



AmericasBarometer Insights: 2009(No.14)\*

# Citizen Satisfaction with Municipal Services<sup>1</sup>

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One of the most emphasized benefits of decentralization is the alleged improvement in public administration. By “bringing the government closer to the people,” public officials are expected to have a greater ability to recognize, interpret and satisfy more precisely citizens’ needs and demands for public goods and services (Evans 1997; Tandler 1997; Montero and Samuels 2004). Due to their proximity, citizens can also discern more effectively whether or not their local governments are fulfilling their expectations. If individuals are satisfied with their local officials’ performance, they may express greater support for the system. However, if local institutions are unable to satisfy their demands, citizens will not only express their discontent with local governments, but they can also be increasingly dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the entire nation (Hiskey and Seligson 2003; Weitz-Shapiro 2008).

<sup>1</sup> 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>

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Thus, it becomes most important to ask: Who is more satisfied with the services provided by local governments, and why? This new paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* attempts to answer these questions by querying the 2008 data base provided by the AmericasBarometer survey carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 23 nations in the Western hemisphere<sup>2</sup>. In this survey 33,809 respondents were asked the following question:

**SGL1.** Would you say that the services the municipality is providing are: (1) Very good; (2) Good (3); Neither good nor poor (fair); (4) Poor; or (5) Very poor?

**Figure 1.**  
Average Satisfaction with Municipal Services in the Americas, 2008<sup>3</sup>

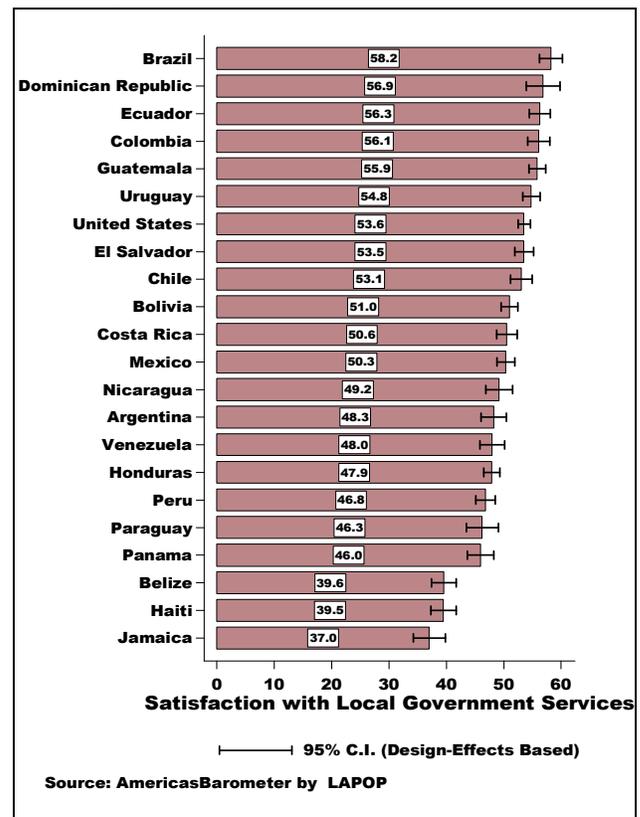


Figure 1 shows national averages for 22 countries in the sample.<sup>4</sup> The scale to measure the degree of

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The non-response rate for this question was 6.08 percent.

satisfaction with municipal services was recoded onto a new continuous scale, where “0” means very poor and “100” means very good. Thus, the average satisfaction with municipal services in the region is 50.13 out of 100 possible points. Figure 1 also shows some variation among countries. At one end, citizens of Brazil, Dominican Republic and Ecuador manifest the highest degree of satisfaction with municipal services in the region, with levels of 58.2, 56.9 and 52.3 points respectively. At the other end, citizens of Belize, Haiti and Jamaica express the lowest degree of satisfaction, with levels of 39.6, 39.5 and 37.0 points respectively.

## Predicting Citizen Satisfaction with Local Government Services

What explains variation in citizen satisfaction with municipal services? Historical/contextual factors may be causing some of the variation across countries, however, in this paper we concentrate on the variance that is explained by individual-level factors.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, we first consider socio-economic and demographic characteristics included in the AmericasBarometer survey: education, gender, age, geographic zone, and wealth. To assess their influence on citizen satisfaction with municipal services, we employ multinomial ordinary-least-squares regression.<sup>6</sup> Since citizens in the United States possess sharply higher levels of socio-economic characteristics, we exclude this country from the analysis.<sup>7</sup> Results of the multivariate regression are displayed in Figure 2.

<sup>4</sup> The AmericasBarometer originally collected information in 23 countries. However, this question was not asked in Canada; therefore, the number of countries was reduced to 22.

<sup>5</sup> We found no statistically significant relationship between a series of level-2 variables, such as level of fiscal decentralization, per capita GDP, the Human Development Index, GINI coefficient, level of Democracy, etc. and citizen satisfaction with municipal services.

<sup>6</sup> All statistical analyses in this paper were conducted using STATA v10 and they are adjusted to consider the effects of the complex sample design.

<sup>7</sup> Given that levels of citizen satisfaction with local government services vary across countries, dummy variables for each country were also included in the model, using Jamaica as the base or reference country.

**Figure 2.**

Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Citizen Satisfaction with Municipal Services in Latin America, 2008

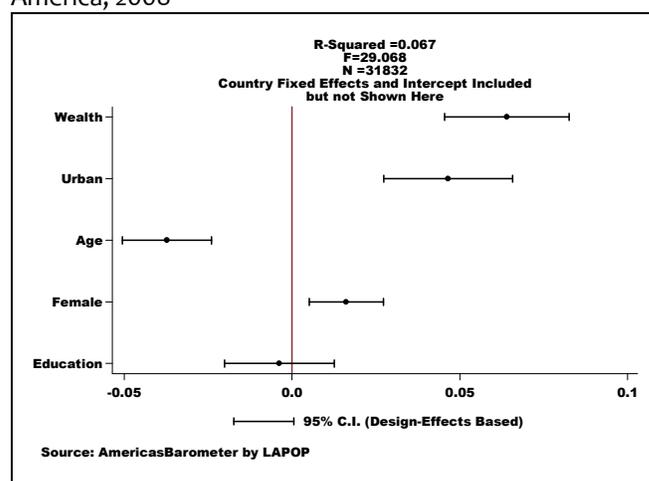
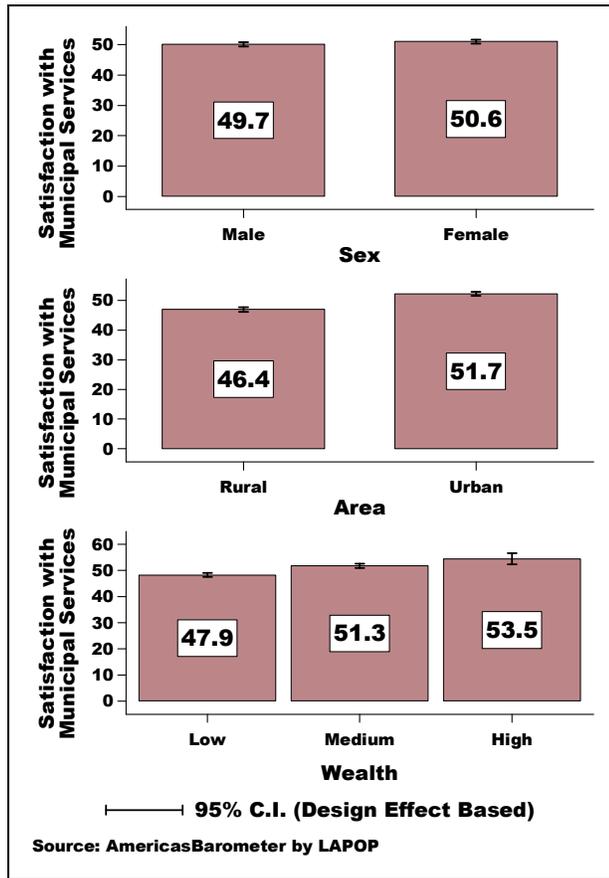


Figure 2 shows the effects of socio-economic and demographic characteristics on levels of satisfaction with municipal services in Latin America. It can be observed that four out of the five factors accounted for in Figure 2 are statistically relevant. Statistical significance is graphically represented 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 if it falls to the left it indicates a negative contribution. In this model, the individual’s level of wealth (measured as capital goods ownership),<sup>8</sup> the geographic zone where the individual resides, age and gender are statistically significant contributors. Holding constant all other of variables, richer individuals in Latin America show a higher satisfaction with municipal services. Additionally, people living in urban areas, as opposed to people living in rural areas, manifest greater satisfaction with local government services. Finally, we also see that, holding everything else constant, women are slightly more satisfied with municipal services than men. These results have important policy implications that will be analyzed in the final section of this paper. The relationship between sex, geographical area and wealth on the one hand, and citizen satisfaction with municipal

<sup>8</sup> For more information on how this index is constructed, please see Seligson (2008).

services on the other hand is shown in Figure 3, which shows average values for the sample.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 3.**  
Age, Education, Gender, Area Size, Wealth and Satisfaction with Municipal Services in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



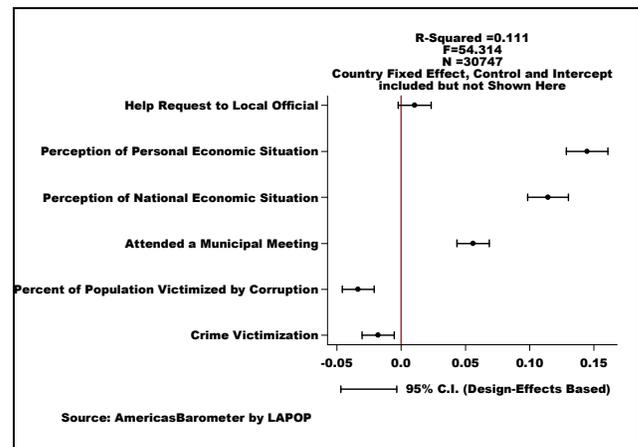
The impact of socio-economic and demographic variables on citizen satisfaction with municipal services is statistically significant and substantively robust, as shown in both Figures 2 and 3. However, there are also several political tendencies and evaluations that theoretically should drive individuals to be either satisfied or dissatisfied with municipal services. In particular, we expect individuals to engage in normal retrospective evaluative processes in which, to assess local services, they ask “what have you done for me lately?” Thus, we hypothesize that measures of individuals’ experiences with crime and corruption

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the variable “Wealth” is grouped into categories with the purpose of illustration. This variable was inserted as continuous in the multivariate regression.

and their evaluations of the economy will influence their satisfaction with the provision of municipal services. We further expect that those who are more engaged in local government might have different evaluations compared to those who are not.

In order to assess these expectations, we added several theoretically-relevant variables to our analysis. Results from this new regression are depicted in Figure 4. It is worth noting that while we included all the socio-economic, demographic and control variables reported above, we display only the political evaluation variables in the Figure below (see the Appendix for the complete set of statistics).

**Figure 4.**  
An Analysis of the Determinants of Average Citizen Satisfaction with Municipal Services in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



The results above indicate that there are quite a few individual factors (in addition to socio-economic and demographic variables) that are significantly related to citizen satisfaction with local government services. First, we find support for the expectation that citizens are more content with municipal services to the degree that they have relatively better experiences and economic evaluations. Thus, those individuals who have been victimized by crime in last the 12 months manifested less satisfaction with municipal services than those individuals who were not victimized. Likewise, those individuals who have been victimized by corruption at least once in the last 12 months are more dissatisfied with municipal services than those that have not been

victimized.<sup>10</sup> These findings clearly suggest that citizens' dissatisfaction with municipal services increases as they perceive that the government is failing to provide for their security and/or failing to uphold the rule of law.

Next, both assessments of personal and national economic situation are positively related to satisfaction with municipal services. As individuals perceive that their personal economic situation improves, their satisfaction with the services provided by the local government increases as well. Likewise, holding all other factors constant, individuals who evaluate more positively the national economic situation are more satisfied with municipal services. Of course we cannot rule out the fact that satisfaction with services positively affects economic evaluations and, in fact, we suspect that the causal arrow does point in both directions.

Additionally, our analysis shows that individuals who participate more often in municipal meetings are more satisfied with local government services. Once again, more research would be required in order to determine with more precision the direction of this relationship. Such research would help to answer the question of whether citizen participation in municipal meetings increases the levels of satisfaction with local government services, or is it the case that more satisfied individuals are those who participate more often in municipal meetings?

Finally, we found initial statistical evidence for a relationship between demand-making on municipal government and satisfaction with local government services (in reduced models not presented here). However, as we added other theoretically important variables to the model, the effect of local demand-making on satisfaction with municipal services tended to fade away. In Figure 4, the relationship is so close to statistically significance that we are unable to reach a firm conclusion regarding this relationship.

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<sup>10</sup> The direction of this relationship could go the other way around as well. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct further research to try to determine the proper direction of causality.

## Program and Policy Implications

This report has shown that in the Latin American context, citizen satisfaction with local government services is neither good nor poor. If Hiskey and Seligson (2003) and Weitz-Shapiro (2008) are right, at least part of citizens' dissatisfaction with the way democracies work in some countries can be due to the poor performance of some local governments. As we have shown, those individuals that have been victimized by either corruption or crime in the past, report lower levels of satisfaction with municipal services than those who have not been victimized. This crucial finding suggests that individuals attribute problems of crime and corruption, at least in part to the poor performance of municipal responsibilities. Presumably, crime and corruption occur with greatest frequency in one's own town or city; it is not surprising, then, that local officials are held accountable for such experiences. Interestingly, in a previous issue of the *Insights* series, we found that crime and corruption victimization were also significantly, and positively, related to citizen participation in municipal meetings.<sup>11</sup> This suggests an interesting relationship among all these variables: victimization appears to directly reduce satisfaction; however, to the degree that it increases participation, it may ultimately increase satisfaction through this linkage. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to fully untangle this set of relationships, which clearly warrant more study.

Lastly, studying particularly the socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals who are more likely to participate in municipal meetings, we found at least two strong, positive and substantive relationships that are policy-relevant. On the one hand, individuals living in rural areas are *less* satisfied with municipal services than those living in urban areas. This finding is two-fold. First, it suggests that governmental decentralization may be more appropriate in rural municipalities in order to improve their capacity to recognize, interpret and satisfy citizens' needs and demands. Second, if rural municipalities are already decentralized, they may not be fulfilling citizen expectations, and thus need a review of their activities in order to improve performance. Finally, taking into account that

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<sup>11</sup> Please refer to the series number I0804 at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>.

poorer individuals tend to live in rural areas,<sup>12</sup> relative deprivation of private goods may also be a reason for their dissatisfaction with municipal services, as shown in our model.

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<sup>12</sup> The correlation coefficient for "Wealth" and "Size of City" is .43.

**Appendix:  
Results from the multivariate model**

**Dependent Variable: Satisfaction with Municipal Services**

	Regression 1		Regression 2	
	Coefficient	t	Coefficient	T
Crime Victimization			-0.018*	(-2.82)
Percent of Population Victimized by Corruption			-0.034*	(-5.32)
Attended a Municipal Meeting			0.056*	(8.74)
Perception of National Economic Situation			0.114*	(14.14)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation			0.145*	(17.56)
Help Request to Local Official			0.010	(1.60)
Education	-0.004	(-0.46)	-0.021*	(-2.47)
Female	0.016*	(2.86)	0.027*	(4.68)
Age	-0.037*	(-5.51)	-0.024*	(-3.61)
Urban	0.047*	(4.76)	0.061*	(6.31)
Wealth	0.064*	(6.76)	0.032*	(3.40)
Mexico	-0.050*	(-5.05)	-0.043*	(-4.62)
Guatemala	0.013	(1.35)	0.022*	(2.26)
El Salvador	-0.013	(-1.27)	0.008	(0.75)
Honduras	-0.056*	(-5.62)	-0.048*	(-4.80)
Nicaragua	-0.046*	(-3.70)	-0.016	(-1.26)
Costa Rica	-0.049*	(-4.55)	-0.047*	(-4.40)
Panama	-0.083*	(-6.56)	-0.071*	(-5.88)
Colombia	0.005	(0.47)	-0.007	(-0.68)
Ecuador	0.008	(0.55)	0.006	(0.43)
Bolivia	-0.045*	(-3.40)	-0.049*	(-3.62)
Peru	-0.071*	(-6.83)	-0.065*	(-6.31)
Paraguay	-0.068*	(-5.45)	-0.054*	(-4.49)
Chile	-0.028*	(-2.71)	-0.031*	(-2.92)
Brazil	0.018	(1.56)	0.008	(0.70)
Venezuela	-0.074*	(-6.36)	-0.086*	(-7.70)
Argentina	-0.073*	(-6.25)	-0.076*	(-6.43)
Haiti	-0.113*	(-9.21)	-0.064*	(-5.15)
Jamaica	-0.146*	(-10.49)	-0.128*	(-9.99)
Belize	-0.136*	(-11.33)	-0.124*	(-10.47)
Constant	0.006	(0.55)	0.002	(0.18)
R-Squared	0.067		0.111	
Number of Obs.	31832		30747	

\* p<0.05