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Trust in Electoral Commissions¹

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The “minimalist,” Schumpeterian conception of democracy suggests that for a system to be democratic “rulers must be selected by free and fair elections” (see: Schumpeter 1943; Przeworski et al. 1999; Diamond 1999). To understand the seriousness of these “stretch” requirements, Pastor (1999) argues that the conduct of free and fair elections requires significant organization, training, administration, and oversight. Who, then, is charged of the electoral responsibilities that are at least partly needed to ensure free and fair elections in liberal democracies? In various developed countries, such as the U.S. and the U.K., elections are administered by local institutions dependent of government offices (Pastor 1999). Citizens in these countries usually take for granted that the electoral process is honest and impartial. In developing countries, however, the administration of elections resides in normatively independent *Electoral Commissions*. This independence from government offices is, perhaps, a mechanism

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>

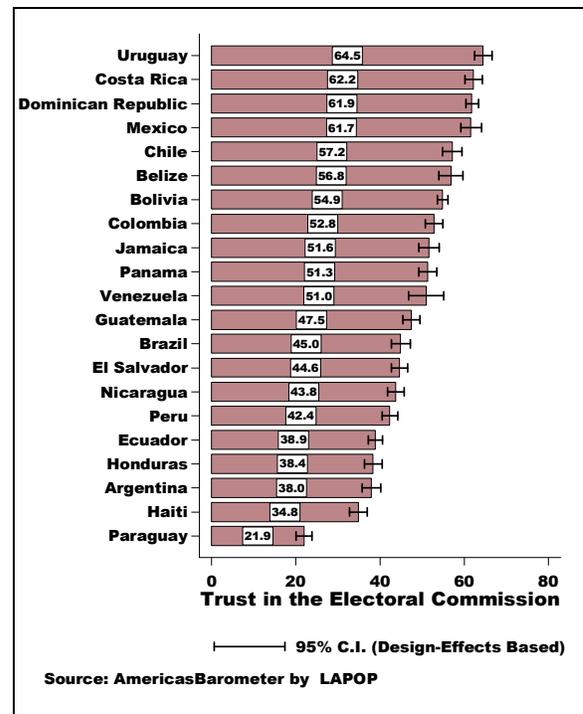
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intended to avoid any possible bureaucratic manipulation of elections that may hurt the credibility of the electoral system.

This *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* report examines the extent to which people in Latin America and the Caribbean trust these electoral commissions and explores the main determinants of the levels of trust. We query the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys.² In this survey 34,521 respondents from 21 nations were asked the next question:³

B11. To what extent do you trust the Electoral Commission?⁴

Figure 1.
Average Trust in Electoral Commissions in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



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.

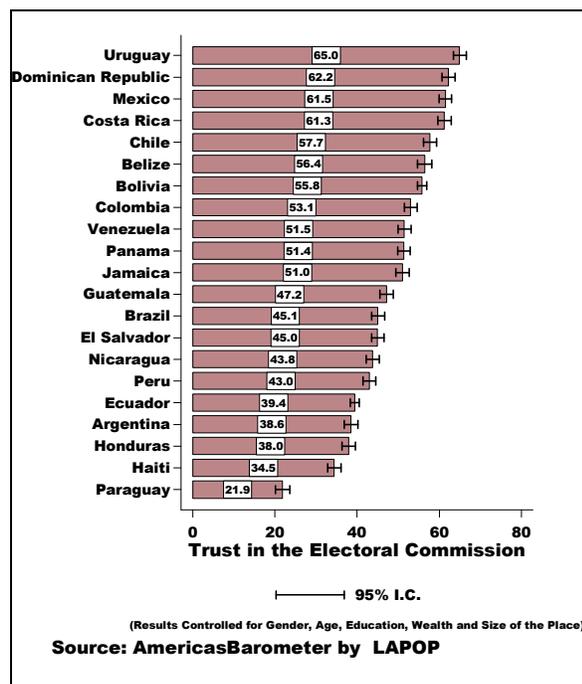
³ This question was neither asked in Canada nor in the U.S.

⁴ The proper name of the Electoral Commission was used in each country (i.e. Supreme Electoral Tribunal in Ecuador).

Respondents placed their trust on a 1-7 scale, where 1 meant 'not at all' and 7 meant 'a lot'. These responses were recalibrated on a 0-100 scale in order to make comparisons across questions and survey waves easier.⁵ Figure 1 shows national averages for the 21 countries in the sample.⁶

It is striking to note that there is a range of variation of at least 40 out of 100 possible points in trust in the Latin American and Caribbean countries. At the highest extreme, countries like Uruguay, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic fall between 61.9 and 64.5, well above the regional mean of 48.56 points. At the lowest extreme, countries like Argentina, Haiti and Paraguay fall between 21.9 and 38.0 well below the regional mean.

Figure 2.
Average Trust in Electoral Commissions after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



How much of this variation across countries emerges from the variation in the socioeconomic

⁵ Non-response for this question was 5.78%.

⁶ In a previous report (IO801) we examined trust in political parties.

and demographic characteristics of the populations of these countries? When the data are controlled for gender, age, educational achievement and household wealth, as they are in Figure 2, the results somewhat vary relative to the ranking displayed in Figure 1.

This variation may be due to possible confounding effects of the socio-economic and demographic individual characteristics on trust, as well as any other confounding factors at the country-level. For this reason, it is imperative to conduct a more rigorous statistical analysis. In this paper, we fit a multi-level model in order to determine not only the impact of individual socio-economic and demographic factors, but also the effects of variation in the country-levels of democracy across countries.

Do Contextual Factors matter?

What explains variation in trust in electoral commissions? In addition to socio-economic and demographic factors at the individual level, we believe that the level of democracy, as measured by Freedom House, affects the levels of trust in electoral commissions. Political systems that score high in the inverted Freedom House Index "enable people to participate freely in the political process through the right to vote, compete for public office and elect representatives who have a decisive impact on public policies and are accountable to the electorate" (Freedom House 2009).⁷ Thus, an institutional design of this sort should increase the levels of trust citizens have on their electoral commissions (Hetherington, 1998; Miller et al. 1999 and Norris, 1999).

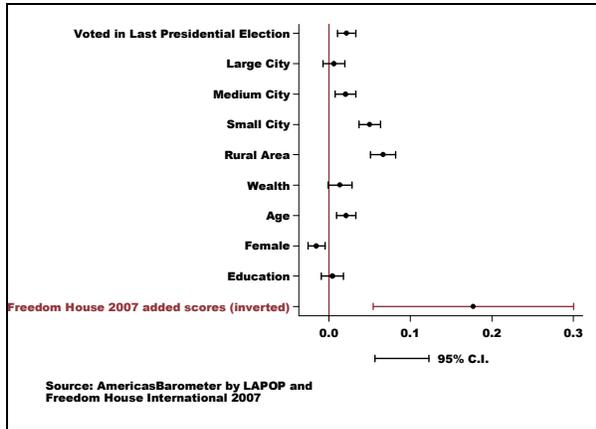
In Figure 3, both the individual characteristics of respondents and the level of democracy, measured by the Freedom House 2007 added scores (inverted) are studied.⁸

⁷ For more information, visit www.freedomhouse.org

⁸ This analysis is carried out using multi-level regression techniques (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Raudenbush, et al. 2004), as implemented by LAPOP on STATA 10. The model simultaneously takes into account both individual and country-level (i.e., contextual) factors, and produces correct regression estimates that are impossible with standard OLS regression.

Figure 3.

A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Trust in Electoral Commissions in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of Democracy, 2008



It can be observed in Figure 2 that sex, age, size of city, and electoral turnout at the individual-level; and democracy, as measured by Freedom House at the country-level are statistically significant. 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 if it falls to the left, it indicates a negative contribution. The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients (i.e., “beta weights”).

Among the individual-characteristics, sex, age, size of city, and electoral turnout, have a positive impact on trust in electoral commissions. Specifically, men’s trust is higher than women’s trust, and older individuals also report higher confidence in electoral commissions. However, the demographic variable “size of city” has a more substantive effect than the socio-economic variables. For this reason, we divided the demographic variable into five groups: Rural Area, Small City, Medium City, Large City and National Capital. We found that individuals residing in rural areas trust much more the electoral commission than those living in large cities or at the national capital.⁹ Finally, those individuals who voted in

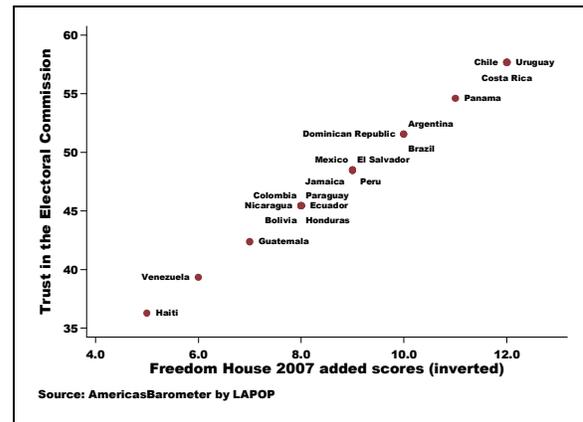
⁹ “National capital” is used as the base category in the model.

the last presidential election expressed higher levels of trust than those who did not vote. Even though we admit that this is an important correlation, we must recognize that this relationship is highly endogenous and it needs a separate study in order to determine the most proper direction of causality.

In this model, we find that the level of democracy (as reported by Freedom House in 2007) is a statistically relevant country-level factor that explains some of the variation of trust in electoral commissions across countries. The Freedom House Index is a measure of freedom that is widely used as a proxy for the level of democracy in the scholarly literature. According to Freedom House, it measures two broad categories: civil liberties and political rights.¹⁰ Thus, it becomes evident from Figure 3 that citizens’ trust in electoral commissions is higher precisely in those countries that are able to guaranty political rights and civil liberties to their citizenry. The specific effects of national contexts are highlighted in Figure 4.

Figure 4.

Democracy and Trust in Electoral Commissions in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



For example, if a Haitian with a given set of socio-economic and demographic characteristics were to migrate from Haiti to Uruguay or Chile, all other things being equal, and none of her individual characteristics such as education, household wealth, turnout, etc. were to change, that person’s trust in the electoral commission

¹⁰ This information was obtained at www.freedomhouse.org

would increase, on average, by nearly 25 points on a 0-100 scale.

Note, however, that the predicted line above fits the countries that would have been outliers in a regular scatter plot. This is the reason why the placement of Paraguay and Argentina, for example, appear to be inconsistent with the rankings presented in Figures 1 and 2. Nevertheless, the placement of most countries (the non-outliers) is consistent with what we observed in the national averages depicted earlier, stressing the robustness of our findings.

Policy Implications

Since trust in the results provided by electoral commissions in emerging democracies, at the extreme, can make the difference between a peaceful governmental transition and a violent coup d'état, it may be natural to ask how trust in these institutions can be improved. Our analysis shows that political rights and civil liberties play a preponderant role in the legitimacy of elections. On the political rights side, enlarging the enfranchisement of people and allowing them to freely choose from different alternatives in competitive elections and join political parties and organizations, may increase political trust. On the civil liberties side, securing individuals' right to voice and association, strengthening the rule of law, individual rights and individuality, may increase institutional legitimacy. At the individual level, focusing efforts to increase trust among individuals residing in large cities and at the national capital seems to be also relevant to increase institutional legitimacy.

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