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The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2012: Towards Equality of Opportunity – Executive Summary

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Executive Summary. In 2012, the Latin American Public Opinion Project's AmericasBarometer surveyed over 41,000 individuals in 26 countries. This *Insights* report presents the executive summary of our newly published regional report, *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2012: Towards Equality of Opportunity*. In the full report, we analyze responses to new questions and standard core modules in order to develop a portrait of public opinion in the Americas. In the 2012 round, a special emphasis was placed on issues related to equality of opportunity. Interested readers can find the full report at our website (www.americasbarometer.org). All data from the AmericasBarometer series are also available at that same website.

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www.AmericasBarometer.org

In the 2012 round of the AmericasBarometer survey by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), we examine inequalities that affect the quality, and at the extreme the stability, of social, economic, and political life in the Americas¹. We draw on an extensive set of questions from the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP. The study covers 26 countries, making it a truly regional survey project.² Our report, *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2012: Towards Equality of Opportunity*³, complements our series of country-specific reports for the 2012 AmericasBarometer by offering a comparative perspective on inequalities in experiences and attitudes across both individuals and countries. In the first part of the report, we pay particular attention to inequalities by gender, race/ethnicity (including skin tone), and parents' background and social status, as well as attitudes toward gay individuals, those on welfare, and those who are disabled. Beyond objectively measured inequalities, we consider attitudes towards the political and economic involvement of historically marginalized groups as well as policies to remedy inequalities. We also examine how inequalities are related to engagement in and attitudes toward the political system. In the latter part of the report, we broaden our

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights Series* can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

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

² Funding for the 2012 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), and Vanderbilt University.

³ The report was written by a team of researchers: Ryan E. Carlin (Georgia State University), Fred Batista Pereira (Vanderbilt), Mollie Cohen (Vanderbilt), Nicole Hinton (Vanderbilt), Gregory J. Love (University of Mississippi), Mason Moseley (Vanderbilt), Mariana Rodriguez (Vanderbilt), Matthew M. Singer (University of Connecticut), Amy Erica Smith (Iowa State University), Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Vanderbilt), and Daniel Zizumbo-Colunga (Vanderbilt). The report was edited by Mitchell A. Seligson, Amy Erica Smith, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister.

Figure 1. 2012 AmericasBarometer Coverage



perspective to consider issues related to government performance in key areas (the economy, crime, and corruption); local government; and democratic legitimacy.

In Part I, we examine (in)equalities of opportunity in the Americas. In the first chapter, we describe economic and social inequalities by demographic characteristics. This look at the 2012 AmericasBarometer reveals important inequalities in levels of education, wealth, income, and food insecurity. Individuals with darker skin tones, on average, have fewer years of education and lower personal incomes than do those with the lightest skin tones. Women who work have lower personal incomes on average than do men, even after taking education into account. We further find that both those with darker skin tones and women are at greater risk of food insecurity in the Americas. Additionally, we find that family background (measured by mother's educational attainment) is strongly

related to how well or poorly citizens fare in the Americas.

Turning to public opinion, we find that many individuals across the Americas support the general notion of government action to reduce inequalities. With the exception of the United States, the average citizen in every country of the Americas strongly agrees that government should implement policies to reduce income inequalities.

But on the other hand, when we ask about policies targeting particular groups we find more mixed public opinion. For example, average support for race-/skin tone-based affirmative action programs hovers just below the neutral point across the Americas as a whole. The average citizen is significantly supportive in eight countries, while the average citizen is at least somewhat opposed to affirmative action in seven others. We also find evidence of a welfare stigma, seen in negative views of those who receive social assistance, in a number of countries. Thus, there exists some tension in public opinion in the Americas: while some favor government intervention to reduce inequalities, others adopt negative views of racial targeting as well as those who receive government assistance. Further, we find evidence that discriminatory attitudes underwrite some inequalities in the Americas. For example, in 13 countries at least 20% of the population blames poverty among dark-skinned individuals on culture. In addition, approximately 30% of citizens of the Americas agree at least somewhat with the notion that men should have priority over women in the labor market. At the same time, there is significant variation in experiences and attitudes across the Americas. Chapter One thus provides insight into the notion that governments and publics in the Americas that

wish to create more equalities of opportunity for their citizens face both levels of support and constraints that vary by country.

In Chapter Two we measure participation among different groups in electoral politics and civil society. We find that self-reported turnout rates by gender have converged over time: in 2012, there is no evidence of a significant gender gap in electoral participation by gender. We do find, however, that gender roles are related to other forms of civic and political engagement. Across the Americas as a whole, female homemakers participate more than men and female non-homemakers in religious and parent associations, though this participation is not always reflected in leadership roles in those or other organizations. Men, on the other than, are more likely to participate in community improvement organizations as both members and leaders, more likely to try to persuade others of their political views, and more likely to work for political campaigns.

The 2012 AmericasBarometer contains interviews with 41,632 individuals from 26 countries. Each national sample consists of a minimum of 1,500 respondents and margins of error are +/- 2.5%.

Beyond gender gaps, we examine participatory inequalities across socioeconomic groups and racial lines. The good news is that on average we find little evidence of differences in participation across different racial groups, though in a number of countries citizens with darker skin are actually likely to participate *more* than others in political campaigns. The not-so-good news, however, is that inequalities are much larger and more persistent across lines of social class: those who are wealthier and better educated participate much more in most all forms of politics than the least educated and the poorest citizens.

Because attitudes can create barriers to participation in political and civic activities, we also examine public opinion with respect to participation by different types of individuals. While average views tend against

discrimination, we nonetheless find that approximately 1 in 4 individuals across the Americas believes that men make better political leaders. But, at the same time, among those who make a distinction by gender, individuals tend to report that female politicians are less corrupt and more capable of managing the economy. In addition, we find that 10% of citizens across the Americas express discriminatory attitudes towards dark-skinned political leaders, while 20% disagree with allowing the disabled to run for office, and 51% disapprove of allowing gays to do so.

In Chapter Three, we relate social, economic and political differences in the Americas to measures of public contentment and democratic political stability. We assess how experiences of discrimination are associated with internal efficacy (evaluations of one's own ability in politics) and external efficacy (belief that politicians care about one's interests). Average rates of self-reported discrimination in government offices or public places are low. However, people who self-identify as black or indigenous are much more likely to report discrimination. Women are not more likely than men to report discrimination. Our analyses reveal that experiences of discrimination are associated with greater internal efficacy and lower amounts of external efficacy. Moreover, those who report higher rates of discrimination have lower levels of system support and support for democracy. Higher rates of self-reported discrimination are also associated with increased rates of protesting – almost double the rates of protesting compared to those not reporting being a victim of discrimination.

Part II broadens the focus on the 2012 round of the AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP. In this section, we examine issues related to governance, local government performance, and support for democracy in the Americas. The introduction to Part II, written by the authors of that section, provides a detailed overview. We discuss just some of the findings here.

Chapter Four examines government performance on the economy, crime, and corruption, all of which are posited to influence levels of life satisfaction. Overall, citizens of the Americas perceive government economic performance as improving: evaluations of one's personal and national economic well-being continue to trend upward in 2012. Crime rates have dropped on average across the Americas in 2012 (compared to 2010), but experiences differ significantly by country. The same is true when we consider concerns about corruption. For example, 32% of Hondurans report that issues related to corruption and government constitute the most important problem facing the country, whereas less than 5% of the populations of Nicaragua, Uruguay, and El Salvador express a similar concern. Overall, across the Americas, perceptions of corruption have decreased somewhat but remain high; actual *experiences* with corruption (rates of being asked for bribes to access public services) increased somewhat in comparison to rates found in the 2010 Americas Barometer survey. Nonetheless, and likely due in part to continued positive economic outcomes, life satisfaction is increasing in the Americas.

In Chapter Five, we focus on local government, examining citizens' participation and perceptions of its effectiveness and performance. The data reveal very low levels of participation and interaction with the local government as well as mediocre levels of satisfaction. There is great variation among countries: in Haiti, 21% of respondents report attending a town meeting in the last twelve months, while only 4% of Chileans report having done the same. Higher attendance rates are associated with higher requests of the local government, but when requests are voiced, only a limited number of citizens feel those requests were resolved. We find fairly consistent results on these measures in 2012 compared to earlier time periods. We also find that lower trust in the local government is associated with low performance ratings and low participation rates.

Chapter Six addresses democratic attitudes in the Americas. Analysis of the AmericasBarometer data reveals that the following attitudes have increased over time: trust in democratic institutions, support for rule of law, and support for the political system. Political tolerance and support for democracy have been consistently high, for the most part, over time. Support for democracy is highest in Uruguay, Venezuela, and Argentina and lowest in Honduras. Moreover, the analyses reveal that those who benefit from the current system support it; they are also, however, less tolerant of political dissent (that is, of the rights of regime critics to participate in politics). The analysis affirms that increasing the capacity of state institutions with respect to economic performance, reducing crime, eliminating corruption, and maintaining

transparency will deepen the attitudinal and normative foundations of democracy.

The complete comparative report for the AmericasBarometer 2012 study, and all country-specific reports and our *Insights* series reports, are freely available at www.americasbarometer.org. As well, the data from the 2012 round of the AmericasBarometer, and all previous AmericasBarometer studies, are available free of charge at that same website. Individuals and institutions can also select to subscribe to receive premium access to the data, codes, and technical support.