

*AmericasBarometer Insights: 2009 (No.27)**

Do you trust your Armed Forces?¹

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Historically, Latin American countries experienced a variety of regime types prior to entering the most recent wave of democratization. Particularly important forms of nondemocratic governments were the *military regimes* that existed in a large number of countries throughout the region. These regimes were usually created through coups d'état that replaced civilian and democratic governments (Diamond and Linz 1989; Huntington 1991; Mainwaring 1999).

Most of these military regimes, such as Rafael Videla's in Argentina, Augusto Pinochet's in Chile, and Alfredo Stroessner's in Paraguay, were very repressive; others, such as Guillermo Rodríguez-Lara's in Ecuador, were less repressive. In spite of the large number of systematic human rights violations in some of these regimes, empirical evidence shows that the Armed Forces in Latin America continue to be an institution with relatively high levels of trust.

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>

* 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.

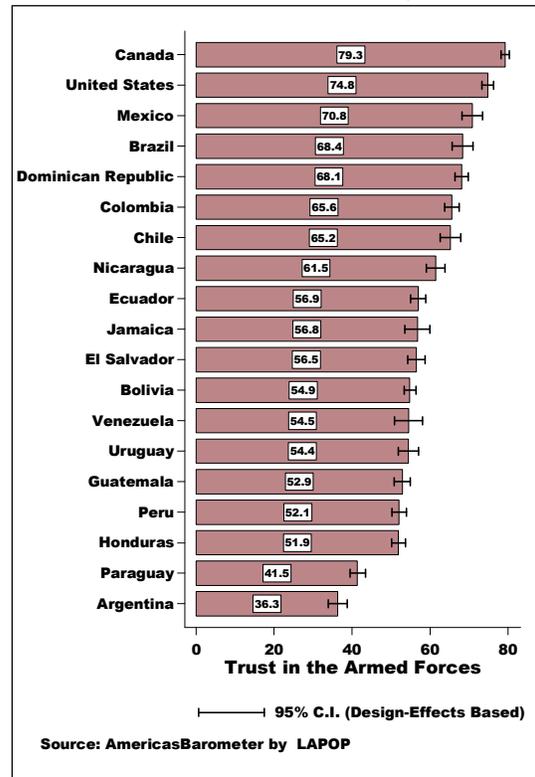
What are the factors that explain levels of trust in Latin America's Armed Forces?

This paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* attempts to answer this question by using the 2008 database made possible by the AmericasBarometer survey carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 22 nations in the Western hemisphere.²

Here we explore the responses given by 30,824 participants in the 20 nations where the following question was asked:³

NP2. To what extent do you trust the Armed Forces?

Figure 1.
Levels of Trust in the Armed Forces, 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 This question was not asked in Costa Rica, Panama and Haiti.

Respondents expressed their trust on a 1-7 scale, where 1 meant ‘not at all’ and 7 meant ‘a lot’.

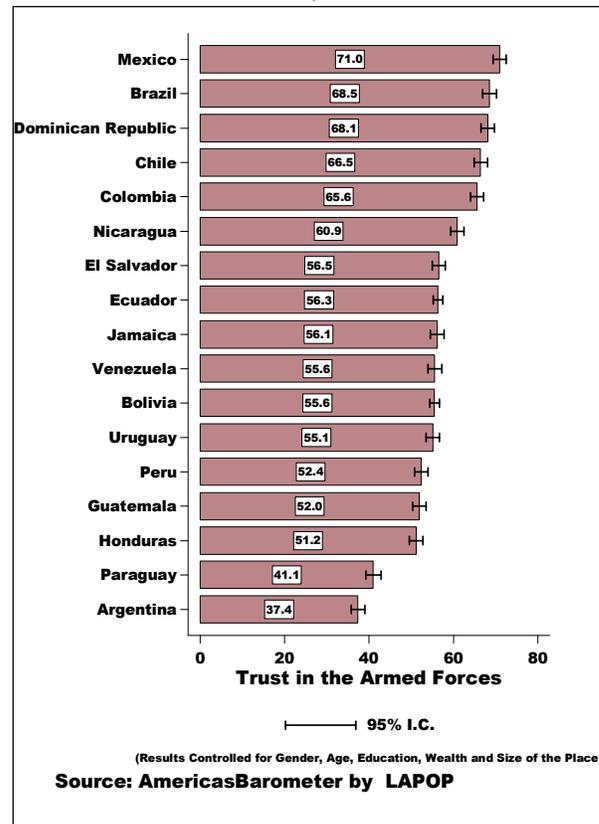
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Not at all			A lot			Doesn't know	

These responses were recalibrated to a 0-100 scale, in order to make comparisons across questions and survey waves easier.⁴ Figure 1 shows national averages for the 20 countries in the sample. It is striking to note, first, that on average, the degree of citizen trust in the Armed Forces is 59.2 out of 100 possible points. This value is well above levels of trust in institutions of representation, such as political parties or the congress, in the same region.⁵

Second, in this context of relatively high levels of trust, there is significant variation across countries. At one extreme, the countries with the highest levels of trust are Canada, the United States and Mexico, with 79.3, 74.8 and 70.8 points respectively. At the other extreme, the countries with the lowest levels of trust are Honduras, Paraguay, and Argentina, with 51.9, 41.5 and 36.3 points respectively.

Do these national trust averages in the Armed Forces hold after controlling for socio-economic and demographic individual characteristics? To respond to this question, we insert sex, age, education, wealth, and size of town as control variables, and we eliminate both the U.S. and Canada cases in part because these countries have such high levels of socio-economic development compared to the others, that any statistical analysis would be affected by these “outliers,” and in part because the LAPOP project’s predominant focus is on policy-relevant questions for the Latin American and Caribbean region. Figure 2 shows that after controlling for standard SES variables, the country ranking remains remarkably similar in comparison to the ranking displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 2. Levels of Trust in the Armed Forces after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



The statistical analyses show that the variation in levels of trust is not only significant across individuals but also among countries. Even though most of the variation in levels of trust can be explained by the differences among individuals, 11 percent of the total variation is due to the effect of country factors.⁶ What factors might matter in explaining this variation across countries? To answer that question we fit a multi-level model to determine not only the impact of individual socio-economic and demographic characteristics, but also the effects of contextual factors across countries on the levels of trust in the Armed Forces.⁷

⁶ The intra-class correlation is 11.22

⁷ This analysis is carried out using multi-level regression techniques (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002), as implemented by LAPOP on STATA 10. The model simultaneously takes into account both individual and country-level (i.e., contextual) factors, and produces correct regression estimates that are impossible with standard OLS regression.

⁴ Non-response for this question was 3.12% for the whole sample.

⁵ For more information about levels of trust in various institutions, see previous issues of this *Insights* series.

Predictors of Trust in the Armed Forces

As noted in the scholarly literature, the 1970s and 1980s displayed a wide wave of politically repressive governments in Latin America. As a result, one evident factor that may affect the levels of trust in the Armed Forces is the degree of political repression experienced by citizens during dictatorial regimes. Specifically, we would expect that, *ceteris paribus*, people from countries that have experienced relatively higher degrees of political and military terror have lower levels of trust in the Armed Forces. To verify this hypothesis, we modeled the effects of the average “Political Terror Scale, 1976-2005” on trust in military institutions.⁸

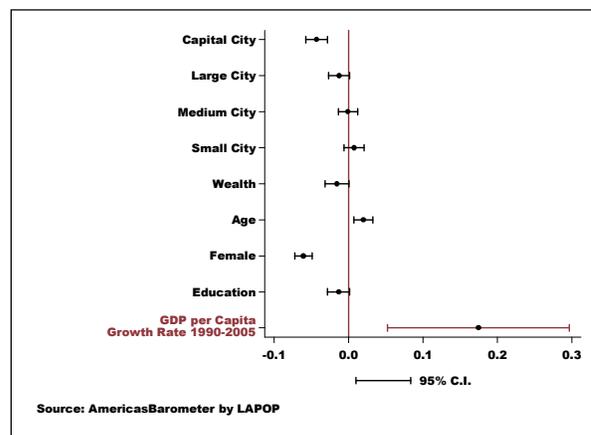
The results of this analysis did not yield any statistical evidence supporting the hypothesis that military repression is statistically correlated with levels of trust in Latin America’s Armed Forces.⁹ In fact, Figures 1 and 2 show that high levels of trust appear not to be related to repression alone (as evidenced by Chile and Brazil, but not Argentina) but perhaps to whether the military, repressive or not, “succeeded” in achieving other goals.

What national-level goals might explain the levels of trust in the Armed Forces? One possibility that emerges is performance. Government output has been found to increase levels of trust in other public institutions (see, for example, previous *Insights* reports focused on political parties) and, moreover, some literature also shows that in many countries the Armed Forces are now playing an actual role in development.

To verify this new hypothesis, we modeled economic growth as a national-level predictor of trust in the Armed Forces at the individual-level. In this case, results from the regression analysis shows that the GDP per capita growth

rate, computed as the yearly average growth per country from 1990 to 2005, is positively related to trust in the Armed Forces. In other words, as the average annual growth rate increases, individuals tend to report more trust in the military in Latin America and the Caribbean. Presumably, this relationship may be due to a higher level of general trust in national institutions as a result of economic progress. It is possible that individuals associate the growth of the economy with a positive role of the Armed Forces. Of course, more research is needed to determine with more precision the causes of this relationship. Results from the regression are depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3.
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Trust in the Armed Forces: The Impact of Economic Growth, 2008



In the figure above, each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables on trust in the Armed Forces is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical “0” line indicates a positive contribution, and if to the left of the “0” line a negative contribution. Statistically significant contributors are shown by confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot; only when the confidence intervals do not overlap the vertical “0” line is the factor significant (at .05 or better). The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients (i.e., “beta weights”).

⁸ This scale is continuously updated by Prof. Mark Gibney, and the data are available at:

<http://www.politicalterrorsscale.org/>

⁹ The p-value for this relationship is greater than one half.

The results displayed in Figure 3 show that the variable with the most important impact is sex. Women trust the Armed Forces *less* in comparison to men. Next, as individuals grow older, they tend to express more trust in the army. Finally, individuals residing at national capitals trust the Armed Forces *less* than individuals residing in small, medium and large cities, as well as those living in rural areas. The effects of education and wealth (measured as capital goods ownership) are not statistically significant at the .05 level; however, they are significant at .1. For this reason we do not conclude that these variables and trust in the Armed Forces are unrelated in order to avoid a potential type II error.

As mentioned before, national context matters, and its importance is highlighted in specific terms in Figure 4; the higher the GDP per capita growth, the higher the average citizen's trust in the Armed Forces. For example, if a Venezuelan individual with a given set of socio-economic characteristics were to migrate from Venezuela to Chile, all other things being equal, and none of her individual characteristics such as sex, age, area size, etc. were to change, that person's trust in the Armed Forces would increase by nearly 20 points on the 0-100 scale.

Figure 4.
Economic growth and Trust in the Armed Forces in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008

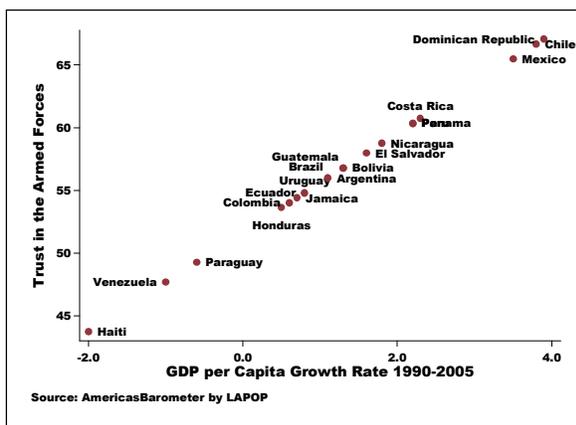


Figure 4 above shows the fitted line from the multi-level model. It is important to note that the predicted line above also fits the countries that were outliers on a regular scatter plot. This ©2009, Latin American Public Opinion Project, "Insights" series
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is the reason why the placement of Brazil and Argentina, for example, appear to be inconsistent with the rankings presented in Figures 1 and 2. Nevertheless, the placement of most countries (the non-outliers) is consistent with what we observed in the national averages depicted earlier, stressing the robustness of our findings.

Policy Implications

In this study we found a very important relationship that we think needs to be further explored in the social sciences literature: as the average annual economic growth increases, citizen's trust in the Armed Forces becomes higher. This finding suggests that despite the military authoritarian wave nearly three decades ago, citizens' confidence in the Armed Forces depends more of economic growth than past excessive use of force. It also suggests a comprehensive effect of government performance on political trust variables. Combined with earlier findings in the *Insights* series, the results begin to establish a pattern in which better performance positively affects trust in political institutions of all types.

It is also important to know that trust in the Armed Forces remains relatively high in the region in comparison to other institutions. At the individual level, men and older individuals expressed higher levels of trust in the Armed Forces. Finally, citizens residing in the national capital city show lower levels of trust than individuals residing in other places. These relationships will be studied in future *Insight* reports, in order to test whether they are a general pattern of institutional trust.

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