

MATTERS OF OPINION

Undergraduate Researchers Analyze Latin America Surveys

BY MELISSA SMITH

Sophomore Stefanie Herrmann has seen first-hand the impact that public opinion can have on democracy and political stability. Born to a Colombian mother and German father, Herrmann moved every three years throughout her childhood, living in places like India, the Philippines, and Thailand.

"I lived in the Philippines during [former President Joseph] Estrada's resignation from the presidency, and left Thailand

just months before the coup d'état against Prime Minister Thaksin [Shinawatra]."

While her sisters were born in Colombia, she was born in Dachau, Germany, because her parents left Colombia in 1989 after drug lord Pablo Escobar bombed the hotel where they worked in Cartagena.

"Protests and political instability were a part of my life," she explained.

So when Herrmann, a double major in French and European studies and Latin

American studies, saw a new honors course called "Crisis, Public Opinion and Democracy in Latin America," she immediately signed up.

The course, designed by Associate Professor of Political Science Liz Zechmeister, is intended to give undergraduate honors students the opportunity to work with data collected by the *AmericasBarometer*, studies usually reserved for graduate students and scholars. One of the primary projects



A LAPOP researcher conducts surveys in Costa Rica.

of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the *AmericasBarometer* is a survey of democratic public opinion and behavior in the Americas. Started in 2004 in 11 countries, the 2010 survey includes responses from over 36,000 people from 26 countries. The data is used by agencies like USAID and the World Bank, as well as the governments of the Latin American countries surveyed.

Students' first project was to work in groups with a LAPOP graduate student to write an Insights report. The Insights series "provides a short analysis of key policy-relevant data," intended for use by the press and policymakers. Recent reports have been picked up for articles in the *Miami Herald* and the *Washington Post*, among other outlets.

The first of the undergraduate reports to be published online is entitled, "Trust in the National Police." Nabeela Ahmad, '12, Victoria Hubickey, '11, and Francis McNamara, '13, found trust in the police was higher for respondents who self-identified as white, but lower for those who had been victims of crime or corruption. Normally, these reports are written by LAPOP graduate students or faculty. Though graduate students ran



LAPOP researchers pre-test interviews in Costa Rica.

analysis of the data, the undergraduates designed the questions and wrote the report.

After finishing this group project, the students were assigned an individual research project, culminating in a poster presentation at the end of the semester. Over the course of two days, students presented their work

to faculty, students, and staff from LAPOP and other areas on campus.

Mitch Seligson, director of LAPOP and professor of political science and sociology, was enthusiastic about the poster presentations.

"It's pretty exciting to see undergradu-

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An interviewer from DATA Opinion Publica y Mercados pre-tests a questionnaire in Mexico.

ates using our data in this way. It's a unique opportunity for them."

Herrmann knew she wanted to conduct her research project on former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe. "My mother loved him, but there were all these allegations about human rights violations during his presidency." She looked at presidential approval between 2006 and 2010 and its connection to public opinion about human rights, and found that there wasn't as much of a correlation as one might think.

For Robert Tauscher, a pre-med double major in biology and Spanish, the individual project provided an opportunity to look at connections between democracy and public health. Robert looked for correlations between food insecurity, malnutrition, and

opinions about democracy. His findings were surprising. His research confirmed what he expected—that people who are food insecure are also less likely to be supportive of democracy. What Tauscher did not expect is that food-insecure people are also more likely to be politically active, and have less political knowledge (even when you control for level of education). The outcome seemed to be a potentially dangerous combination of anti-democratic ideals mixed with political activism. Tauscher plans to continue to focus his studies on public health policy, and hopes to travel to Guatemala next year to conduct research there.

One of the biggest takeaways for students in the course was learning how to conduct social science research at this level. “I realized how possible this kind of research is—it’s not some unattainable world,” said Rebecca Reed, ’12, whose research focused

on the connection between religion and life satisfaction. This experience, alongside the opportunity to publish their Insights reports online, affords the students opportunities that would normally be reserved for graduate students.

In addition to the new honors course, LAPOP also has plans to initiate a new undergraduate research fellowship program this fall. According to Zechmeister, the semester-long fellowship would provide the fellows with an opportunity to participate in applied research on public opinion in Latin America under the supervision of a faculty member.

“It is expected that final research projects will be published on LAPOP’s website and, when applicable, students will be encouraged to submit their research to calls for proposals from academic conferences,” said Zechmeister.



Survey training in Costa Rica.

For more information about the Latin American Public Opinion Project, visit www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop.



Barrios, or neighborhoods, in Mexico where surveys were conducted.