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Social Capital in the Americas: Participation in Religious Groups

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Religious organizations are considered by some as important tools for the generation of civic engagement. Drawing on James Coleman's work on social capital, Greeley (1997) has argued that participation in religious structures not only affects religious institutions but also non-religious life as well. Several authors have found a strong link between religious participation and civic engagement (Lockhart 2005; Smidt 1999). However, Putnam (1992) was skeptical about the contribution of some types of religious participation to social capital and civic engagement, and some authors have found that certain types of religious affiliations contribute to social problems such as discrimination and residential segregation (Blanchard 2007).

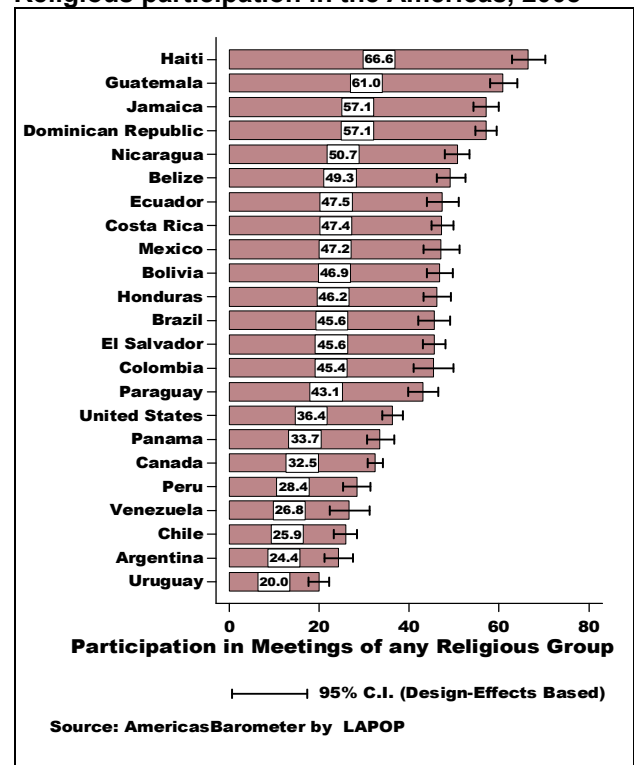
In any case, while the nature and magnitude of the relationship may be debated, few doubt that religious participation has some impact on social life. This new edition of *Insights* assesses the levels of

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religious participation in the Americas as a form of social capital, whether positive or not, and is based in the 2008 AmericasBarometer of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)¹. This survey was carried out in twenty-three countries in the Americas with a total of 38,053 respondents.² Religious participation was one of several types of groups and organizations about which respondents were first prompted with the type of group and then asked a question as follows:

CP6. Meetings of any religious organization? Do you attend them at least once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year, or never?³

Figure 1
Religious participation in the Americas, 2008



The item measures involvement in social events that have a religious profile. It is important to note,

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found in: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications. The data in 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 1 percent.

however, that such participation can involve from attendance to religious services to participation in community-church initiatives. Figure 1 shows results based on this question, after converting the responses to a 0-to-100 scale, where 100 represents the highest level of religious participation (at least once a week) and 0 the lowest (none).

According to Figure 1, Caribbean countries (Haiti, Jamaica, and Dominican Republic), in addition to Guatemala, show the highest levels of religious participation, whereas three of the countries in the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay) are found at the bottom of the ranking in religious participation. Most of the countries fall in the intermediate levels with respect to religious participation, whereas the U.S., Panama, Canada, Peru, and Venezuela rank near the bottom.

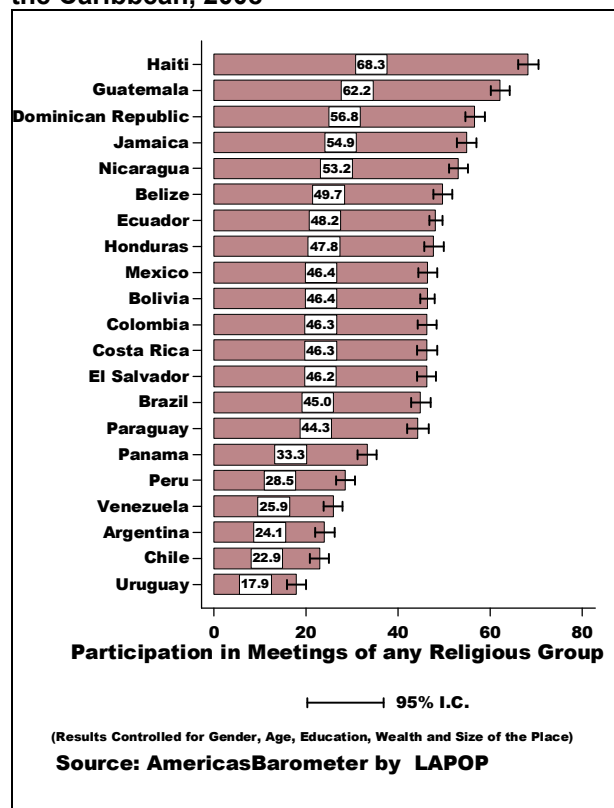
But since Haiti and Guatemala are some of the poorest countries in the Americas, and the South Cone countries are usually identified as the more developed in Latin America, these results suggest that religious participation might be related with the levels of development.

Therefore, a new look at the results of religious participation controlling for socio-economic and demographic characteristics is necessary, and so an analysis including variables such as gender, age, education, and personal wealth was performed. This analysis removed the U.S. and Canada because the high levels of socioeconomic development in those countries make them outliers.⁴ As can be seen in Figure 2, the results only change slightly, with the same countries making the top and the bottom of the ranking.

The former means that individual variables are not enough to explain the variations of religious participation across Latin America, and that it may be necessary to analyze the data taking into consideration contextual variables. The next section explores the determinants of religious participation using individual and country-level variables.

⁴ Analyses in this paper were conducted using Stata v10, and they have been adjusted to consider the effects of complex sample designs.

Figure 2
Religious Participation after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



The Determinants of Religious Participation

Religious participation may be influenced by several factors. In this report we explore not only individual characteristics but also personal experiences, such as crime and corruption victimization, and political engagement. The hypothesis in the cases of victimization is that people who have been victims of crime and corruption may turn to higher levels of religious participation as a way to cope with the insecurity produced by the victimization events. We do not expect reverse causality with, for example, criminals or bribe-seekers selecting their victims from among those who are more involved with religious organizations. In the case of political involvement, people interested in politics might be also more involved in religious activities given the close link between political and religious participation. However, most of the studies on this issue have focused in the impact of religious

involvement on political engagement (see, for example, Camp 1994 and Patterson 2005).

In addition, we also explore whether contextual variables, specifically country wealth and development, also affect religious participation. Hence, the analysis was carried out using a Hierarchical Linear Model, which combines individual and contextual (national) variables in predicting religious participation.

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

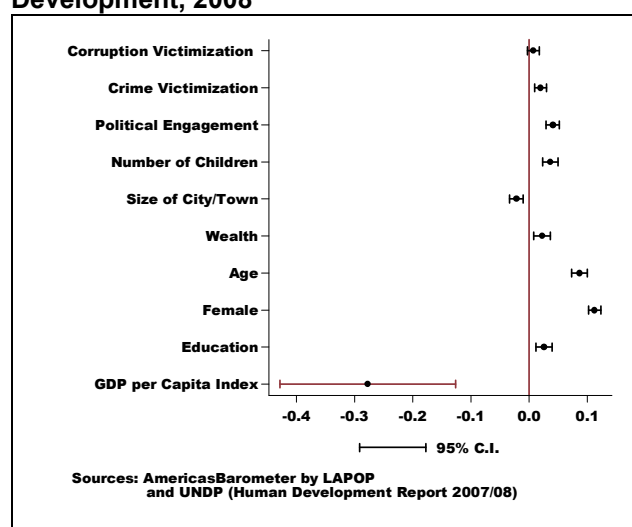
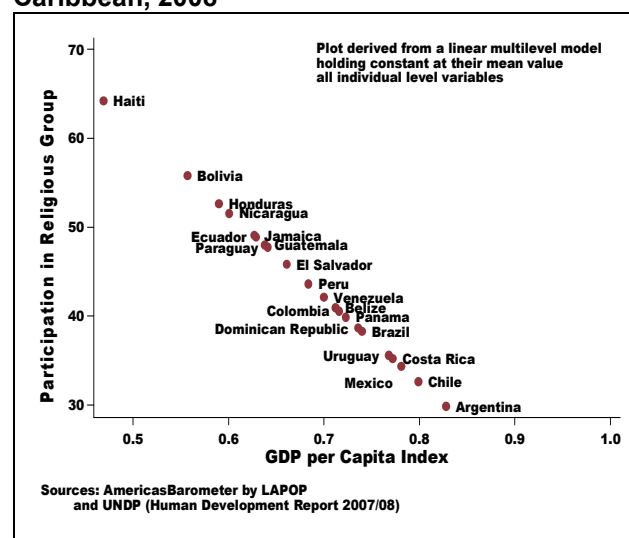


Figure 3 shows the results of this statistical analysis. Religious participation is higher among the well-educated, women, the older population and the better-off. It also increases among those who live in small towns and rural areas and among those who have many children. Crime victimization and political engagement also bolster participation in religious meetings.⁵ The most interesting finding, though, comes when examining the effect of country wealth, measured through country GDP per capita index. According to the results, attendance at religious meetings decreases in richer countries. In other words, the richer the country is, the less religious participation it has, all other variables being held constant.

⁵ However, it is important to consider that the latter relationship may operate the other way around: religious participation may lead to political engagement.

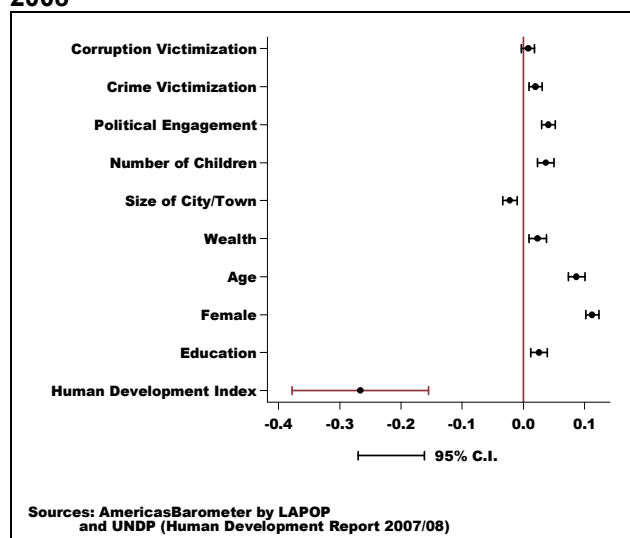
This result can be clearly seen in Figure 4. This graph shows the predicted scores of religious participation in each country according to GDP per capita. The poorest countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Haiti, Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua) exhibit the highest scores on the scale of participation in religious meetings. Conversely, the richest per capita countries in Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Costa Rica) tend to score low on religious participation. To put it in other way, if a citizen from Haiti with a given set of socio-economic characteristics were to move to Mexico, Chile or Argentina, *ceteris paribus*, and none of his/her individual characteristics were to change, the probability of this person participating in religious groups would be at least 30 points lower than if this individual were to remain in Haiti.

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



Similar results are obtained when citizen participation in religious meetings is regressed on the Human Development Index 2005. As shown in figures 5 and 6, human development, measured using the UNDP country-level index, is negatively related to citizen participation in religious meetings. In other words, participation in religious activities is negatively related to the country levels of social and economic development.

Figure 5
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Religious Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of Human Development, 2008

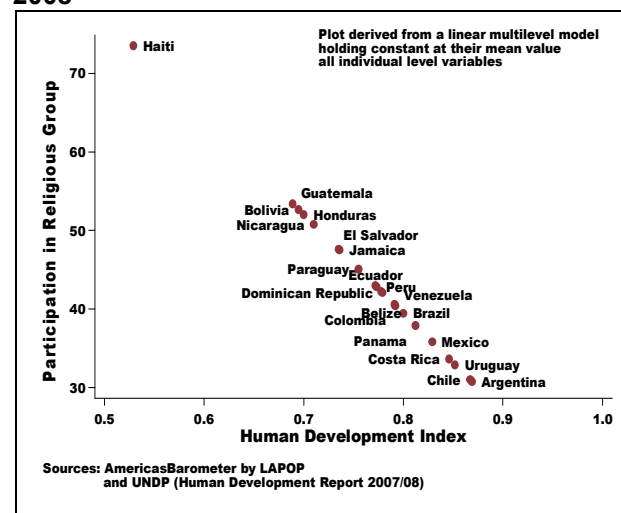


Such findings indicate that, in this case, contextual conditions operate in an opposite direction compared to similar individual-level variables. Despite the positive effect of *personal* wealth on religious participation, *country-level* social development and well-being tend to depress religious involvement in the Americas. In other words, better-off people may participate more in religious activities, but churches and religious centers seem to attract fewer people in richer and developed societies than in poorer countries.

In sum, the results of the Americas Barometer 2008 show that to the degree to which citizens participate in religious meetings depends on a variety of individual-level characteristics. Women, the elderly, the more educated, and wealthy people tend to attend religious activities more frequently; victims of crime and corruption also seem to seek out more opportunities for religious involvement. However, an interesting finding is that religious participation is significantly higher in those poor and developing societies. Does this mean that religious involvement helps to overcome the strains imposed by harsh living conditions in poor societies? It might not be that simple, since the data also show that the better-off people are more active in religious participation than deprived citizens, precisely in those developing countries.

Rather, these results might be signaling complex social processes, where –in the vein of Inglehart and Norris (2004)– social and economic development create conditions for different attitudes toward religious participation despite the particular characteristics of citizens.

Figure 6
The Impact of Human Development on Religious Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



Discussion

Instead of policy implications in the short term, these results call for a discussion over the research agenda on religious participation and its impact on social capital. We therefore need to ask questions regarding how religious activities can be made most beneficial for development and civic engagement. Given that participation rates tend to be higher in poorer countries, religious organizations may be one feasible resource for improving economic, and political, conditions in those same places. The fact that religious participation in Latin America is higher among better-off citizens living in deprived and developing societies also calls for more scholarly attention. We need to understand better these seemingly opposing relationships, and then we can proceed to determine their implications for future development and democracy.

Religious participation is one of the most common forms of citizen participation in the region, and attitudes and social behaviors toward religion have

been changing significantly in the last three decades. The diffusion of evangelical Pentecostalism along with the retreat of Catholicism in many Latin America countries has produced new forms of religious participation. These fresh types of religious activism are probably changing the way social capital is constructed in the region. Thus, a final avenue for future research would concern attempts to understand better the consequences of such transformations and the influence they might have on current and future development policies.

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