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# Political Parties and Representation in Latin America

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Political parties perform functions essential to any democracy. Among these functions is their critical role as representatives of society's interests (Gunther and Diamond 2001; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). However, recent studies suggest that a crisis of representation is occurring, specifically in contexts like Latin America. As some authors point out, this crisis occurs when "citizens do not believe they are well represented" (Mainwaring et al. 2006: 15).

In order to better understand citizen dissatisfaction with the basic institutions of representation, this new paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* analyzes the extent to which people in the Americas consider that political parties represent their voters. This report is the second of the *Insight Series* studies to examine political parties<sup>1</sup>; a previous report addressed the lack of confidence in political parties in the region. This time, we again query the 2008 database provided by the

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

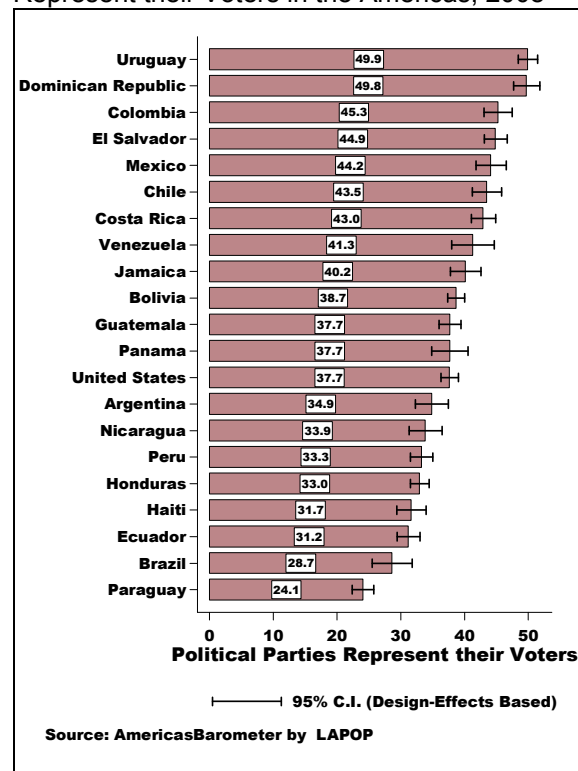
AmericasBarometer survey carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 21 nations.<sup>2</sup> In this survey 34,469 respondents were asked the following question:

**EPP1.** To what extent do you agree or disagree that political parties represent their voters?

Respondents placed their opinion on a 1-7 scale, where 1 meant 'not at all' and 7 meant 'a lot'.

These responses were recalibrated on a 0-100 scale in order to make comparisons across questions and survey waves easier.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows national averages for the 21 countries in the sample.

**Figure 1.**  
 Average Agreement that Political Parties Represent their Voters in the Americas, 2008



<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Non-response was 10.94% for the whole sample.

The relatively low levels of support for the belief that political parties represent their voters in the Americas is noteworthy. In *every* country, the average level falls below 50 points on the 0-100 scale. Uruguay and Dominican Republic are the countries with the highest levels of support for the belief that political parties represent their voters, close to the mid point, whereas at the other extreme we find Haiti, Ecuador, Brazil, and Paraguay, countries that display scores around 30 points. In general terms, we could say that citizens in the Americas do not consider that political parties are good representatives of their interests.

As noted, in a previous report (I0802) we examined levels of confidence in political parties. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there is a positive overall relationship between confidence in political parties and belief that parties represent voters' interests. However, the correlation is not exceptionally high (0.43). In what follows we examine the determinants of attitudes about political parties as vehicles for representation and, while this couldn't be foretold *a priori*, we find a story that is similar to that in our previous study.

## Explaining Belief that Parties Represent Their Voters

What explains variation in the belief that political parties represent their voters? We will focus on individual characteristics of the respondents in our surveys to answer this question.<sup>4</sup> 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 a linear regression model.<sup>5</sup> Given that citizens in the United States have sharply higher levels

<sup>4</sup> Multilevel analyses predicting to what extent people agree that political parties represent their voters 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.

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

on these socio-economic characteristics, we exclude this country from the analysis.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 2.** Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Support for the Belief that Political Parties Represent their Voters in Latin America, 2008

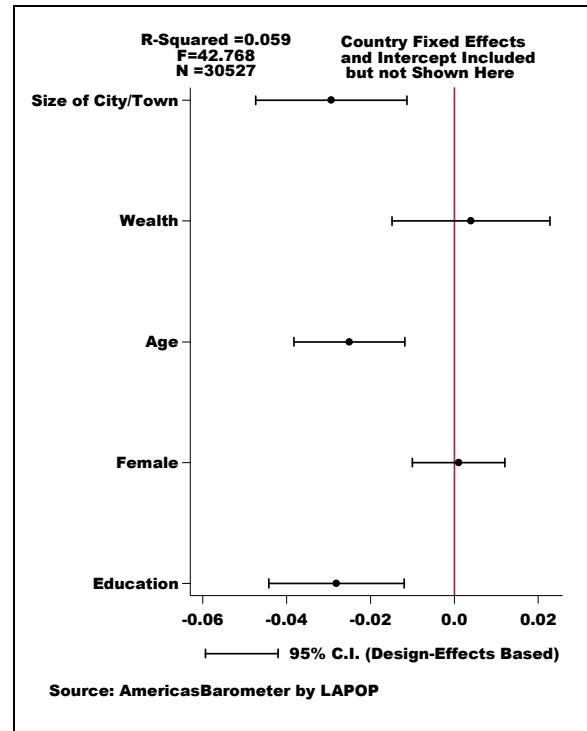


Figure 2 shows the influence of these individual-level socio-economic and demographic characteristics on the belief that political parties represent well voters in Latin America. Three out of the five variables considered are statistically significant, although the size of their effects is relatively small. 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 model, size of the city, age, and education are statistically significant contributors. In this

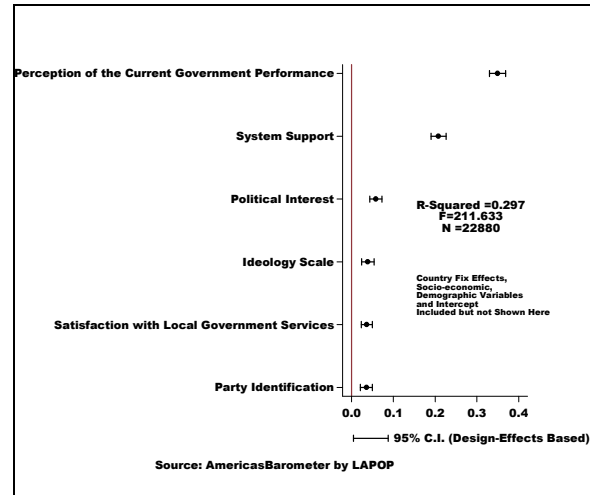
<sup>6</sup> To capture the variation across countries the model included dummy variables for each country, using Uruguay (the country with the higher score on the dependent variable) as the reference country.

sense, people living in rural areas or small towns tend to agree more that political parties represent their voters than people living in large cities, *ceteris paribus*. Older people express more positive evaluations of political parties in the same way, more than younger cohorts. Finally, also holding constant the rest of variables, people with higher levels of education are more skeptical than people with lower levels of education. Levels of wealth and gender do not make a difference.

In order to have a more reasonable and accurate idea of the determinants of support for the idea that parties represent their voters, we need to include in our model political evaluations and attitudes. In a previous *Insight Series* report, we assessed the expectation that citizens' trust in political parties is related to government performance. Drawing on this same basic argument, Figure 3 displays the results of a new model intended to explain citizens' evaluations of parties as good channels of representation in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

The effects of these new variables in the model are particularly notable when contrasted with those we found for education, age, and city/town size. The effects of perception of government performance and system support in particular are larger than those found earlier for socio-economic and demographic variables.

**Figure 3.**  
An Analysis of the Determinants of Average Support for the Belief that Political Parties Represent their Voters in Latin America, 2008



As others have also pointed out (Mainwaring et al. 2006), citizens' perceptions about representatives depend on outputs, that is to say, on the way citizens consider that representatives perform their duties. This hypothesis is supported by this analysis: the higher the perception of current government performance<sup>8</sup>, the higher the support for the idea that parties are representing voters.

<sup>7</sup> 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. It is worth noting that gender gains significance once attitudes are included, whereas size of town and wealth change the sign of their effect.

<sup>8</sup> The Perception of the Government Performance Index was constructed from five items that asked to what extent people thought the current administration fights poverty, combats government corruption, promotes and protects democratic principles, improves the security of citizens, and combats unemployment

The results also indicate that “system support,” or a belief in the legitimacy of the system of government,<sup>9</sup> has a relatively strong effect on evaluations of parties as representatives. Again we find that belief in the legitimacy of the political system as a whole is related to views of political parties.

Apart from performance at the national level, satisfaction with outputs at local level is also found to be important, as Figure 3 shows. The higher the satisfaction with the services provided by local governments the higher the support for the idea that parties represent their voters, *ceteris paribus*. This impact is, however, not as strong as we found for national-level performance.

Political interest and party identification are also statistically significant predictors, though again with a smaller effect. People interested in politics and those who identify with parties tend to believe that parties perform well representing citizens. Although in the relationship with party identification in particular the causal arrow may go in both directions, we consider that this nonetheless noteworthy in light of low levels of party identification in the region.

Finally, we included as a predictor the role of ideology as expressed on the classic 1-10 scale of left-right self-identification. As Figure 3 shows, this factor is statistically significant (again though with a relatively small effect). The results show that people who self-identified with the right tend to support the idea that parties represent their voters more than those who identified with the left.

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<sup>9</sup> System Support Index is measured through the following questions: B1. To what extent do you believe the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial? B.2 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

Given the importance of the functions that political parties perform within the framework of liberal democracies, it is important to consider how to improve citizens’ perceptions of the ability of parties to accomplish these tasks. In this case, we ask how might citizens’ evaluations of parties’ ability to represent citizens be improved?

As we saw when we analyzed confidence in political parties, the AmericasBarometer data suggest again that citizens are holding political parties responsible for the extent to which government does or does not satisfy their basic needs. In this sense, in order to increase support for the idea that parties accomplish their representative function, the belief that regimes fulfill their objectives and satisfy people’s demands at the national level (in terms of general performance) and at the local level (in terms of service) needs to be increased.

More efforts made to fight corruption, crime, and poverty, and promoting and protecting basic rights and the rule of law, should be among the principal priorities in any policy making agenda, according to our analysis. Achieving higher levels of political interest among citizens and stronger ties with political parties would be also useful. Given the positive relationship between perceptions of representation and that examined earlier, namely trust in political parties, we can be reasonably sure that such efforts will increase evaluations of political parties across several dimensions.

In conclusion, perceptions about the extent to which parties represent their voters are importantly explained by political attitudes and evaluations that are related to issues of system effectiveness and performance at both national and local levels. We suspect that efforts to improve government performance across a range of policy areas would, among other things, help to decrease the widespread general dissatisfaction with political parties in the Americas.

## REFERENCES

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Appendix: Determinants of the Belief that Parties Represent Their Voters				
	Regression I		Regression II	
	Coef.	Err. est.	Coef.	Err. est.
Education	-0.028*	(0.008)	-0.038*	(0.008)
Female	0.001	(0.006)	0.013*	(0.006)
Age	-0.025*	(0.007)	-0.045*	(0.007)
Wealth	0.003	(0.010)	-0.002	(0.009)
Size of City/Town	-0.029	(0.009)	0.011	(0.008)
System Support			0.208*	(0.009)
Political Interest			0.039*	(0.008)
Ideology Scale			0.058*	(0.008)
Efficacy of the Current Government			0.349*	(0.010)
Satisf. Local Services			0.037*	(0.007)
Party Identification			0.036*	(0.007)
Mexico	-0.048*	(0.011)	-0.015*	(0.008)
Guatemala	-0.099*	(0.009)	-0.049*	(0.009)
El Salvador	-0.0432	(0.009)	0.027*	(0.007)
Honduras	-0.136*	(0.008)	-0.020*	(0.007)
Nicaragua	-0.129*	(0.011)	-0.028*	(0.010)
Costa Rica	-0.059*	(0.009)	-0.038*	(0.008)
Panama	-0.095*	(0.012)	-0.008	(0.009)
Colombia	-0.039*	(0.010)	-0.033*	(0.008)
Ecuador	-0.192*	(0.012)	-0.095*	(0.012)
Bolivia	-0.116*	(0.011)	-0.050*	(0.010)
Peru	-0.122*	(0.009)	-0.017*	(0.008)
Paraguay	-0.174*	(0.008)	-0.023*	(0.007)
Chile	-0.045*	(0.011)	-0.006	(0.009)
Brazil	-0.161*	(0.013)	-0.081*	(0.010)
Venezuela	-0.065	(0.014)	0.009	(0.014)
Argentina	-0.111*	(0.011)	-0.027*	(0.011)
Dominican Republic	-0.006	(0.010)	0.000	(0.008)
Haiti	-0.143*	(0.011)	-0.020*	(0.010)
Jamaica	-0.0752*	(0.011)	-0.020*	(0.009)
Constant	-0.002*	(0.009)	0.017*	(0.008)
R-squared	0.059		0.296	
N	30527		22880	
* p<0.05				