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Inequality Matters: The Role of Education in Defining Social Class in Colombia vs. Uruguay

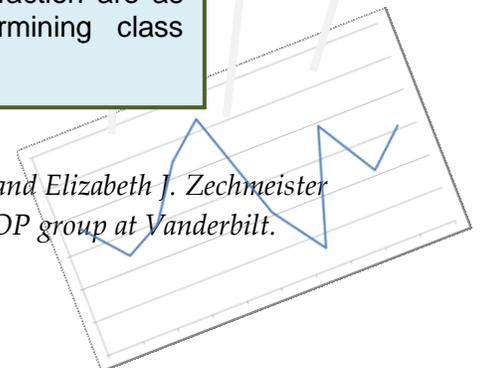
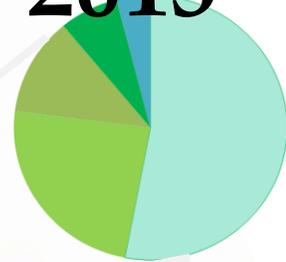
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Executive Summary. Despite the high levels of inequality in Latin America, we know very little about how citizens perceive themselves in terms of social class. Using a question on subjective social class included in the AmericasBarometer 2012, this *Insights* report compares two countries that represent opposites in the regional distribution of inequality: the more egalitarian Uruguay and one of the most unequal countries in the world, Colombia. We explore how Colombians and Uruguayans identify on the social ladder and the determinants of this perception. As expected, we find that those who are wealthier and more educated place themselves in higher classes. Yet, the role of education varies. It is more relevant in Colombia than in Uruguay, where access to education is more equal. Moreover, ascribed factors such as a darker skin color and living in a rural area are related to lower class self identification in the more unequal Colombia, but not in Uruguay. Finally, we present evidence that other perceptions such as the evaluation of one's current and past personal economic situations or general life satisfaction are as important as more objective measures of well-being in determining class perceptions in these two countries.

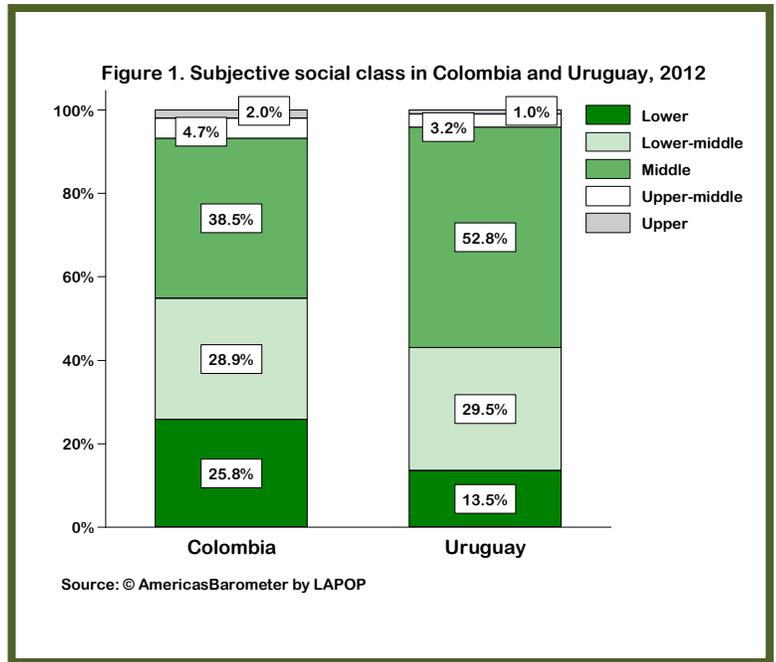
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Latin America is the most unequal region of the world in terms of income distribution (Hoffman and Centeno 2003). Yet, we know little about how people locate themselves on the social ladder. Research on class perceptions or subjective social status, popular in English speaking countries, has not received the same attention in the region. Hence, we do not know whether objective measures of inequality mirror how people perceive themselves in terms of class (but see Zechmeister, Sellers, and Seligson 2012).¹ Part of this lack of attention comes from the absence of data on class perceptions.

Fortunately, the 2012 AmericasBarometer included a question on this topic.² In this *Insights* report, we use these data to understand what determines subjective social class, meaning where citizens identify on the social ladder. It is important to investigate the determinants of such subjective class identity, as one's identification as upper or lower class has an independent impact on various political behaviors and even health outcomes, both physical and psychological (Adler et al., 2000; Huckfeldt, 1984; Ostrove et al., 2000; Singh-Manoux et al., 2003). We compare two countries at opposite extremes of income inequality: Colombia, one of the most unequal countries in Latin America (and the world) and Uruguay, one of the most egalitarian countries in the region.³ Our expectation is that determinants of social class identification may vary across less and more equal contexts. And, in fact, we find that



education matters more for social class perceptions in relatively unequal Colombia compared to more equal Uruguay.

Although most research on class perceptions has been conducted at the national level there are some examples of cross-national comparisons (Wright 1997). In our case, comparing citizens' self perceptions of class in two countries with distinct income distribution contexts will provide leverage in understanding the impact such contexts can have on how individuals perceive themselves.

In this *Insights* report, we show how Colombians and Uruguayans perceive themselves in terms of social class, focusing on the following question from the 2012 round of the AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP:

MOV1. Would you describe yourself as belonging to the upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, or lower class?

Figure 1 shows the distribution of class perceptions in Colombia and Uruguay.⁴ There

⁴ The response rate for this question is high for both countries: 99% in Colombia and 98% in Uruguay. The

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 Colombia has a Gini index of 55.9, while in Uruguay it is 45.3. A Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality. Data from 2010, source: World Bank.

are no important differences in the upper end of the distribution. Self-identification with the upper and upper middle classes is low in both countries. Yet, two main differences stand out. While in Colombia the proportion of people who think of themselves as middle class is 38.5%, in Uruguay the proportion reaches more than half of the population (52.8%). And that difference is in large part due to the fact that Colombia has a much bigger group of people who consider themselves lower class (25.8% versus 13.5%). This picture, based on subjective perception, mirrors objective data, given the higher levels of poverty and inequality in Colombia.

Predictors of Subjective Social Class

From Marx onwards there has been little agreement about how class consciousness works. Do people identify themselves with the class they belong to according to objective measures of occupation or education, or not? Evidence is mixed. In the U.S. context, Jackman (1979) found education, income and occupation impact individuals' perceptions of their social class. But, she argues, people do not only consider their current situation when faced with a question such as "What class do you belong to?" Assessments of past class trajectories and future expectations of well-being matter as well. Jackman also found that a husband's occupation affects his wife's class identification, so relational assessments with members of the family may matter as well.

In this section we examine the factors that influence subjective social class. We first include some indicators of the socioeconomic well-being of the person usually associated with objective social class, such as quintile of wealth⁵ and education.⁶ Occupation is a "usual

question was asked of only half the sample (via a split sample design) in Colombia.

⁵ The variable QUINTALL is created based on an index of household goods. For more information on the creation of the wealth quintiles, see Córdova (2009).

suspect" in the definition of class perception (Pampel and Vanneman 1977), but we need comparable data on specific occupational categories for that type of analysis. Given that those data are not available in the AmericasBarometer 2012, we only use one category in relation to occupation: unemployment, with the expectation that being unemployed will lower class perceptions.⁷

To account for the person's overall assessment of her economic situation (following Jackman, 1979) we included evaluations of one's current personal economic prospects as well as an evaluation of her past economic conditions.⁸ The hypothesis here is that those who evaluate more positively their economic situation are more likely to identify with upper classes, all else equal.

Based on previous research that shows a positive relationship between income and life satisfaction (Corral 2011; Lora 2008; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; Di Tella and MacCulloch 2008), we also include life satisfaction as a predictor of subjective social class.⁹ It is possible that individuals with higher levels of satisfaction consider themselves as part of an upper class, other things being equal. However, Lora (2008) finds that despite the enormous income inequality prevalent in Latin America,

⁶ ED: "How many years of schooling have you completed?"

⁷ We included a dummy for "unemployed," which takes the value of 1 if the respondent has no job but is looking for one and 0 otherwise. We considered a person to be unemployed if she was actively looking for a job (OCUP4A = 3).

⁸ Because of space constraints, LAPOP did not include questions about evaluations of future economic situations in the 2012 round. The questions we include are measured with IDIO1 and IDIO2 (recoded to a 0-100 scale). IDIO1: "How would you describe your overall economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad or very bad?" IDIO2: "Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?"

⁹ Measured with LS3 (recoded to a 0-100 scale). LS3: "To begin, in general how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say that you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?"

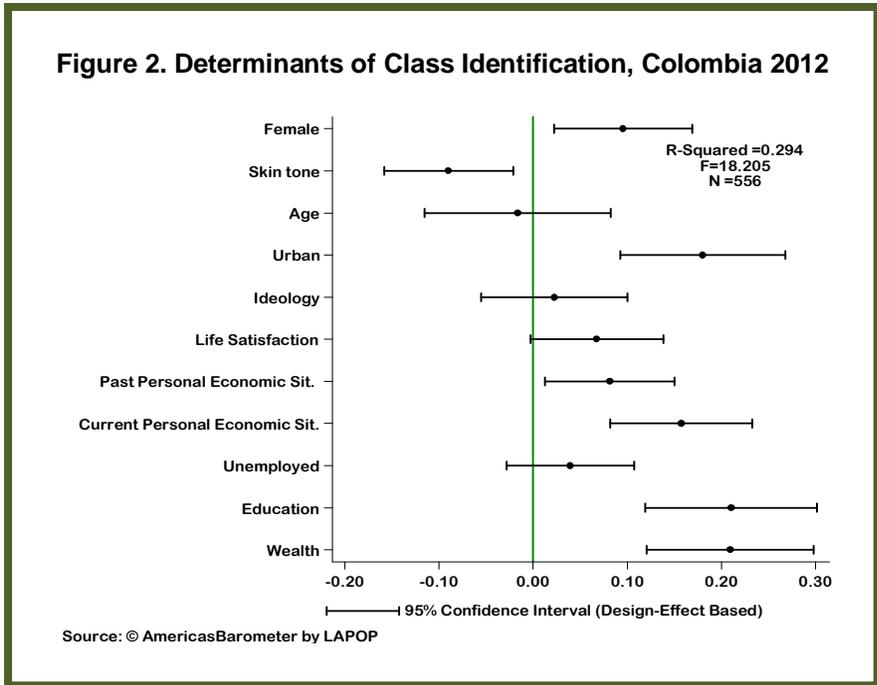
individuals from different income levels have surprisingly similar levels of satisfaction.¹⁰

Following the idea that people may consider things other than material conditions when placing themselves on the social ladder, we have included ideology as a predictor (1 is completely to the left and 10 is completely to the right).¹¹ We are here inverting class cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), which states that the social position that an individual has in a society determines his/her political preferences. Our hypothesis is that other (material) things being equal, those that lean to the left will not identify themselves with the upper classes because it would go against their egalitarian values.

We do not have information about family members to test, for example, partner and children's placement in relation to the household head's class, but we have included gender to see if there is a difference between women and men in their self-placement in terms of class (0 for male and 1 for female).

¹⁰ We acknowledge that causality, in this case, can also go in the opposite direction: being upper class could make you happier. However, with this model, we are testing the impact of life satisfaction on subjective social class.

¹¹ Measured with L1: "According to the meaning that the terms "left" and "right" have for you, and thinking of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale?" Because a fair number of respondents do not answer the left-right question and therefore are eliminated from analyses that rely on this direct measure, we also examined ideology as a series of distinct dummy variables, including one for those who do not answer the left-right question, and found no significant effect for any of these variables in either of our analyses. However, recovering the missing values on ideology in the Colombia analysis does cause life satisfaction to become statistically significant and perception of one's past personal economic situation to become statistically insignificant. Recovering the missing on ideology in this same way has no effect on the other measures included in the Uruguay analysis.



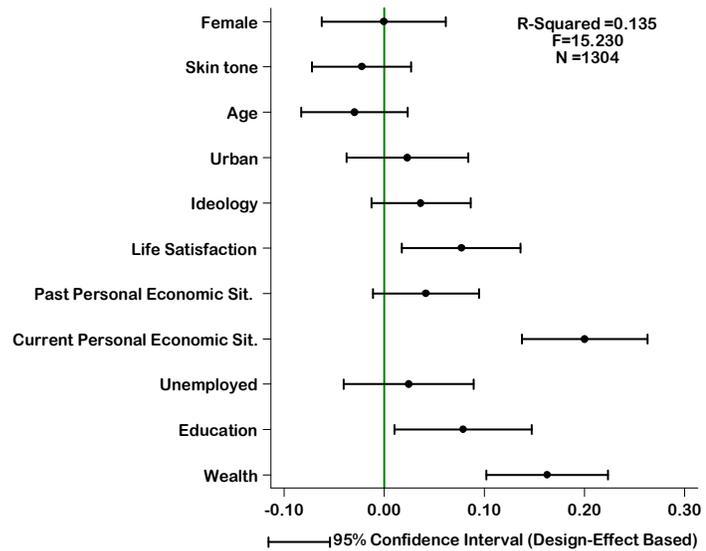
Other socio-demographic controls are age and place of residence (coded 0 for rural, and 1 for urban). We have also included skin color as an indicator of race. Experts consider this measure better than racial or ethnic self-identification for comparative purposes in inequality research in Latin America (Telles and Steele 2012).¹²

¹² Measured by COLORR, a variable which runs from 1 (lightest skin) to 11 (darkest skin). Skin tone is registered discretely by the interviewer, without asking, using a color chart.

The results of the linear regression models are shown in Figures 2 and 3 (see Appendix 1 for the regression table), which display standardized regression coefficients.¹³ Our dependent variable is social class identification, which takes the values of 1 for lower class, 2 for lower-middle, 3 for middle, 4 for upper-middle, and 5 for upper class. Each dot in the figures represents the estimated standardized coefficient, which captures the relative relationship of the identified factor with class identification. If a dot falls to the right of the vertical line at 0, its estimated effect on class identification is positive; if a dot falls to the left of the line, its estimated effect is negative. The horizontal bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals around these point estimates. We can be at least 95 percent confident that the effect is statistically significant if the horizontal bar does not cross the vertical line.

Results show commonalities and differences for the two countries. Wealth and education are significantly and positively associated with class perceptions. Yet, education has a smaller effect in Uruguay than it does in Colombia.¹⁴ This makes sense given that access to education is more widespread in the former country. Being unemployed, in turn, does not change

Figure 3. Determinants of Class Identification, Uruguay 2012



Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

class identification.¹⁵ Neither does age. In both countries, more positive evaluations of people’s current economic situation correspond to higher social class identifications. Contrary to what we expected, self-placement on the ideological scale is not a significant predictor. This issue deserves further attention given that in an exploratory analysis of respondents across all of Latin America, ideology emerges as an important predictor of one’s class identification

Some variables are significant only for Colombia. The first is gender. Colombian women tend to place themselves in a higher social class than men. We do not have any theory or hypothesis to explain this, so it remains a puzzle. Second, evaluations of past economic situations do affect positioning in the social ladder in the analysis presented in Figure 2. More positive evaluations correspond to

¹³ Given that our dependent variable varies only from 1 to 5, we also ran an ordered logit model. Results were substantively the same. All analyses were conducted with STATA v12 and results were adjusted for the complex sample design employed.

¹⁴ As a robustness check, we pooled the data for the two countries and ran a single analysis in which we included an interaction between “Uruguay” and the education measure; the interaction is significant and negative, affirming that the effect of education is statistically less powerful in Uruguay compared to Colombia.

¹⁵ In future work we hope that more specific occupational categories can be tested to account for the great theoretical relevance sociology gives to occupation in relation to class locations and perceptions.

identification with higher classes. Third, urban Colombians position themselves above their fellow countrymen who live in rural places. Finally, skin tone is significant, showing that the darker the respondent, the lower is his/her placement in the social structure. None of these variables achieves statistical significance in Uruguay.

In turn, life satisfaction turns out significant in Uruguay while not in Colombia (but see footnote 11). The more satisfied Uruguayans are with their lives, the higher they position themselves.

Conclusions

Colombians and Uruguayans are fairly class conscious, given the correspondence between measures of well-being and self-perception in terms of class. Those who are more educated and wealthier position themselves in higher classes. Yet, there is a striking difference in the role of education for subjective social class. While for Colombians education is a key factor determining class identification, it matters less for Uruguayans. This needs to be understood in the context of different levels of educational coverage and achievement in the two countries we compare. Education has more value and status when it is a scarce good, that is, in more unequal contexts.

A salient finding is the key role that some ascribed factors have in determining class perceptions in the more unequal Colombia. Rural and darker skinned Colombians locate themselves at lower social classes than fellow Colombians with the same education and wealth (and the other characteristics we control for). The first finding may relate to the wider gaps in that country between rural and urban areas, which may in turn cause a feeling of relative deprivation among rural populations. According to the last Human Development Report, rural areas in Colombia are much more vulnerable than urban areas (PNUD 2011).

The relation between skin tone and class perceptions shows the intersectionality of race and class. The lack of relationship in Uruguay remains a puzzle, given that in both countries there is evidence of racial inequalities (Bucheli and Scuro 2008; Rodríguez et al. 2008; Urrea and Viáfara 2007). More single country and comparative research is needed here to understand the complex ways in which race and class perceptions mutually influence each other.

One of the most interesting findings, however, relates to how, beyond these “objective” well-being and ascribed factors, other more subjective factors also affect how people understand their position in the class structure. Thus, better evaluations of one’s current economic situation increase respondents’ self ratings in terms of class. In addition, while the general assessment of life satisfaction matters in Uruguay, the evaluation of one’s past personal economic situation matters in Colombia. We recognize causality can work both ways between these evaluations and class perceptions. Thus we prefer to speak of associations between well-being and class identification.

We conclude that class perceptions are not mere mirrors of “objective” class positions. People consider other subjective aspects when they define themselves in terms of class, and some of those aspects vary by context. In addition, some objective factors such as education are valued differently in different contexts, in terms of their relevance for how people locate themselves in the social ladder. Finally, we show that ascribed factors not only impact inequality, as many others have demonstrated, but they can impact how people perceive themselves, as we show here.

In this brief paper we analyzed the determinants of self class identification for two countries. Given that the measure of social class self-identification was part of the 2012 AmericasBarometer core survey, we hope that scholars will conduct similar analyses for all

the countries in the LAPOP sample. We are also interested in understanding the relationship between these perceptions and other attitudes, perceptions and behaviors such as discrimination experiences and perceptions. We posit that perception of one's social class may be affected by a wide variety of experiences with fellow citizens and with public officials. It remains to be seen, however, whether these relationships exist in the data and whether they vary by country, as do some of the factors we have analyzed here.

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Appendix. Regression Results: Determinants of Class Perception

	Uruguay		Colombia	
Wealth	0.094***	(0.02)	0.145 ***	(0.03)
Education	0.016*	(0.01)	0.046***	(0.01)
Unemployed	0.051	(0.09)	0.207	(0.12)
Current Personal Economic Sit.	0.009***	(0.00)	.008 ***	(0.00)
Past Personal Economic Sit.	0.094	(0.06)	0.227*	(0.09)
Life satisfaction	0.003*	(0.00)	0.003	(0.00)
Ideology	0.011	(0.01)	0.009	(0.01)
Urban	0.069	(0.09)	0.424***	(0.10)
Age	-0.001	(0.00)	-0.001	(0.00)
Skin tone	0.014	(0.01)	-0.050**	(0.02)
Female	0.000	(0.05)	0.181*	(0.07)
Constant	1.271***	(0.18)	0.337	(0.31)
<i>Number of observations</i>	<i>1304</i>		<i>556</i>	
<i>Adjusted R-squared</i>	<i>0.13</i>		<i>0.29</i>	

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, ** p < .01; *** p < .001.
Standard errors in parenthesis.