

AmericasBarometer Insights: 2009* Participation in Meetings of Political Parties

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Participation in civil society organizations is considered as a key ingredient for a “healthy” democracy. It fosters bonds of solidarity and cooperation among members and therefore it influences variables relevant to the functioning of democracy such as trust and tolerance (Putnam 1993, 2000). Although political parties are not civil society organizations *per se*, they are core components of any political system. Participation demonstrates citizens’ engagement in and commitment to the democratic “game.” As well, these institutions theoretically could generate positive effects for democracy in the same vein as civil society participation more generally. As we saw in previous *Insights* reports¹, citizens in Latin America are generally dissatisfied with political parties: they show low levels of trust (I0802), and do not consider that parties are listening to the people (I0812). In this context of dissatisfaction, to what degree do individuals participate in these institutions? This report will address this question as well as the determinants of this kind of participation. We again query the 2008 round of the Latin

* The *Insights* Series is co-edited by Professors Mitchell A. Seligson and Elizabeth Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.

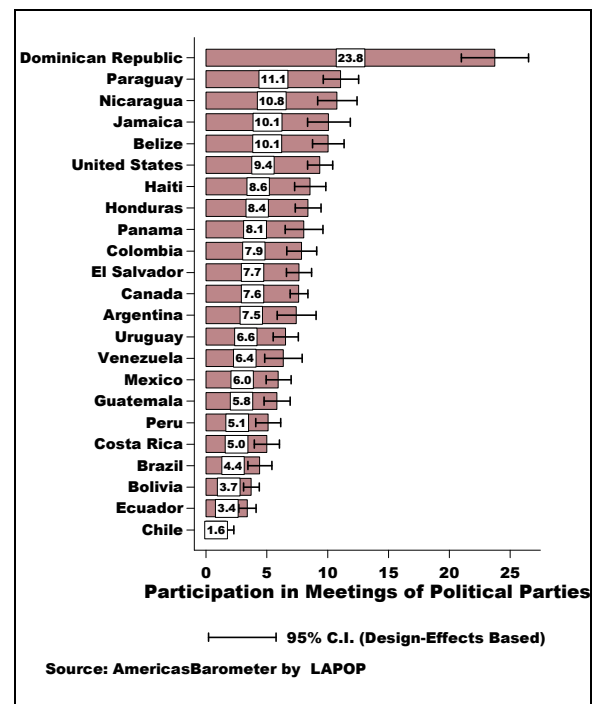
¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys.² In this survey 38,053 respondents from 23 nations in North, Central, South America and the Caribbean were asked the same question:

CP13. Meetings of a political party or political movement? Do you attend them at least once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year, or never?

These responses were then recoded on a 0-100 basis to conform to the LAPOP standard, which facilitates comparability across questions and survey waves.³ On this new scale 100 represents the highest level of participation (at least once a week) and 0 the lowest (never). Figure 1 shows a strikingly low participation in meetings of political parties. The level of participation falls below 25 points in every country.

Figure 1.
Participation in Meetings of Political Parties in the Americas, 2008



² Funding for the 2008 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), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

³ Non-response was 1.66% for the sample as a whole.

The Dominican Republic is the country that displays the highest level of participation in meetings of political parties, with a score above 20 points on our 0-100 scale. The difference between this country and the rest is statistically significant. Paraguay, Nicaragua, Jamaica and Belize show levels around 10. At the other extreme we find Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Chile, where the average scores do not reach 5 points. One might suppose that participation levels are highest in countries that held elections in 2008, such as the Dominican Republic; however, when we check levels of participation in 2006, we find they are quite similar. Overall, it is quite evident that citizens in the Americas do not participate in meetings of political parties to the same degree that they participate in other civic groups.

Explaining Participation in Meetings of Political Parties

What explains variation in participation in meetings of political parties? We will focus on the individual characteristics of respondents in our surveys to answer this question.⁴ As a first step we take into account the following socio-economic and demographic characteristics: education, gender, age, wealth, and city/town size. In order to assess their influence on our dependent variable, we employ linear regression model.⁵ Given that citizens in the United States and Canada have sharply higher levels on socio-economic characteristics and given our primary interest in Latin America and the Caribbean, we exclude these countries from the analysis.⁶

⁴ Multilevel analyses predicting levels of participation with variables such as GDP, economic growth, and level of democracy, did not yield significant results. It is possible that the variation across countries displayed in Figure 1 is explained by some other national-level political factors, analysis that will be left for future research.

⁵ All statistical analyses in this paper were conducted using STATA v10 and results were adjusted for the complex sample designs employed.

⁶ To capture the variation across countries the model included dummy variables for each country, using Uruguay as the reference country.

Figure 2. Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Participation in Meetings of Political Parties in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008

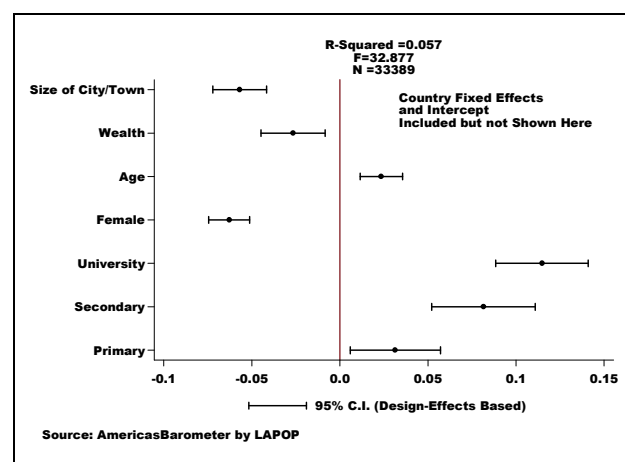


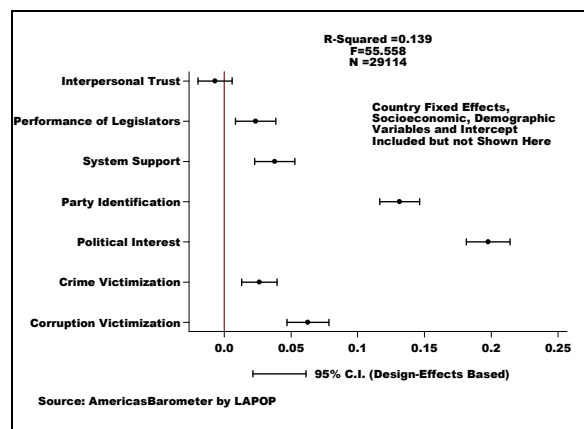
Figure 2 shows the influence of these individual-level socio-economic and demographic characteristics on participation in meetings of political parties in Latin America and the Caribbean. All five variables considered here are statistically significant. This significance is graphically represented by a confidence interval that does not overlap the vertical “0” line (at .05 or better). When the dot, which represents the predicted impact of that variable, falls to the right of the vertical “0” line it implies a positive relationship whereas when it falls to the left it indicates a negative contribution. In this sense, we see that people living in rural areas or small towns tend to participate more than people living in large cities, *ceteris paribus*. Men, also holding constant the rest of variables, are more participative. Participation is also higher among the older and among people with fewer economic resources. Education level is one of the variables with the largest effects, having a university education increases the frequency of attending meetings of political parties.

Although socioeconomic characteristics have a statistically significant impact on this kind of participation, we need to add more variables in order to have a more reasonable and accurate idea of the determinants of participation in political parties. Theoretically, it is reasonable to expect that citizens are more likely to participate

in political party meetings the more they approve of the political system, are otherwise engaged in the political system, and/or have grievances that the system might address. We therefore run an analysis that contains variables tapping these three types of motivating factors. Figure 3 displays the results the new model⁷.

The effects of some of these new variables, such as political interest and party identification, in the model are larger when contrasted with those we found for socioeconomic and demographic variables. Furthermore, once we include these variables, gender and size of town lose significance.

Figure 3.
An Analysis of the Determinants of Participation in Meetings of Political Parties in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



Some scholarly literature has linked interpersonal trust to civic participation as two elements that reinforce each other (Putnam 1993). However, Figure 3 shows that interpersonal trust has no statistically significant impact on participation in meetings of political parties. This is in line with previous studies that find a weak link between social trust and civic participation in Latin America (Córdova 2008).

⁷ This analysis was carried out using a linear regression that also included the socioeconomic and demographic variables and the country dummies employed earlier. Figure 3 displays only the political variables. All the regressions performed can be found in Table 1 in the appendix.

As we found in previous reports, citizens' participation in different civic organizations, such as participation in municipal meetings, is related to crime and corruption victimization. Those individuals who have been victimized by corruption at least once in the last year are more likely to participate in political party meetings. In the same way, those who have been victims of any crime are more likely to participate in these meetings. One explanation for this relationship is that those who have been victimized search for solutions to these problems through their participation in parties. Theoretically, they may see these organizations as places where they have the opportunity to voice important concerns.

Interestingly, we find that political interest is the variable with the largest effect. As we could suppose, the probability of participating in meetings of political parties increases as political interest is greater. In the same line, people identified with any political party tend to participate more.

Furthermore, diffuse support for the political system also has a statistically significant impact on participation⁸. People who see the political system as legitimate tend to participate more in one of its basic organizations, political parties. Finally, we included one variable related to the performance of legislators. When citizens consider that representatives satisfy their demands and perform their duties well they are more likely to participate in political party meetings.

⁸ System Support Index is measured through the following questions: B1. To what extent do you believe the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial? B2. To what extent do you respect the political institutions in (country)? B3. To what degree do you believe that the citizen's basic rights are safeguarded by the political system in (country)? B4. To what degree do you feel proud of living in the political system in (country)? B6. To what degree do you think the political system in (country) should be supported)?

Policy and Program Implications

This new *Insights* series report shows how citizen participation in political party meetings in Latin America is rather low. These low levels of involvement are even lower than levels of participation in other civic organizations such as municipal meetings as we saw in previous reports. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that these low levels of participation are a consequence of general dissatisfaction with political parties in the region. As we saw in a previous *Insights* report, citizens in Latin America show low levels of trust in parties (I0802) and, further, they do not consider that parties are listening to the people (I0812).

How might participation in political party meetings be improved? The AmericasBarometer data suggest again that participation in political parties depends on the extent to which citizens are interested in politics, identify with political parties, as well as the extent to which representatives fulfill their functions and perform their duties. While we have not examined the link here specifically, we might anticipate that increasing trust in political parties and representatives could lead to an increase in participation in these organizations. The more citizens perceive the party system as legitimate and efficacious with respect to satisfying their needs, the more likely they may be to participate in this form of civic activity. As Seligson and Booth (2005) found for the case of Costa Rica, political legitimacy leads to involvement in political parties activities.

We also see that participation in political organizations is related to having been a victim of crime or corruption. These findings could be suggesting that individuals participate as a desire to be heard and to find a response to these problems. While the circumstances compelling them to participate is negative, there may be a silver lining if victimization is motivating participation, which is that individuals retain some level of belief that political parties can provide positive solutions to important problems in their lives. This would imply a baseline level of respect for political

parties and their functions exists that can be built upon.

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Appendix: Determinants of Participation in Meetings of Political Parties				
	Regression I		Regression II	
	Coefficient.	t	Coefficient.	t
Primary Education	0.032*	(2.41)	0.022	(1.39)
Secondary Education	0.082*	(5.44)	0.046*	(2.93)
University Education	0.115*	(8.59)	-0.031*	(-5.05)
Female	-0.063*	(-10.61)	0.003	(0.37)
Age	0.024*	(3.84)	-0.044*	(-4.57)
Wealth	-0.026*	(-2.85)	-0.056*	(-7.09)
Size of City/Town	-0.057*	(-7.32)	0.022	(1.39)
Corruption Victimization			0.063*	(7.81)
Crime Victimization			0.026*	(3.87)
Political Interest			0.198*	(23.76)
Party Identification			0.131*	(17.35)
System Support			0.038*	(4.92)
Performance of Legislators			0.024*	(3.06)
Interpersonal Trust			-0.007	(-1.05)
Mexico	-0.007	(-0.94)	0.005	(0.74)
Guatemala	-0.010	(-1.33)	0.021*	(2.87)
El Salvador	0.006	(0.79)	0.016*	(2.22)
Honduras	0.012	(1.49)	0.022*	(2.63)
Nicaragua	0.035*	(3.32)	0.058*	(5.74)
Costa Rica	-0.020*	(-2.61)	0.010	(1.31)
Panama	0.007	(0.69)	0.037*	(4.37)
Colombia	0.006	(0.66)	0.021*	(2.71)
Ecuador	-0.056*	(-6.04)	-0.002	(-0.30)
Bolivia	-0.057*	(-6.30)	-0.036*	(-4.48)
Peru	-0.029*	(-3.88)	0.004	(0.55)
Paraguay	0.035*	(4.20)	0.045*	(5.96)
Chile	-0.052*	(-8.05)	-0.008	(-1.37)
Brazil	-0.021*	(-3.01)	0.008	(1.16)
Venezuela	-0.004	(-0.43)	0.016	(1.72)
Argentina	0.007	(0.73)	0.021*	(2.54)
Dominican Republic	0.176*	(11.55)	0.164*	(11.90)
Haiti	0.006	(0.62)	0.022*	(2.45)
Jamaica	0.019	(1.74)	0.011	(1.19)
Belize	0.033*	(3.55)	0.054*	(5.64)
Constant	-0.004	(-0.58)	-0.008	(-1.06)
R-Squared	0.057		0.139	
Number of Obs.	33389		29114	
* p<0.05				