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The Political Culture of Belize: Preliminary Evidence

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Belize is a mystery to many social scientists. While squarely located geographically in Central America, most experts on Central America do not consider it to be part of the traditional region (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica). There are many good reasons for this. Whereas the traditional five-country Central American countries were all colonies of Spain, Belize was a British colony up until its formal independence in 1981 and remains a member of the Commonwealth. Politically, unlike all of the other countries in the region, who are led by a president, Belize is led by a prime minister. While Spanish predominates as the national language in Central America, English predominates in Belize, and while historically most Central Americans have been Catholics, only small minorities of Belizeans are Catholics. Many other differences abound, and yet, increasing migration from Mexico and Guatemala, along with growing contact and

trade with Central America has led to greater links with that region, even though formally Belize retains its membership in the Caribbean trading community (CARICOM) rather than the Central American community with its ties to the U.S. under the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). It is therefore appropriate to take a look at political values and behaviors in Belize and to see how those fit, or do not fit, into the larger patterns of Central America, and the Latin American and Caribbean region beyond.

The opportunity to do this was presented by a generous grant to LAPOP by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) that enabled us to add Belize as the 23rd country in our 2008 round of surveys. As far as we know, this is the first national sample of political culture ever conducted in Belize.¹ This paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series*² looks at a small number of key questions in the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project survey, which involved face-to-face interviews conducted in 23 nations in Latin America and the Caribbean, and a web survey in the United States³. A full analysis of the Belize survey data remains to be conducted. The survey was conducted between October and November by a team of interviewers trained by the second author of this paper. In total, 1552 respondents (half male, half female) were interviewed, in a stratified probability sample (with quotas for respondent selection within the home). The country was stratified into six districts: Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize City, Cayo, Stann Creek and Toledo, with the number of interviews per stratum proportional to the census data adult population distributions and further stratified by urban and rural divisions (51.8% rural, 48.2% urban). Results are shown in Figure 1:

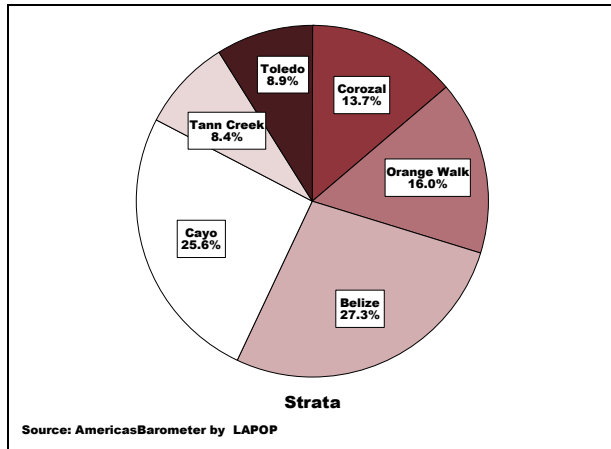
¹ For background see Fernández, 1989.

² Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications. The data on which they are based can be found at: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets.

³ Funding for the 2008 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Significant sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas, and Vanderbilt University.

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Figure 1
Distribution of the Sample by Districts



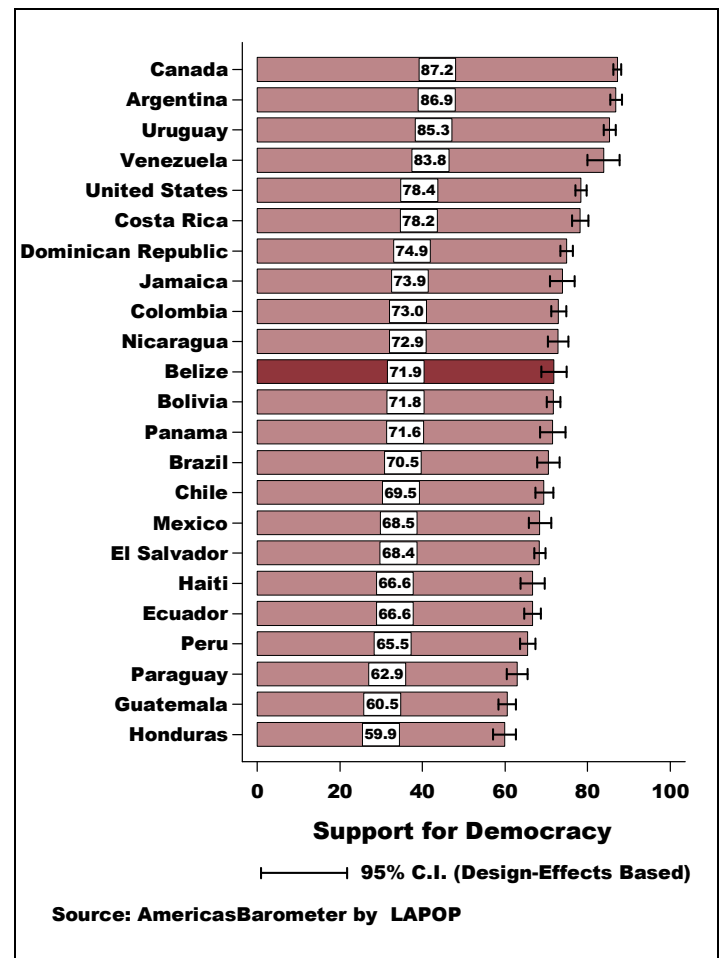
The full description of the sample design is available at http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/files/dQ5t9C/Belize_sample_design_v1.pdf. All interviews were carried out using handheld computers (PDAs), with programming provided by Advitek of Toronto, Canada. The questionnaire was prepared and tested in both English and Spanish; interviewers with a single click on their PDAs were able to immediately switch from one language to the other if a respondent indicated difficulty in replying to the question in the other language. Many Belizeans are bi-lingual, but are dominant in one of the two main languages (Spanish or English). While there is a substantial Mayan Indian and Garifuna population, the former are almost all bi-lingual or monolingual Spanish speakers, while the latter are almost all fluent in English. The survey data found, for example, that when asked what language the respondent spoke growing up at home, 55.9% reported that it was Spanish, 35.9% that it was Creole or English, 1.7% Garifuna, and 4.7% Mayan (Maya Kechi, Mopan, or Yucatec). In the survey itself, however, respondents were more likely to have used English (63.9%) than Spanish (36.1%).

Support for Democracy

How much support is there for democracy in Belize? In the AmericasBarometer 2008 we included several items to try to measure this issue. One basic question is the one derived

from Churchill’s classic statement: “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.” We asked respondents how much they agreed with this point of view, and converted the responses (as we do for most items in LAPOP studies) to a 0-100 scale. The results are shown in Figure 2; in every country in the Americas, the average response is to agree with Churchill, with the mean score in Belize reaching 71.9 (out of a possible 100), placing the country in about the middle of the pack, slightly below Nicaragua, higher than all of the other countries in the region except Costa Rica.

Figure 2
Support for Democracy in the Americas



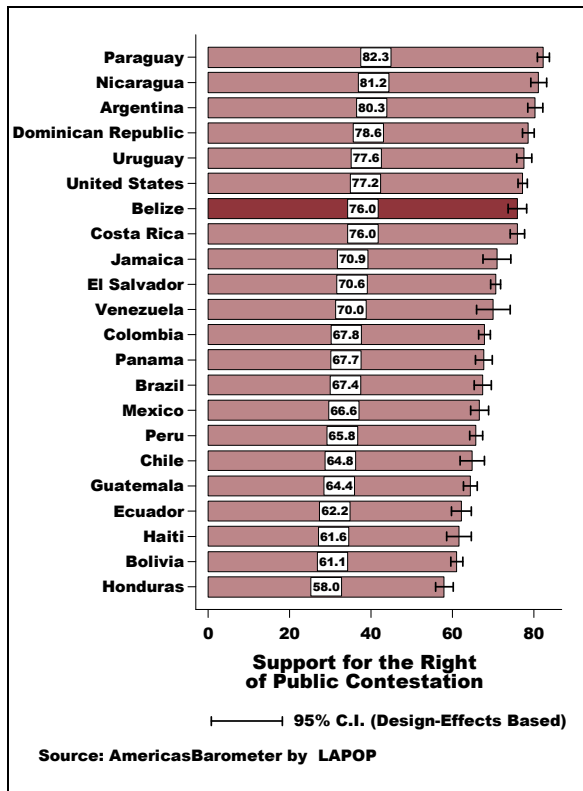
The Churchill item, valuable though it is, does not get at the specific operational aspects of democracy. So, we include additional batteries of items to deepen our understanding of

popular support for democracy. One key element is support for the right of public contestation, as Robert Dahl (Dahl 1971) put it. We asked three questions, and formed a scale (0-100) based on the responses. Asked how much people approve/disapprove of:

1. People participating in legal demonstrations.
2. People participating in an organization or group to try to solve community problems.
3. People working for campaigns for a political party or candidate.

The results are shown in Figure 3. Once again, all nations in the Americas score on the “agree” end of the 0-100 continuum, but this time Belize is among the top third of countries. Interestingly, this places Belize higher than any of the other countries in the region, although there is no significant difference with Costa Rica (note the confidence intervals in the graph).

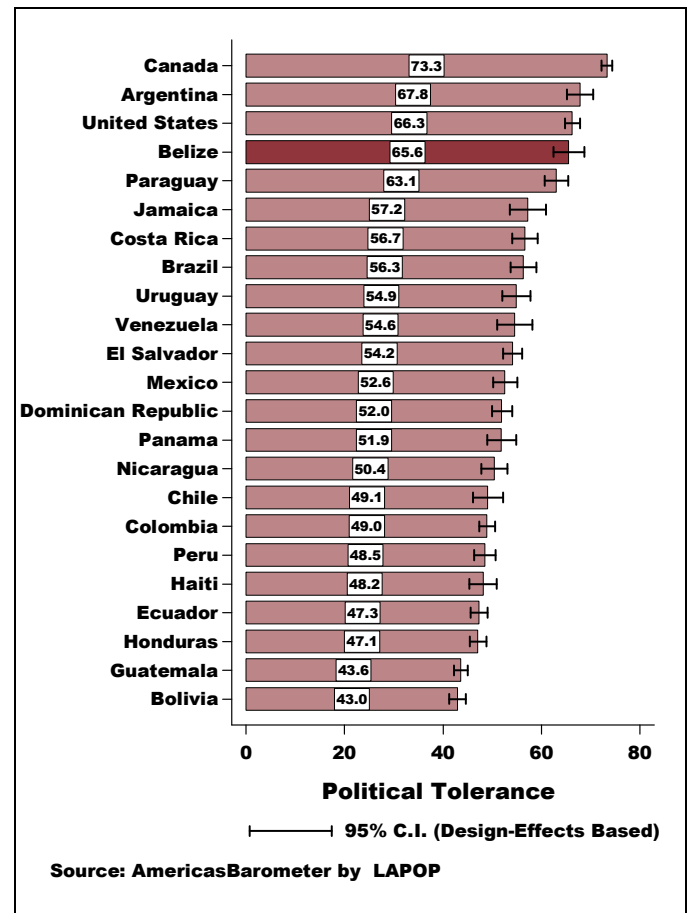
Figure 3
Support for the Right of Public Contestation in the Americas



In many LAPOP studies, political tolerance has been explored. We have relied on a four-item

scale in which respondents are asked the extent to which they would be willing to allow people “who only say bad things about our system of government” to have the right to vote, run for office, make speeches and engage in peaceful demonstrations. As can be seen in Figure 4, the Belizean population is especially tolerant when compared to other countries in the Americas. Belizeans are more tolerant, on average, than the citizens of any country in Central America.

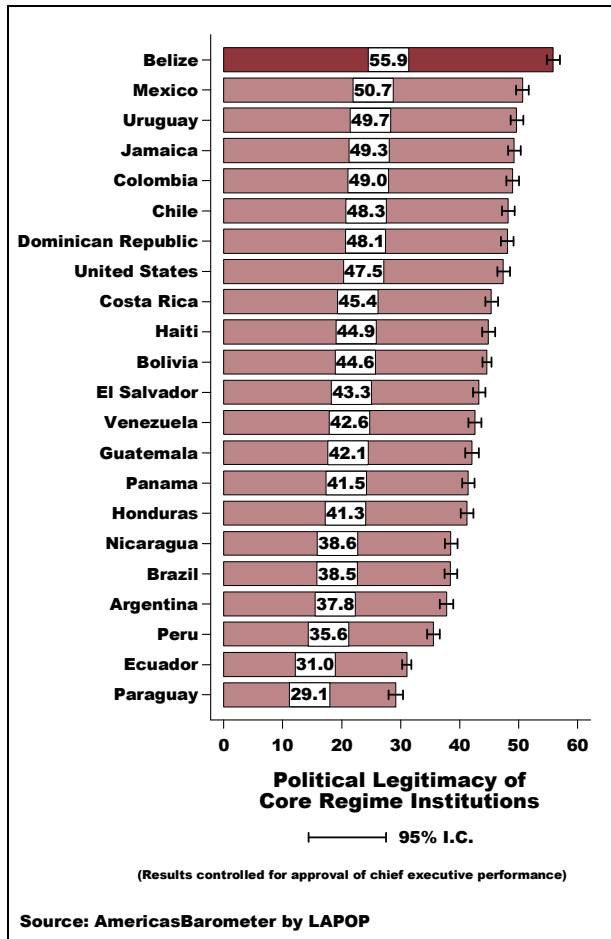
Figure 4
Political Tolerance in The Americas



Finally, another key value is political legitimacy of the core institutions of government. A multi-item index, discussed in detail in the country reports already on line at www.AmericasBarometer.org, and explored in detail in a new book (Booth and Seligson forthcoming) was created. Figure 5 shows that Belize scores the highest of any country in the

Americas, indicating very solid support for these institutions.

Figure 1
Political Legitimacy of Core Regime Institutions in the Americas



Conclusions

How to explain these results? Perhaps the British colonial tradition can explain why several aspects of Belizean political culture are so highly democratic. Of course, there are other former British colonies in the region, one of them, Jamaica, is also included in our sample. Jamaican values are quite close to those found in Belize, indicating that there may be some substance to the theory that colonial heritage marks countries over the long term, a thesis that has been explored for Jamaica and Costa Rica in one early study (Seligson 1987), and that is a major element of recent theories (Acemoglu and

Robinson 2006; Fukuyama 2008). Further exploration of the Belize data set awaits our analysis.

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