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Low Levels of External Efficacy Can be Improved by Government Efforts to Deliver Better Outcomes

By Hannury Lee, Ginny Randall, and Jackson Vaught

with Mollie J. Cohen and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister
mollie.j.cohen@vanderbilt.edu
liz.zechmeister@vanderbilt.edu
Vanderbilt University

Main Findings:

- Average levels of external efficacy in most countries are low
- Education is not a significant predictor of external efficacy
- Age is positively correlated with external efficacy
- Perceptions of government performance and executive approval positively predict external efficacy: those who give the current administration better marks for its efforts on the economy, crime, and corruption report higher levels of external efficacy

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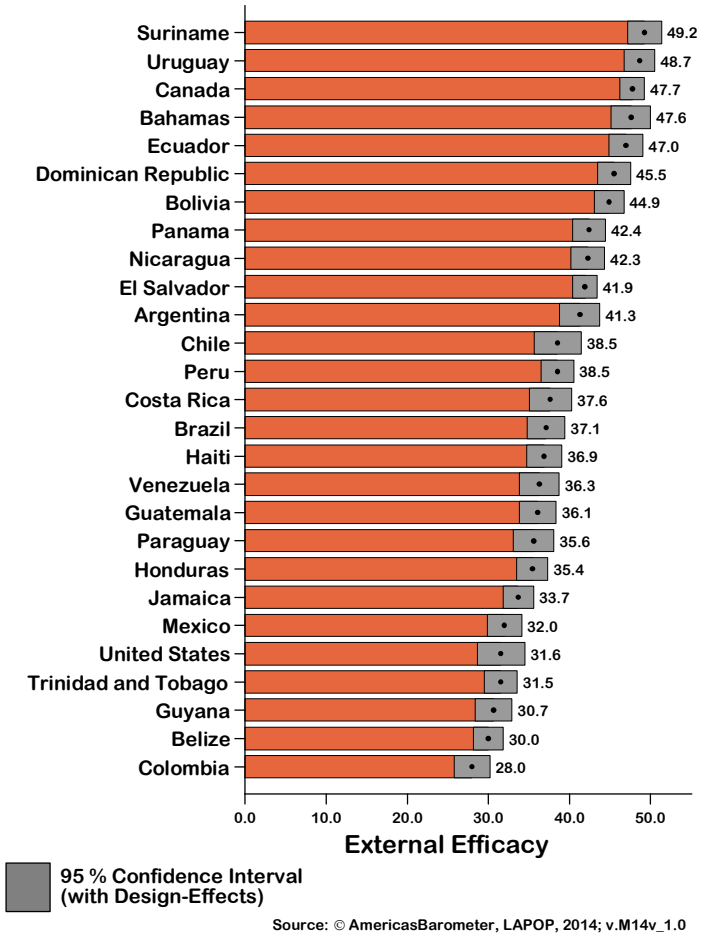
Democracy promises "continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens" (Dahl 1971, p. 1). Traditionally, democracy is thought to foster representative, responsive, and accountable government to and for its citizens. The concept of "external efficacy" captures the extent to which individuals believe their government meets this democratic ideal.[1]

External political efficacy matters because it provides insight into the extent to which the mass public believes the government is attentive to its interests. It also matters because it has consequences for how citizens participate in politics (e.g., Pollock 1983). The first step to understanding external efficacy is to develop a profile of individuals who perceive that the government listens to them. Such an analysis can identify factors that governments can consider when seeking to increase this aspect of democratic legitimacy within their borders.

In this *Insights* report,[2] we examine external efficacy in the Americas (with a focus on the Latin America and Caribbean region) using data from the 2014 AmericasBarometer.[3] Specifically, we assess data gathered from national surveys in 27 countries, in which 48,881 respondents were asked the following question:

EFF1: Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Figure 1. External Efficacy Scores (Averages on a 0-100 Scale)



Responses were recorded on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 corresponding to "strongly disagree" and 7 corresponding to "strongly agree." Those responses have been rescaled from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating more external efficacy.

Figure 1 shows average degrees of external efficacy across 27 countries. The country average score is noted as a dot and the gray area indicates the 95% confidence interval. Mean degrees of external efficacy range from 28.0 in Colombia to 49.2 in Suriname. It is interesting to note the substantial difference between Canada (47.7) and the U.S. (31.6), the two neighboring advanced industrialized democracies in North

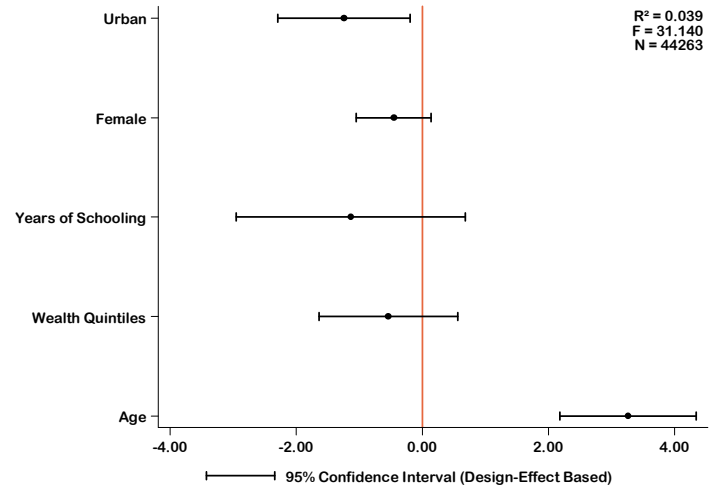
[1] In contrast, "internal efficacy" focuses on individuals' views of their personal capacity to engage in politics.

[2] 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.

[3] Funding for the 2014 round came mainly from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is produced solely by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of USAID or any other supporting agency.

America. This suggests that a country's wealth and age of democracy may not explain cross-national differences in efficacy. Importantly, the national averages for all countries are below the mid-point of 50, which represents a neutral response. From this, we can infer that there is a deficit of external efficacy in the region: on average, the mass public in the Americas does not tend to believe that political leaders care about what they, the people, think.

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of External Efficacy



Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of External Efficacy

Who is more likely to feel that the government listens to them? Research on the U.S. public has shown that those with more education are more likely to report higher levels of external efficacy (e.g., Pinkleton et al. 2012). We assess whether this finding holds in the Latin America and Caribbean region. We further examine the relationship between external efficacy and the following demographic and socio-economic variables: urban (versus rural) residence, gender (female vs. male), wealth, and age.[4]

Figure 2 illustrates the results of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model, which examines the predicted effects of urban/rural residence, gender, education, wealth quintiles, and age on external efficacy. Each independent variable is scaled from 0 to 1, so that the regression coefficient can be understood as the maximum effect that independent variable is predicted to have on the 0 to 100 efficacy scale. Non-standardized coefficients for each of the independent variables are indicated with a black dot attached to a line indicating the 95% confidence interval for that estimate. Coefficients that lie left of the red "0.00" line have negative relationship to the dependent variable, while those that are on the right of that line have a positive relationship; where the horizontal confidence interval line does not cross zero, the effect is statistically significant.

In the first place, education is not a significant predictor of external efficacy in the Latin America and Caribbean region. This is interesting because it suggests that the relationship between schooling and efficacy found in the U.S. may be unique to well-established, advanced industrialized settings. In addition, we find that gender and wealth are not statistically significant predictors of external efficacy. Place of residence is significant – such that those living in urban areas report lower

[4] Urban is a dummy variable, coded as 1 if the respondent lives in an urban region, and 0 if in a rural area. The gender dummy variable takes the 1 value if the respondent is female. The wealth measure is a five-category variable that is generated using a series of items about household possessions; for more information see Córdova 2009 (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0806en.pdf). Age is divided by cohort, with respondents grouped into the following categories: 16-25, 26-35, 36-45, 56-65, and 65+. The United States and Canada are excluded from all multivariate analyses presented here, given that the wealth measure is not available for these countries and given the focus in this series on the Latin America and Caribbean region.

degrees of external efficacy – but, the effect is substantively negligible.[5]

The analysis shows that the only statistically significant and substantively important demographic variable is age, which shows a positive correlation with external efficacy. An increase in age is associated with an increase in external efficacy; specifically, a shift in age from youngest to oldest results in an increase in external efficacy of just over three degrees. While not a tremendously large impact, it is important to keep in mind that levels of efficacy in general are low across the Americas and, from that perspective, an increase in even three degrees is meaningful.

[E]ducation is not a significant predictor of external efficacy in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

Evaluations of Government Performance and Executive Approval as Predictors of External Efficacy

At the start of this report, we indicated that external efficacy can be understood as related to the overarching concept of political legitimacy (on the latter, see Booth and Seligson 2009). But, is external efficacy relevant only to diffuse political support (that is, political legitimacy and related concepts) or might it also be related to specific support for incumbent administrations and policies? Existing scholarship focused on the case of the United States suggests that evaluations specific to incumbents and their policies are not important predictors of external efficacy. For example, Iyengar (1980, p. 255) finds that efficacy has only a moderately positive correlation with satisfaction towards public policies and output and no relationship to attitudes toward the incumbent; thus, he concludes "political efficacy does not appear to be closely intertwined with evaluations of the incumbent government."

Yet, in the Latin America and Caribbean context we might expect factors indicative of specific support – such as evaluations of policy effectiveness and executive approval – to be related to external efficacy, in much the way that specific and diffuse support seem more tightly connected in such contexts (see Booth and Seligson 2009). That is, current performance evaluations may be more consequential for broader evaluations of the system in less established democracies than in more established democracies; the logic behind this is that through time and socialization, older democracies build up stockpiles of diffuse support that are relatively less affected by specific government performance (see discussion in Booth and Seligson 2009, among others).[6]

Using an OLS regression similar to Figure 2, we test the extent to which external efficacy is predicted by evaluations of government performance in three policy areas – the economy, crime, and corruption – and executive approval.[7] The results are shown in Figure 3,

[5] In an analysis we conducted prior to the inclusion of Suriname and the Bahamas in the dataset, we did not observe the negative correlation between urban residence and external efficacy; instead, the effect was insignificant.

[6] Some scholars have found links between actual policy output and efficacy, in ways that support the notion that policy performance and efficacy ought to be linked. For example, Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls (1997) find that collective efficacy correlates negatively with rates of violence in neighborhoods. Therefore, one could infer that a positive crime evaluation might, in turn, correlate with higher rates of political efficacy. Furthermore, levels of corruption are also shown to have significant negative correlations with rates of political efficacy in a democracy. Anderson and Tverdova (2003) illustrate through a study of sixteen democracies, both young and old, that nations with high levels of corruption tend to have lower levels of political trust and support among their citizens. These findings provide reasons to expect that a positive corruption evaluation will correlate with higher political efficacy.

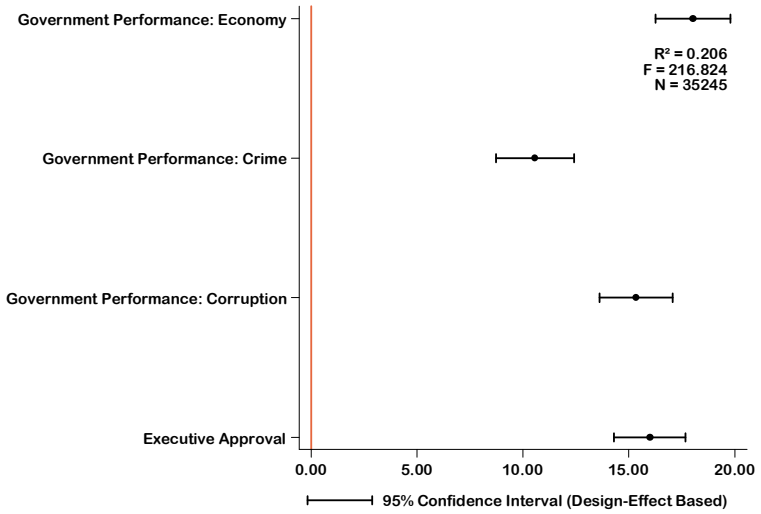
[7] Executive Approval is measured using the AmericasBarometer variable M1, which asks respondents to

which controls for all previously studied socio-economic, demographic, and country-level variables in addition to the four new variables. Once again the dots represent the estimated non-standardized coefficients and the bars represent 95% confidence intervals for those estimates.

We find that individuals' approval of the executive and their assessments of government efforts with respect to the economy, crime, and corruption all have strong, statistically significant relationships with external efficacy.[8]

The executive approval variable shows a very strong positive correlation with external efficacy, with a maximal increase in executive approval resulting in 18 degrees of increase in efficacy. This result differs from that found by Iyengar (1980) for the case of the United States. In the Latin America and Caribbean region, people who highly approve of the incumbent executive agree to a larger degree that those who govern the country are interested in what they think.

Figure 3. An Extended Model of External Efficacy



Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2014; v.M14v_1.0

In terms of evaluations of the government's handling of the economy, we expected that there would be a positive correlation between people's assessments on this issue and external efficacy. While there is a lack of literature on the direct relationship between people's evaluations of the government's efforts on the economy and efficacy, our expectations derive from the synthesis of two lines of research. First, Almond and Verba (1963) hypothesize that satisfaction with the political system is positively related to efficacy and, second, Lagos (2001) suggests that the economic situation perceived by the people is positively correlated with people's support for the political system. Taken together, this suggests a connection that runs from economic perceptions to efficacy. Our findings substantiate that there is indeed a relationship between evaluations of incumbent performance on the economy and external efficacy in the Latin America and Caribbean region. In our regression analysis, a maximum increase in one's evaluation of the government's handling of the economy results in 16 degrees of increase in efficacy.

rate the performance of the president (or, in the case of Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, and the Bahamas, the prime minister). Originally on a scale from 1 to 5, the variable is rescaled from 0 (very bad) to 1 (very good). Government Performance: Corruption is measured using the AmericasBarometer variable N9, which asks respondents their opinions on the current administration's job in fighting corruption. Originally on a 1-7 scale, the variable is rescaled from 0 (not at all) to 1 (a lot). Government Performance: Crime is measured using the AmericasBarometer variable N11, which asks respondents their opinions on the current administration's job in improving citizen security. Originally on a 1-7 scale, the variable is rescaled from 0 (not at all) to 1 (a lot). Government Performance: Economy is measured using the AmericasBarometer variable N15, which asks respondents their opinions on the current administration's job in managing the economy. Originally on a 1-7 scale, the variable is rescaled from 0 (not at all) to 1 (a lot).

[8] The number of cases across models in Figure 2 versus Figure 3 drops substantially; this is due in large part to the fact that the question about evaluations of government handling of corruption was not asked in the Suriname or the Bahamas and so these countries fall out of the analysis in Figure 3. When this variable is excluded from the analysis, the number of observations increases, while the size, direction, and statistical significance of the other variables included in the model remain substantively similar.

We find similar effects for evaluations of the incumbent's performance in the areas of crime and corruption. A maximum increase on each of these variables results, in turn, in an 11 and a 15 degree increase in external efficacy. In short, in contrast to what research on the case of the United States has found, evaluations of policy performance appear to have substantial consequences for external efficacy in the Latin America and Caribbean region.[9]

[I]ndividuals' approval of the executive and their assessments of government efforts with respect to the economy, crime, and corruption all have strong, statistically significant relationships with external efficacy.

Conclusion

Previous studies in the field of political science have attributed higher levels of external efficacy to a variety of socio-demographic variables and political factors. Our study of public opinion provides new perspective on understanding this issue in the Latin America and Caribbean region. When an individual approves of the executive and perceives positive government performance with regards to the economy, crime, and corruption, he or she has a greater belief that the government is interested in what he or she thinks.

This leads us to two core conclusions. First, short term factors are relevant to external efficacy in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Governments can bolster perceptions that the system is attentive to individuals by putting forward executives who inspire confidence in themselves and their administration's work in various policy areas.

Second, the findings in this report raise the question of whether executive approval and perceptions of government performance might have a greater impact on external efficacy than actual output in these areas in the Latin America and Caribbean region. That is, for external efficacy, it may be that it is more important for executives to deliver the appearance of assiduous efforts in terms of their jobs in general and their work on specific issue areas, than it is to deliver actual results.

These conclusions have unique implications for politicians seeking to improve the democratic legitimacy of their governments. For example, propaganda and publicity campaigns emphasizing government action against crime and corruption or new programs for the economy may result in higher levels of external efficacy. It may be that such efforts bolster external efficacy regardless of the actual outcomes, though further examination of the correlation between actual and perceived government performance is warranted.

Our results highlight other important questions for future research. For example, it may be interesting to consider whether external efficacy can be bolstered through elevated performance evaluations and executive approval in nondemocratic regimes. Further, Figure 1 presents interesting cross-national variation that

[9] In analyses conducted but not shown here, we also found that the relationship between understanding important political issues (internal efficacy) and external efficacy is statistically significant and positive, though not as strong as the other evaluative variables. This could perhaps point to an interesting relationship between these variables, as understanding the current economic or political climate likely informs one's ability to evaluate it. The complexity of this connection is referenced in Beaumont's (2011, p. 216) study of political learning, where she concludes that political awareness and "sociopolitical learning mechanisms … differently interact with individual background to contribute to political efficacy". Understanding political issues may partially enhance external efficacy, but does not necessarily result in a strong direct relationship between the two variables. Finally, it is interesting to note that rates of education had a negative relationship to external political efficacy when we controlled for internal efficacy in analyses not presented here. This should be a focus for further research.

could be examined more closely on a country-level basis.

While more work remains to be done, an important conclusion from this report is that the factors that predict external efficacy in the Latin America and Caribbean region differ in important ways from the factors that explain this attitude in more established democratic settings such as the United States. While education has been found to positively predict external efficacy in the United States, in the Latin America and Caribbean region, education does not have a positive, significant relationship with external efficacy. Further, while in the United States scholars have argued that short-term factors such as attitudes toward the sitting president and policy evaluations have no or little effect on external efficacy, we find in contrast that these factors are strongly related to the tendency for individuals in the Latin America and Caribbean region to believe that their leaders listen to what people like them think.

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Appendix: Author Biographies

Hannury (Nury) Lee is a College Scholar and rising junior majoring in neuroscience and minoring in child development. She is from South Korea and went to high school in Canada. She serves as secretary for Vanderbilt Students Volunteering for Science (VSVS), as vice president for Medicine, Education, and Development for Low Income Families Everywhere (MEDLIFE), and as a volunteer for Preschool for Children with Autism (PCA). She plans on pursuing a career in medicine and hopes to be able to contribute in better understanding autism spectrum disorders and in alleviating healthcare disparities in developing countries.

Ginny Randall is a rising junior College Scholar from Naperville, IL majoring in Public Policy with a track in Poverty Alleviation and Social Justice, with a double minor in Anthropology and European Studies. On campus, she is the Vice President of Public Relations of Kappa Delta sorority, a Vanderbilt University Tour Guide, a member of the Phi Sigma Pi National Honors Fraternity, and an active participant in the Alternative Spring Break service program. Eventually, she plans on attending graduate school and pursuing a career in international social justice and human rights work.

Jackson Vaught is a rising senior in the College Scholars Honors Program at Vanderbilt University. Originally from Murfreesboro, TN, he is a double major in Political Science in the College of Arts & Science as well as Human & Organizational Development in Peabody College. On campus, his involvement includes Vanderbilt Student Government, Vanderbilt Programming Board, VUcept, and serving as a Resident Adviser on the Ingram Commons, Vanderbilt's freshman campus. His plans after graduation are to work in either the field of human resources or organizational consulting and then to attend law school with a focus on international law.

LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar in the Spring of 2015. That class, HONS186, was taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister and Mollie Cohen acted as teaching assistant. Author names are listed here in alphabetical order.

Full results of the 2014 AmericasBarometer and previous rounds can be consulted online at www.LapopSurveys.org. The full data set is available for online analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.

Appendix: Complete OLS output for Figures 2 and 3

Independent Variables	**Figure 2**	**Figure 3**
Executive Approval		15.99***
		(0.859)
Government Performance: Corruption		15.34***
		(0.881)
Government Performance: Crime		10.57***
		(0.939)
Government Performance: Economy		18.02***
		(0.902)
Education	-1.127	1.531*
	(0.926)	(0.884)
Age	3.263***	3.505***
	(0.551)	(0.531)
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.538	-0.169
	(0.563)	(0.536)
Female	-0.453	-0.329
	(0.303)	(0.309)
Urban	-1.233**	0.596
	(0.536)	(0.507)
Guatemala	3.341**	1.414
	(1.624)	(1.379)
El Salvador	9.768***	0.591
	(1.356)	(1.218)
Honduras	3.282**	-5.028***
	(1.512)	(1.296)
Nicaragua	10.01***	-2.677**
	(1.556)	(1.359)
Costa Rica	5.250***	6.286***
	(1.774)	(1.598)
Panama	10.56***	3.208**
	(1.515)	(1.294)
Colombia	-3.827**	-5.329***
	(1.585)	(1.442)
Ecuador	15.34***	-0.322
	(1.562)	(1.437)
Bolivia	13.11***	4.051***
	(1.432)	(1.264)
Peru	6.674***	5.276***
	(1.525)	(1.441)
Paraguay	3.668**	2.151
	(1.716)	(1.626)
Chile	6.697***	-0.661
	(1.898)	(1.728)
Uruguay	16.58***	7.497***
	(1.489)	(1.285)
Brazil	5.222***	5.027***
	(1.633)	(1.483)

Venezuela	4.720***	8.391***
	(1.703)	(1.386)
Argentina	9.696***	11.81***
	(1.686)	(1.558)
Dominican Republic	13.69***	1.581
	(1.528)	(1.434)
Haiti	4.237***	-2.916**
	(1.595)	(1.362)
Jamaica	1.612	0.491
	(1.462)	(1.326)
Guyana	-2.038	-3.200**
	(1.622)	(1.364)
Trinidad and Tobago	-0.141	-0.0507
	(1.530)	(1.328)
Belize	-2.507*	-4.579***
	(1.469)	(1.322)
Suriname	17.08***	
	(1.530)	
Bahamas	16.96***	
	(1.676)	
Constant	32.69***	6.753***
	(1.301)	(1.221)
Observations	44,263	35,245
R-squared	0.039	0.206

Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: For the country fixed effects in the model, the comparison (baseline) category is Mexico.