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Trust in Elections

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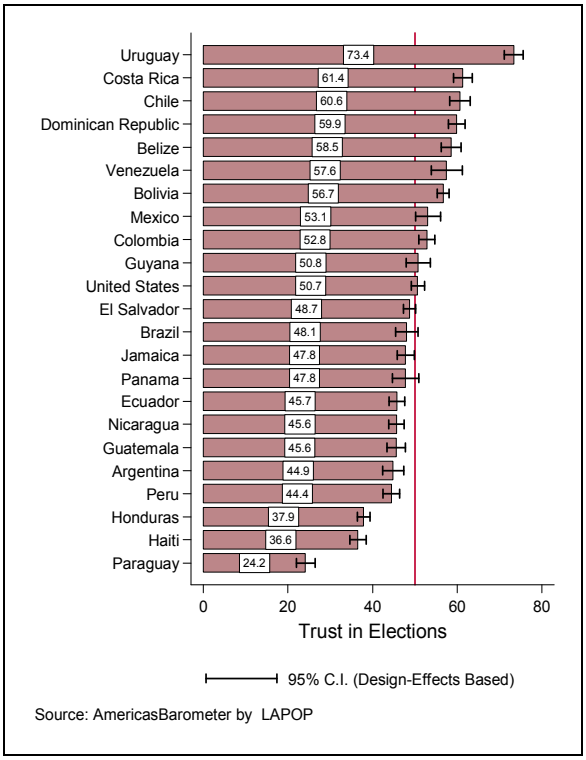
Elections are the keystone of representative democracy. While they may not be sufficient for democratic consolidation, electoral processes remain essential to democracy and democratic legitimacy (Diamond, 1999). Recently, the political crisis in Honduras has focused attention on presidential elections as a means to mend political divisions. A single public vote is unlikely to resolve deep societal and political problems; however, trust in the electoral *process* is integral to acceptance of the outcome as legitimate (Anderson et al., 2005). This *AmericasBarometer Insights Series* report looks at citizens' trust in elections.[1] To do so, I employ the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys.[2] In this round 38,535 respondents from 23 nations[3] in North, Central, South America, and the Caribbean were asked the same question:

B47. To what extent do you trust elections? Responses were given based on a 1-7 scale, where '1' indicates "not at all" and '7' indicates "a lot." These responses were then recalibrated on a 0-100 scale to conform to the LAPOP standard, which facilitates comparability across questions and survey waves.[4] Figure 1 displays each nation's average score with its confidence interval. I find that there are three distinct groups of nations when measuring trust in elections in the Americas. One group – the top nine countries – is higher than the neutral point (50), another – the middle six – hovers around the neutral point, and a third group – the last eight – falls well below 50.

Figure 1.
Average Trust in Elections in the Americas Compared to Neutral Line at 50 Points, 2008



Uruguay leads all countries at 73.4 points, followed at a distance by Costa Rica (61.4) and Chile (60.6). At the other extreme, we find Paraguay, Haiti, and Honduras, countries where

* 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.

[3] Interviewers did not ask the question in Canada.

[4] Non-response was 3.80% for the sample excluding Canada. Four countries had non-response rates over 5%: Guatemala (8.65%); Honduras (5.98%); Dominican Republic (5.18%); and Belize (13.21%).

the average score falls below 38 points and at 24.2 for Paraguay. Notably, despite its long democratic history, U.S. citizens are ambivalent in their trust of elections (50.7 points).

How much of this variation across countries emerges from differences in individuals' socio-economic and demographic characteristics? In order to assess the effects of these characteristics, I control for education, gender, age, wealth, and city/town size. Given that the United States holds sharply higher levels on socioeconomic characteristics and given the focus on Latin America and the Caribbean, I exclude it from the analysis for a total sample size of 37,035.[5]

Figure 2.
Average Trust in Elections after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean Compared to Neutral Line at 50 Points, 2008

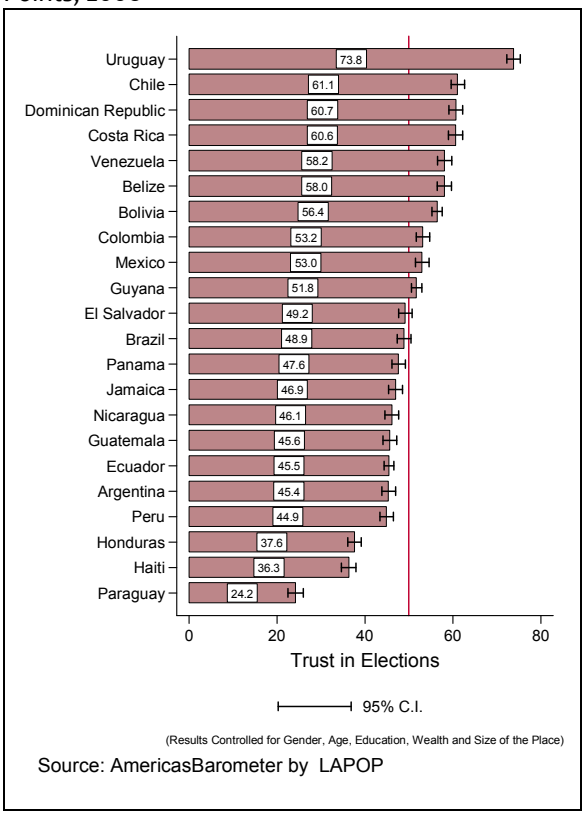


Figure 2 shows that the results remain remarkably consistent with Figure 1: the national averages remain almost the same.[6] In addition, similar cross-national rank-orderings remain evident. Still, there is a much smaller neutral group than previously: only El Salvador and Brazil cross the neutral reference line with their confidence intervals. This suggests that the survey question has tapped into attitudes with significant cross-national variance and some level of meaning for individuals. Therefore, we must search for other factors that might help to explain the variations in trust across countries.

Do Contextual Factors Matter?

While controlling for citizens' socio-economic and demographic characteristics does not have much effect on the observed cross-national variation in trust in elections, individual political attitudes and behaviors and national characteristics may have more influence. The question is, which attitudes and behaviors and what characteristics?

Figures 1 and 2 presented some surprises in terms of national rankings with rich and poor nations included in both high and low trust groups. Moreover, highly democratic nations such as Uruguay and Costa Rica appear at the top of trust in elections as we might expect. However, the ambivalence of respondents in the US (see Figure 1) indicates that neither the level of economic development nor the level of democracy tell the whole story. Therefore, I construct a model that also includes individual attitudes as predictors of trust in elections.

The classic problem with elections is that they *de facto* divide the population into winners and losers. Work by Anderson et al. (2005) shows that voters whose preferred candidate loses in an election have less trust in government. Based on their results, I theorize that a similar relationship will hold for trust in elections. Therefore, it is necessary to control for those who reported voting for the winning candidate in the previous presidential election because their acceptance of election results and thus trust

[5] The non-response rate for the sample without the United States or Canada is 3.95%.

[6] An analysis of variance model was employed, with the socio-economic and demographic variables used as covariates.

in elections should be statistically and substantively higher than that of electoral losers. Although there may be an over-reporting of having voted for the winning candidate in survey measures, merely *believing* that one chose the winner should have a positive impact on trust in elections.

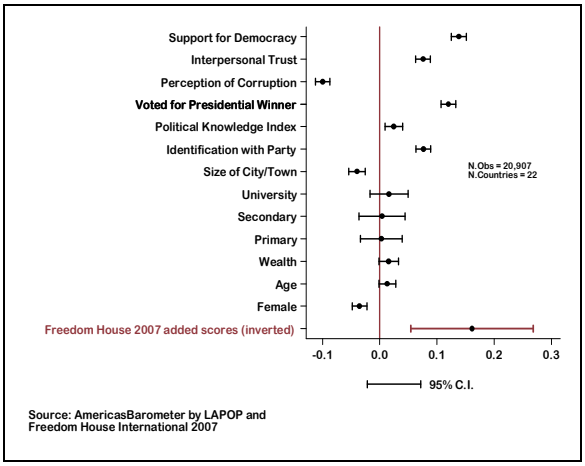
The model also includes individual-level variables regarding generalized support for democracy (the Churchillian attitude). Moreover, I include measures of interpersonal trust, perceptions of corruption, political knowledge, identification with a political party, and standard socioeconomic and demographic controls.

I expect that individuals who support democracy as the best form of government despite its flaws will exhibit a higher level of trust in elections. Similarly, I expect that individuals who have a higher level of generalized interpersonal trust will trust more in elections because of the inherently social aspects of this form of political participation. If most people can be trusted, then it is easier to believe that elections and the reported election results are legitimate. I further considered whether perceptions of corruption would have a negative effect on trust, because, in theory, corruption should undercut trust and the legitimacy of societal institutions such as elections for those that witness and perceive corrupt acts.

Additionally, in line with the literature on political support (see Almond and Verba, 1963; Ginsberg and Weisberg, 1978), I expect that those who are more involved in politics will exhibit more support for democratic institutions. Therefore, I expect to see that those who have more political knowledge or who identify with a political party will have higher levels of trust in elections as one of the key institutional processes of democratic governance.

In Figure 3, both the individual characteristics of respondents and the level of democracy of the nation, measured by inverted 2007 Freedom House scores, are analyzed. After accounting for individual-level variables, nations with a more democratic context should have citizens that express more trust in elections.[7]

Figure 3.
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Average Trust in Elections, 2008



The impact of each variable is shown graphically by a dot, which if to the right of the vertical "0" line implies a positive contribution and if to the left of the "0" line a negative impact. Only when the confidence interval (the horizontal line) does not overlap the vertical "0" line is the variable statistically significant (at .05 or better). The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients (i.e., "beta weights").

Figure 3 shows that, holding individual attitudes constant, national level of democracy has a statistically significant impact on individual trust in elections. The more democratic the country is, the greater the trust in elections.[8]

7 This analysis is carried out using multi-level regression techniques (Raudenbush, et al. 2004), 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. Again, the United States is excluded from the analysis.

8 The Freedom House Index is a measure of freedom that is widely used as a proxy for the level of democracy in the scholarly literature. Freedom House Index 2007 is a composite measure of a country's level of democracy. It includes two measures of democracy: *political rights* and *civil liberties*. Both measures contain numerical ratings between 1 and 7 for each country with 1 indicating the "most free" and

Figure 3 also supports the expectations regarding the impact of individual attitudes and behaviors. Those who support democracy as the best form of government despite its flaws express more trust in elections.[9] In addition, interpersonal trust has a statistically significant positive association with trust in elections. Individuals who trust each other more also tend to trust elections more. We see in Figure 3 that the variable measuring perception of corruption[10] is also significant but negative, meaning that individuals who perceive corruption in their societies have significantly less trust in elections than individuals who do not.

The measures of political involvement are also statistically significant. Political knowledge[11] and identification with a party[12] both have positive effects on trust in elections, which means that feeling more of a sense of investment in the political process increases legitimacy.

Finally, as expected, the effect of reporting a vote for the winning candidate is very large and positive.[13] Those who reported a vote for the winner in the last presidential elections trust elections to a much larger degree than those whose candidate lost, all else equal.

Regarding socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, holding constant the rest of variables, level of education is insignificant. Moreover, neither the wealth nor the age of the respondent has a statistically significant effect. The size of the city/town of the respondent's residence is significant and negatively associated with trust in elections, meaning that residents of larger cities and towns tend to have less trust in elections. Interestingly, the variable for gender shows a negative and significant relationship with trust in elections, signifying that women have lower levels of trust in elections than men, even after controlling for other socio-economic and demographic factors.

Figure 4.
The Impact of Level of Democracy on Predicted Levels of Trust in Elections in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008

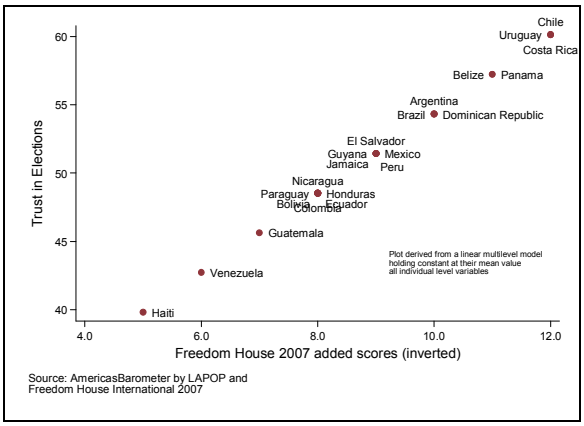


Figure 4 highlights the importance of national context. This figure shows the fitted line from the multi-level regression analysis with democracy scores as the national-level variable. The predicted line fits the countries' expected trust in elections according to the level of democracy measured by inverted Freedom House scores holding all the individual level variables constant. Higher levels of democracy predict higher trust in elections, with some

7 the "least free." In this short report, both measures were inverted and combined into an index with lower values indicating "less free" and higher "more free". This information was obtained at www.freedomhouse.org.

[9] The variable is measured based on a question that asks, "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements?" Responses were given on a 1-7 scale, where '1' indicates "strongly agree" and '7' indicates "strongly disagree." These responses were then recalibrated on a 0-100 scale.

[10] Both the trust measure and the perception of corruption measure used here are based on ordinal categorical response questions with four alternatives that were recalibrated on a 0 to 100 scale where 100 is high perception of corruption or high trust and 0 is low perception of corruption or low trust.

[11] This variable is measured on a scale from 0 to 5 based on the respondents' number of correct answers to a series of objective and factual political knowledge questions.

[12] Measured as a dummy (0 or 1) variable, where '1' indicates identification with a party.

[13] This is measured as a dummy (0 or 1) variable, where '1' indicates that the respondent reported a vote for the winning candidate in the last presidential elections. Because many individuals did not report their vote choice, this variable caused a large increase in missing data. I reran the model with all missing values for the variable coded at the mean (.568). This increased the number of observations to 30,906. The results are largely the same with the exception that the control variable for Age is significant in the positive direction.

variation around the neutral point (50). Substantively, if a citizen from Haiti (given Haiti's characteristics in 2008 prior to the earthquake in Port-au-Prince) with a given set of socio-economic characteristics were to move to Uruguay, Chile or Costa Rica, *ceteris paribus*, and none of his/her individual characteristics were to change, this person would demonstrate trust in elections that would be about 20 points higher on average than if this individual were to remain in Haiti.

It seems important to note that Argentina dramatically improves its position on trust in elections in Figure 4 compared to Figure 1. Given its level of democracy, Argentina's average trust in elections from Figure 1 falls well below its predicted value given in Figure 4. This suggests that Argentina is strongly influenced by some variable(s) not included in our model. This result may also reflect the impact of the "suitcase scandal" where a Venezuelan-American businessman was caught attempting to enter Argentina with nearly $800,000 in cash after a stop in the United States. U.S. authorities linked the man with the Cristina Kirchner campaign, although Kirchner denied any connection to the cash or influence by Venezuela on the campaign. The AmericasBarometer survey occurred in January-February 2008, not long after the scandal emerged in media outlets.

Policy and Program Implications

The findings of this report suggest that citizens in the Latin American and Caribbean region, on average, have neutral feelings toward elections, but that there is significant cross-national variation. Individual support for democracy conditions trust in elections. In addition, interpersonal trust, perceptions of corruption, vote for a winning candidate, political knowledge, identification with a political party, gender, and city/town size all have substantive effects. Trust in elections also depends on the contextual level of democracy.

The finding that women show lower trust in elections than men is one potentially interesting avenue for future inquiry. Given that other demographic variables such as wealth and education that might indicate a "traditionalism" bias show no significance, it is not clear what would explain this finding. It may be, however, that women express lower trust in elections due to the systematic underrepresentation of women in politics.

Another question relates to the causal mechanisms at work in this model. Although this is a subject for a more in-depth analysis, it is possible to speculate about the strong correlation between support for democracy and trust in elections. The model posits that support for democracy helps increase trust in elections, but it may be that individuals cannot support democracy until there is some baseline level of trust in the elections that give life – for better or worse – to that system of government. This suggests a reciprocal relationship, perhaps with some cumulative effects over time.

To return to the political crisis in Honduras, one wonders what impact elections may have in that country in overcoming the underlying political and societal problems of the nation (see Booth and Seligson, 2009). Given the general correlation between democracy and economic performance, if citizens live in a context where the economy has reached a relatively high *level* of development, we expect they would tend to trust elections to a greater degree. The level of economic development in Honduras, however, is not high nor is it clear that there is a sufficient level of democratic support to solidify trust or establish legitimacy. The results of the model presented here suggest that further investment in anti-corruption initiatives, particularly in urban areas, may be helpful. Additionally, investments that target women to improve their political representation and involvement may reap greater trust in elections. As demonstrated here, elections may be central to democracy, but their success at engendering legitimacy depends on background attitudes, individual perceptions, and contextual factors.

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