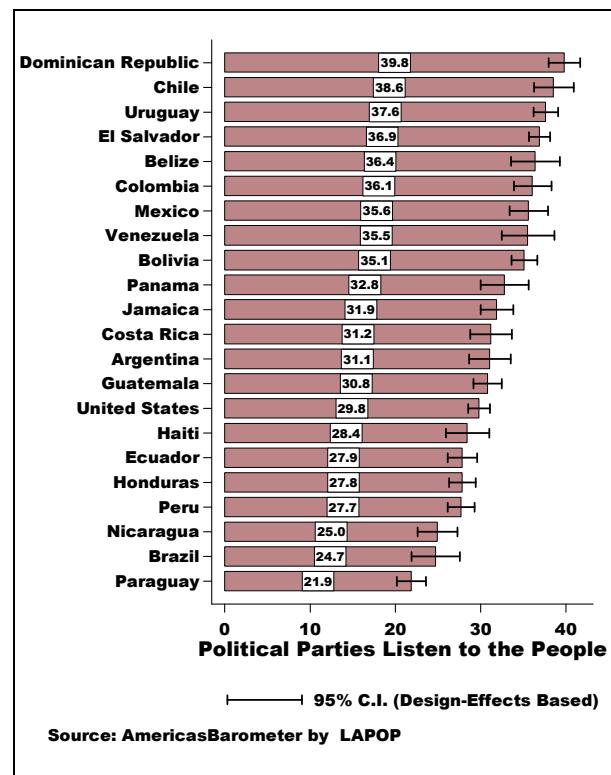
³ This question was not asked in Canada.

Responses were given based on a 1-7 scale, where '1' meant "not at all" and '7' meant "a lot."

These responses were then recoded on a 0-100 basis to conform to the LAPOP standard, which facilitates comparability across questions and survey waves.⁴ Figure 1, which displays national averages, shows a strikingly negative perception of political parties as institutions that listen to the people. The average level falls below 40 points in every country.

Figure 1.

Average Belief that Political Parties Listen to the People in the Americas, 2008



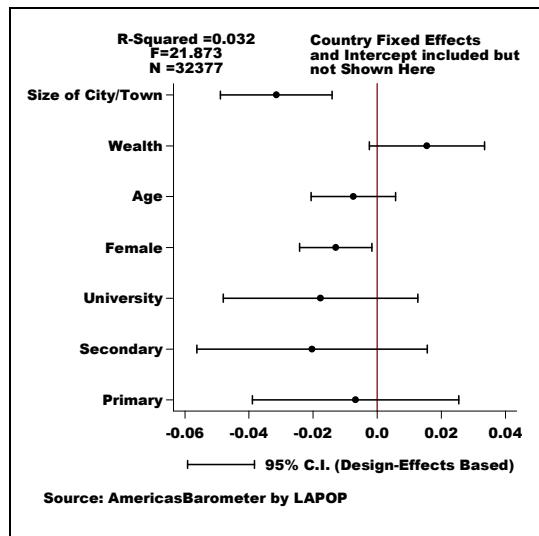
Countries such as the Dominican Republic, Chile, Uruguay, El Salvador, Belize, and Colombia display the highest mean beliefs that parties listen to the people. In all these countries the average response falls between 35 and 40 points on our 0-100 scale. At the other extreme, we find Nicaragua, Brazil, and Paraguay, where the average score falls below 25 points. It is quite evident that citizens in the Americas do not believe that political parties are listening to the people.

⁴ Non-response was 4.51% for the sample as a whole.

Explaining Belief that Parties Listen to the People

What explains variation in the belief that political parties listen to the average person? We will focus on the individual characteristics of respondents in our surveys to answer this question.⁵ As a first step we take into account the following socio-economic and demographic characteristics: education, gender, age, wealth, and city/town size. In order to assess their influence on our dependent variable, we employ an OLS linear regression model.⁶ Given that citizens in the United States have sharply higher levels on socio-economic characteristics, we exclude this country from the analysis.⁷

Figure 2.Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Support for the Belief that Political Parties Listen to the People in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



⁵ Multilevel analyses predicting to what extent people agree that political parties listen to the people with variables such as GDP, economic growth, and level of democracy, did not yield significant results. It is possible that the variation across countries displayed in Figure 1 is explained by some other national-level political factors, analysis that will be left for future research.

⁶ All statistical analyses in this paper were conducted using STATA v10 and results were adjusted for the complex sample designs employed.

⁷ To capture the variation across countries the model included dummy variables for each country, using Uruguay as the reference country.

Figure 2 shows the influence of these individual-level socio-economic and demographic characteristics on the belief that political parties listen to the average person in Latin America and the Caribbean. Only two of the variables considered here are statistically significant, and the size of their effects is relatively small. This significance is graphically represented by a confidence interval that does not overlap the vertical "0" line (at .05 or better). When the dot, which represents the predicted impact of that variable, falls to the right of the vertical "0" line it implies a positive relationship whereas when it falls to the left it indicates a negative contribution. In this model, size of the city and gender are statistically significant contributors. In this sense, people living in rural areas or small towns tend to agree more that political parties listen to the people than people living in large cities, *ceteris paribus*. Females, also holding constant the rest of variables, are more skeptical than men about this belief. Levels of wealth, education or age do not make a difference.

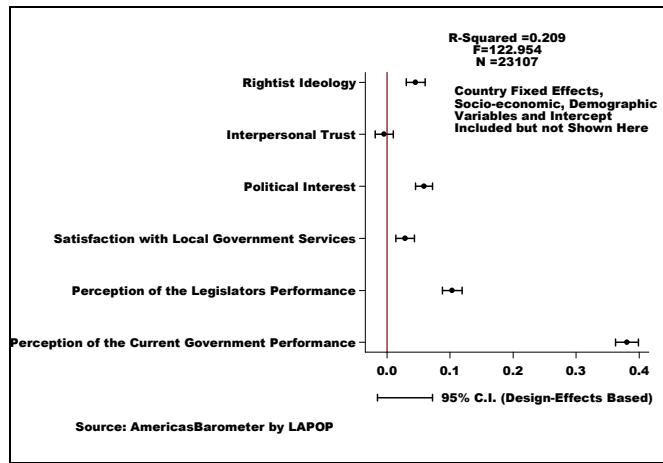
Given that socioeconomic characteristics seem to have a small impact on the belief that parties listen to the people, we need to add more variables in order to have a more reasonable and accurate idea of the determinants of support for this belief. We therefore turn to an assessment of select political evaluations and attitudes. In previous *Insights Series* reports, we assessed the expectation that citizens' trust in political parties is related to government performance. Drawing on this same basic argument, Figure 3 displays the results of a new model intended to explain citizens' evaluations of parties as incorporating citizen input.⁸

The effects of these new variables in the model are particularly notable when contrasted with those we found for education, age, and city/town size.

⁸ This analysis was carried out using a linear regression that also included the socioeconomic and demographic variables and the country dummies employed earlier. Figure 3 displays only the political variables. All the regressions performed can be found in Table 1 in the appendix..

Figure 3.

An Analysis of the Determinants of Average Support for the Belief that Political Parties Listen to the People in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



As we found in previous reports, citizens' perceptions of political parties depend on outputs, that is to say, on the way citizens consider that representatives satisfy their demands and perform their duties. We see that the higher the perception of current government performance⁹, the higher the support for the belief that political parties are listening to the people. Furthermore, the higher the perception that the members of parliament are performing a good job in the legislature, the higher the support for the idea that parties listen to the people.

Apart from performance at the national level, satisfaction with outputs at local level is also found to be important, as Figure 3 shows. The higher the satisfaction with the services provided by local governments the higher the support for the idea that parties listen to the people, *ceteris paribus*. This impact is, however, smaller than what we find for national-level performance.

Political interest is also a statistically significant predictor, as is ideology. The latter is measured by the classic 1-10 scale of left-right self-identification.

⁹ The Perception of the Government Performance Index was constructed from five items that asked to what extent people thought the current administration fights poverty, combats government corruption, promotes and protects democratic principles, improves the security of citizens, and combats unemployment.

The results show that people who self-identify with the right tend to support the idea that parties listen to the people more than those who identify with the left.

Policy and Program Implications

This new *Insights* series report again shows how citizens in Latin America are dissatisfied with political parties. Citizens show low levels of trust in parties (I0802). And, further, they do not consider that parties are listening to the people. How might these overwhelmingly negative perceptions of parties be improved?

As we have seen in previous reports, the AmericasBarometer data suggest again that perceptions about parties depend on the extent to which government does or does not satisfy their basic needs. In this sense, in order to increase support for the idea that parties listen to the people, the belief that governments and representatives in congress fulfill their functions needs to be increased.

Therefore, according to our analysis, there should be more efforts to fight corruption, crime, and poverty, and promoting and protecting basic rights and the rule of law, in any policy making agenda. Achieving higher levels of political interest among citizens would be also useful.

In conclusion, our analysis here suggests that perceptions about the extent to which political parties listen to the people, and perceptions about parties in general, would be more positive if political systems achieve higher levels of government performance across a range of policy areas, at the levels of the executive and legislative and at the national and local levels.

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Appendix: Determinants of the Belief that Parties Listen to the People				
	Regression I		Regression II	
	Coef.	Err. est.	Coef.	Err. est.
Primary	0.007	(0.41)	-0.000	(-0.00)
Secondary	0.020	(1.11)	-0.023	(-1.16)
University	0.018	(1.14)	-0.021	(-1.26)
Female	-0.013*	(-2.24)	0.000	(0.07)
Age	-0.007	(-1.11)	-0.014	(-1.94)
Wealth	0.015	(1.69)	0.016	(1.71)
Size of City/Town	-0.031*	(-3.54)	-0.006	(-0.66)
Political Interest			0.059*	(8.48)
Rightist Ideology			0.045*	(5.91)
Efficacy of the Current Government			0.381*	(40.67)
Satisfaction with Local Government Services			0.029*	(3.87)
Performance of Legislators			0.103*	(13.03)
Interpersonal Trust			-0.004	(-0.60)
Mexico	-0.019	(-1.83)	0.017	(1.90)
Guatemala	-0.056*	(-6.59)	-0.016	(-1.78)
El Salvador	-0.008	(-1.11)	0.057*	(7.20)
Honduras	-0.080*	(-9.82)	0.019*	(2.10)
Nicaragua	-0.099*	(-9.32)	-0.013	(-1.41)
Costa Rica	-0.055*	(-5.02)	-0.024*	(-2.27)
Panama	-0.040*	(-3.31)	0.042*	(4.09)
Colombia	-0.014	(-1.39)	-0.009	(-0.98)
Ecuador	-0.101*	(-8.70)	-0.026*	(-2.04)
Bolivia	-0.028*	(-2.50)	0.011	(0.90)
Peru	-0.072*	(-8.91)	0.012	(1.53)
Paraguay	-0.107*	(-14.08)	0.012	(1.60)
Chile	0.007	(0.64)	0.037*	(3.40)
Brazil	-0.096*	(-8.10)	-0.038*	(-3.44)
Venezuela	-0.017	(-1.29)	0.051*	(3.92)
Argentina	-0.050*	(-4.69)	0.024*	(2.07)
Dominican Republic	0.014	(1.64)	0.023*	(2.50)
Haiti	-0.071*	(-6.11)	0.013	(1.07)
Jamaica	-0.047*	(-4.92)	-0.001	(-0.07)
Belize	-0.016	(-1.33)	0.034*	(2.65)
Constant	-0.005	(-0.59)	0.013	(1.52)
R-squared	0.032		0.209	
N.	32377		23107	

* p<0.05