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Not Happy? Blame your Legislature

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The proper role of the legislature in presidential systems has sparked endless debates among scholars and policy makers. The debate is not merely theoretical in the Latin American and Caribbean region, where there have been numerous attempts by executives to solve the “problem” of intrusive legislatures by attempting to govern without them, on the grounds that congress is “obstructionist, corrupt, or ineffective” (Morgenstern and Nacif 2002:1). Nonetheless, given the central role of legislatures in liberal democracies (Close 1995), it is not an institution that is likely to disappear any time soon. In that context, it is important to know how citizens view the relationship between the legislature and the president. This new *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* report¹ will address this question utilizing the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys.² In

* 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 *Insight 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>

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.

this survey 33,021 respondents from 20 nations in North, Central, South America and the Caribbean were asked the same question³:

EC1. And now thinking of the Parliament. To what extent does the National Legislature obstruct the power of the President?

Responses were given based on a 1-7 scale, where ‘1’ meant “not at all” and ‘7’ meant “a lot.” These responses were then recoded on a 0-100 basis to conform to the LAPOP standard, which facilitates comparability across questions and survey waves.⁴

Figure 1.
Average Agreement that Parliament Obstructs the Power of the President in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008

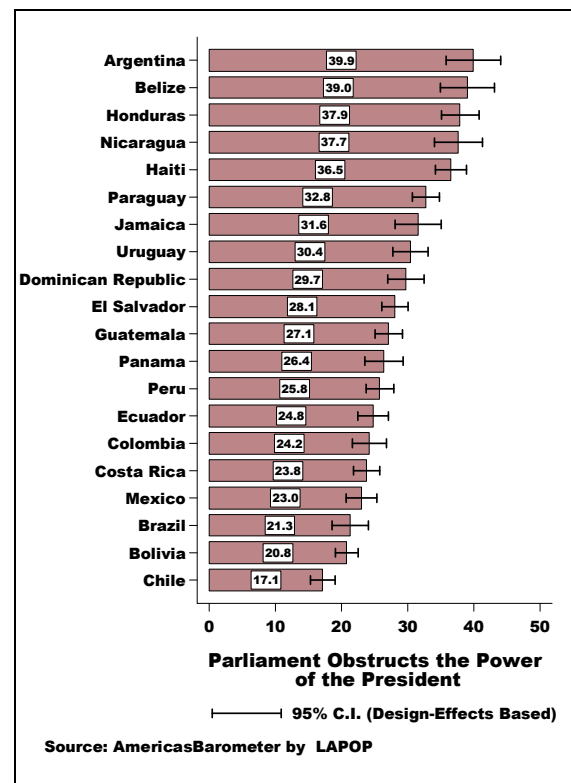


Figure 1 depicts national averages for the 20 countries in the sample and shows that, in

³ This question was not asked in Canada or in the United States. Further, given that in Venezuela there is no opposition to the president in the National Congress, we excluded this country from the analysis.

⁴ Non-response was 14.77% for the sample as a whole.

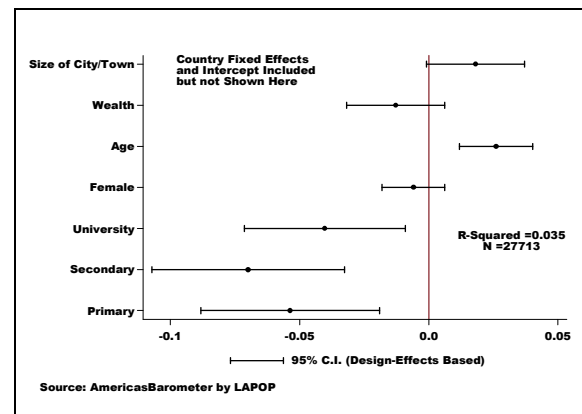
general terms, there is low support for the idea that parliament obstructs the power of the president. Averages fall below 40 points in every country. Argentina is the country that displays the highest level, with a score of 39.9 points on our 0-100 scale. Below Argentina, with levels between 35 and 40 we find countries such as Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua and Haiti. At the other extreme, we find Costa Rica, Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia and Chile, where national averages fall around 20 points on our 0-100 scale. Overall, it is quite evident that on average citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean do not consider that legislators obstruct their president's work.

Explaining the Belief that Parliament Obstructs the Power of the President

What explains variation in the belief that parliament obstructs the power of the president? We will focus on the individual characteristics of respondents in our surveys to answer this question.⁵ First, we take into account the following socio-economic and demographic characteristics: education, gender, age, wealth, and city/town size. In order to assess the influence of these on our dependent variable, we employ a linear regression model.⁶

Figure 2 shows the influence of these individual-level socio-economic and demographic characteristics on the belief that parliament limits the executive in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁷

Figure 2. Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of the Belief that Parliament Obstructs the Power of the President in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



Only two - of the five variables considered here are statistically significant: education and age. 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 older people tend to agree more with the idea that the parliament limits the powers of the president compared to young people, *ceteris paribus*. Education also has a statistically significant impact; having primary, secondary or university education compared to no education decreases support for that idea that congress hinders the executive. The rest of variables-- size of the place, personal wealth, and gender-- do not make any difference in explaining why some individuals are more likely to believe that their legislature is an obstacle to presidential action.

Given that socioeconomic and demographic characteristics overall are not strong predictors, we need to add more variables to our analysis in order to have a more reasonable and accurate idea of the determinants of the belief that parliament limits the power of the president.

Theoretically, it is reasonable to expect that perceptions of the balance of power depend to

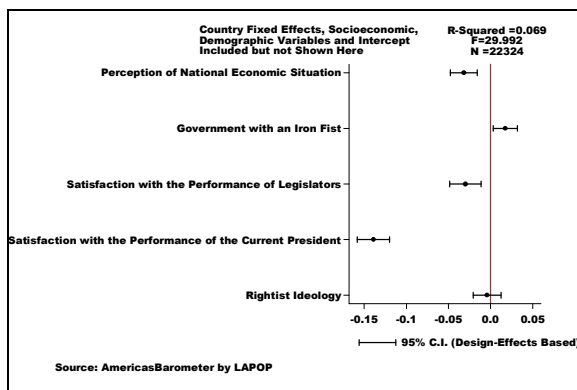
⁵ Multilevel analyses predicting support for the idea that legislatures limit the power of the president with variables such as GDP, economic growth, and level of democracy, did not yield significant results. It is possible that the variation across countries displayed in Figure 1 is explained by some other national-level political factors, analysis that will be left for future research.

⁶ All statistical analyses in this paper were conducted using STATA v10, and results were adjusted for the complex sample designs employed.

⁷ To capture the variation across countries the model included dummy variables for each country, using Uruguay as the reference country.

some extent on opinions about the performance of both branches. If citizens perceive that government, and the executive and congressional branches, are doing a good job, they may determine that the two powers do not interfere with each other. Furthermore, we could consider that the belief that the legislature obstructs the executive may be a product of ideological or authoritarian attitudes. For instance, people who express their support for an “iron fisted” government may be those who express a higher level of support for the executive to govern without the limits of the legislature. We therefore ran an analysis that contains variables tapping these types of motivating factors. Figure 3 displays the results the new model⁸.

Figure 3.
An Analysis of the Determinants of the Belief that Parliament obstructs the Power of the President in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



As we can see in Figure 3 all the independent variables considered here except for ideology are statistically significant. We find that the perception of interference by the parliament with the power of the president is strongly related to perceptions of the executive’s performance. That is, the greater the satisfaction with the performance of the current president,

⁸ 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.

the lower the belief that the legislature hinders his/her power. In the same vein, as satisfaction with the performance of legislators increases, agreement with the idea that they hinder the president decreases. Perception of national economic performance has the same effect. People who consider that the economy is doing well tend to disagree with the idea that the parliament hinders the president’s work. On the other hand, citizens with authoritarian attitudes, for example, that the country should be governed with an “iron fist”, tend to agree more with the idea that parliament obstructs the power of the president. These people may see the parliament as a barrier preventing a president from gaining more power and governing with that “iron fist”.

Policy and Program Implications

This new *Insights* series report shows how citizens in Latin America and the Caribbean see the balance of power between the president and the parliament. This analysis is especially relevant in the context of a growing number of chief executives who have been trying to limit those who oppose “the people’s will”, legislatures among others (Seligson 2007). In general terms, the majority do not consider that parliament is hindering the power of the president.

The results suggest that perceptions of the balance of powers depend to some extent on citizen assessment of performance, at both the national economic level and the institutional level. The extent to which representatives and the president fulfill their functions and perform their duties affects citizens’ views on the relationship between both political powers. When they do well, there is no reason to think that any power, in this case the parliament, is hindering the power of the other.

We have found that parliament is seen as an obstacle for those who tend to agree with the idea that in the country the country needs a government with an iron fist rather than believing that problems can be resolved with everyone’s participation.

Optimistically, we could interpret these results as reflecting a new period in Latin American politics, where parliaments are seen as necessary to democracy and not as obstructionist and inefficient institutions as they were viewed in the past. Pessimistically, our analysis suggests that if authoritarian attitudes were to increase and/or performance to decline substantially, such attitudes supporting the legislature's role could likewise decline. In short, the data in this case highlight the strength of citizen assessment of democratic politics within Latin America; however, our analysis also reminds us of potential vulnerabilities.

REFERENCES

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Appendix: Determinants of the Belief that the Parliament obstructs the Power of the President				
	Regression I		Regression II	
	Coefficient.	t	Coefficient	T
Primary Education	-0.057*	(-3.29)	-0.060*	(-3.01)
Secondary Education	-0.073*	(-3.92)	-0.061*	(-2.84)
University Education	-0.040*	(-2.49)	-0.030	(-1.64)
Female	-0.005	(-0.77)	-0.008	(-1.21)
Age	0.022*	(3.05)	0.027*	(3.33)
Wealth	-0.009	(-1.00)	-0.003	(-0.29)
Size of City/Town	0.019	(1.89)	0.028*	(2.75)
Rightist Ideology			-0.004	(-0.49)
Satisfaction with the Performance of the Current President			-0.139*	(-14.20)
Performance of Legislators			-0.030*	(-3.17)
Government with an iron fist			0.018*	(2.42)
Perception of National Economic Situation			-0.032*	(-3.86)
Mexico	-0.041*	(-3.93)	-0.044*	(-4.10)
Guatemala	-0.020	(-1.94)	-0.024*	(-2.20)
El Salvador	-0.014	(-1.38)	-0.032*	(-3.19)
Honduras	0.047*	(3.96)	0.021	(1.87)
Nicaragua	0.045*	(3.43)	0.002	(0.16)
Costa Rica	-0.033*	(-3.30)	-0.027*	(-2.53)
Panama	-0.020	(-1.68)	-0.048*	(-4.26)
Colombia	-0.032*	(-2.97)	-0.024*	(-2.07)
Ecuador	-0.042*	(-2.95)	-0.036*	(-2.24)
Bolivia	-0.075*	(-5.65)	-0.087*	(-6.37)
Peru	-0.027*	(-2.64)	-0.049*	(-4.61)
Paraguay	0.016	(1.85)	-0.035*	(-3.61)
Chile	-0.076*	(-8.02)	-0.085*	(-8.76)
Brazil	-0.051*	(-4.67)	-0.052*	(-4.41)
Argentina	0.057*	(4.00)	0.048*	(3.10)
Dominican Republic	-0.003	(-0.27)	-0.000	(-0.02)
Haiti	0.037*	(3.28)	-0.007	(-0.60)
Jamaica	0.013	(0.98)	-0.005	(-0.38)
Belize	0.053*	(3.61)	0.048*	(3.32)
Constant	0.010	(1.15)	-0.001	(-0.14)
R-Squared	0.044		0.069	
Number of Obs.	27113		22324	
* p<0.05				