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Explaining Support for Vigilante Justice in Mexico¹

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Two fundamental responsibilities of states are the protection of citizens' security and the meting out of punishment against those who engage in criminal acts. To the extent that states fail in these roles, they lose legitimacy (Donnelly, 2006). Not surprisingly, states prefer that citizens use official law enforcement institutions to resolve differences, to seek protection, and to dole out retribution for crime (Donnelly, 2006). However, frustration with states' (in)effectiveness has, to varying degrees, led citizens of the Americas to choose to take justice into their own hands. Indeed, the AmericasBarometer² survey shows that, to varying degrees, many citizens of the Americas express support for such citizen-administered justice.

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¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>
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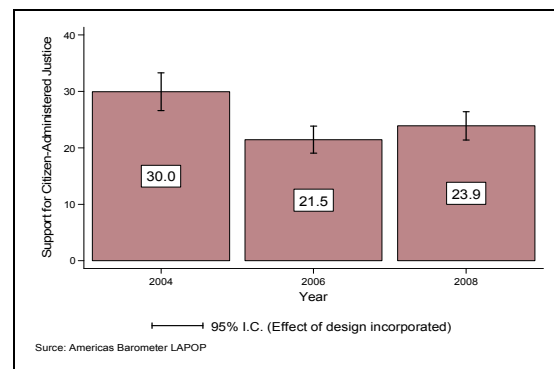
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This behavior, often referred to as vigilantism and/or lynching (“lynchamientos” is the anglicized term used often in the Americas), has been widespread in recent years in Guatemala, Bolivia (Goldstein, 2003; Handy, 2004), Peru (BBC Mundo, 2004a), and other countries.

In Mexico, from 1984 to 2001 there were at least 294 cases of actual or attempted lynching (Díaz-Fuentes, 2004).³ For example, in 2004 two police officers were lynched for their alleged role in organized crime in Mexico City’s Tlahuac neighborhood (BBC Mundo, 2004b). Support for citizen-administered justice among pockets of citizens is also seen in the case of the Mormon “LeBaron” community, whose members, after a number of murders, recently opted to arm themselves in self-defense (Milenio, 2009).

This *Insights* report examines the determinants of support for citizen-administered justice in Mexico. Specifically, I argue that this attitude can be fueled by the combination of low confidence in state law enforcement institutions and, surprisingly, high levels of interpersonal trust. This report thus shows what has been termed the “dark side” of social capital: high social cohesion combined with low perceptions of state effectiveness in ensuring citizens' security leads to more support for vigilante justice in Mexico

Figure 1. Mean Levels of Support for Citizen-Administered Justice Mexico, 2004-2008.



³ Just over 35% of these lynchings resulted in the death of the victim.

Figure 1 shows survey respondents' mean level of support for citizen-led justice in Mexico in 2004, 2006, and 2008. The data are from the corresponding waves of the AmericasBarometer survey. The figure is based on the following question, to which respondents could answer using a one to ten scale that was rescaled from zero to 100 to follow the LAPOP standard:

E16. How much do you approve or disapprove of people taking the law into their own hands when the government does not punish criminals?

As Figure 1 indicates, mean support in Mexico for citizens taking the punishment of criminals into their own hands has fluctuated in recent years between 21.5 and 30 units. While these values are not overwhelmingly high, they are cause for concern. To look at this a different way, the 2008 AmericasBarometer survey in Mexico shows that roughly 20 percent of respondents openly express support for vigilante justice (that is, they fall on the approve side of the 50 unit mid-point, in a histogram of the data not shown here).

The Joint Importance of Trust and Institutions in Explaining Support for Citizen-Administered Justice

Since the influential work of de Tocqueville (1835) first touched on the issue in his analysis of the burgeoning American political system, many authors have seen social capital as crucial to a well-functioning democracy (Fukuyama, 1996; Newton, 2001; Putnam & Feldstein, 2004; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1994; among many others).

Social capital is believed to promote government accountability and responsiveness (Putnam et al., 1994). Additionally, social capital presumably allows individuals in a community to interact with each other without the need for external authorities policing relations and agreements (Newton, 2001; Putnam, 2001; Putnam & Feldstein, 2004; Putnam et al., 1994); social capital

facilitates interpersonal interactions by promoting people's belief that others will "act in their best interests" (Newton, 2001, p. 202).

While social capital has been empirically associated with beneficial outcomes for the democratic life of a country, scholars also recognize that "not all externalities of social capital are positive" (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004, p. 1437). Indeed, some academics suggest it is important to consider this "dark side" of social capital (Armony, 2004; Boggs, 2000, 2001; Tarrow, 1996, 1998).

Thus, researchers have theorized and found relationships between social capital and various phenomena that might be considered unhealthy from the perspective of democracy. These phenomena include outsider exclusion (Waldinger, 1995); corruption (Graeff, 2007; Schweitzer, 2005; Treisman, 2000); free-riding (Portes, 1998); social obstacles for individual success and conformism (Portes, 1998); rent seeking behavior (Olson, 1984); and even the manifestation and perpetuation of contentious social movements such as gangs and militias (Bourgois, 1996; Tarrow, 1998).

In line with these previous works, I also propose that social capital can produce attitudes that are inherently problematic for democracy. Specifically, I argue that high levels of interpersonal trust can lead to greater support for non-state sanctioned citizen-administered justice – *when* it appears alongside a lack of confidence in state law enforcement institutions.⁴

The first part of my argument is that distrust in state law-enforcement institutions increases levels of support for vigilante justice more strongly as levels of interpersonal trust increase. This expectation is based on the reasoning that

⁴ In previous reports in the *Insights* Series, social capital has been studied from the perspective of understanding the determinants of various types of civic engagement (Cruz, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c); these reports look at the determinants of civic participation, which is believed to be linked to, and foster, interpersonal trust.

citizens might be more willing to support the communal overriding of the official rule of law if they trust that their neighbors will act in their best interest. Additionally, it might be the case that high social capital increases support for vigilante justice by increasing the sympathy gap (see Black, 1997) between those who conform to the rules of the neighborhood and those who do not.

The second part of the argument is that the effect of interpersonal trust in support for vigilante justice is conditional on levels of confidence in state law enforcement. In Mexico, the salience and pervasiveness of economic and security problems (Consulta, 2010) send a signal to citizens that the state lacks control in at least certain domains, including security and justice. Some local communities have found themselves outside the protection of state authorities, subject either to little rule of law or, where sufficient social capital exists, developing forms of local control (Yashar, 1999). Where the state's ineffectiveness spreads to the realm of rule of law and it no longer has a monopoly over violence, communities may see collective violence as a "...moralistic response to deviant behavior" (Senechal de la Roche, 1996, p. 98).

In short, I argue that support for citizen-administered justice is most likely to occur when confidence in state institutions is low and levels of interpersonal trust are high, a situation that both motivates and facilitates collective action and may fuel less tolerance of behavior that deviates from the collective will.

This argument is consistent with that made by Senechal de la Roche (2001), who draws from Black's (1997) work to propose that, "Lynching is a joint function of strong partisanship (understood as sympathy) toward the alleged victim and weak partisanship toward the alleged offender" (2001, p. 126) and conversely, in the cases where sympathy towards the aggressor and the victim is equal, the occurrence of a lynching becomes less likely.

In summary, there are theoretical reasons to expect that citizen-administered justice will prevail when two conditions are jointly met: first, there exist high levels of interpersonal trust and, second, individuals perceive state institutions to be incompetent in the realm of providing security against private violence (see Donnelly, 2006).

Though it is beyond the scope of this study (as well as the data from the AmericasBarometer) to assess factors that account for participation in lynching episodes, this report can assess whether the factors highlighted here predict support for such behavior. Support for such behavior is important to examine because, first, it is likely more widespread than actual cases of lynching and, second, because high levels of support may create an environment that permits and even facilitates lynching.

METHOD

To assess the factors that predict support for vigilante justice in Mexico, I make use of the 2008 *AmericasBarometer* survey for Mexico. The field work was conducted in February of 2008. The project used a national probability sample design of voting-age adults that was both stratified and clustered, with a total number of 1,560 face-to-face interviews.

The attitude I seek to explain (the dependent variable in the analyses) is measured using the question featured above in Figure 1, which asks about support for citizens taking matters of justice into their own hands. This and all variables were rescaled to a 0-100 scale for ease of comparability in interpretation.

To measure interpersonal trust, I use the AmericasBarometer question IT1, which asks respondents to indicate how trustworthy people in the community are (for analysis

related to the validity of this question see Armony & Schamis, 2005; Cordova, 2008).⁵

In order to measure citizen confidence in the law enforcement capability of their state institutions, I create an index based on three variables: trust in the judicial system (B10A)⁶, trust in police (B18)⁷, and trust in the PGR (*Procuraduría General de la República*) (B16).⁸ The three indicators have good internal reliability (alpha: .80); I therefore combined them into a single additive index.

To assess my argument concerning the joint relevance of these variables, interpersonal trust and confidence in state law enforcement, I include an interaction term in the model. This term allows us to assess whether the effect of one predictor (interpersonal trust) is conditional on the level of another (confidence in law enforcement institutions), and vice versa (see Kam & Franzese, 2007).

In addition, I control for alternative explanations that have been proposed as predictors of support for community justice. First, wealth may matter. As Black (1976) states, "law varies directly with rank [e.g., income]. . . so that⁹ people with less wealth have less law. They are less likely to call upon the law in dealing with one another" (1976, p. 17). Second, in line with the statistics and research on lynching in Mexico, I control whether the respondent lives in an urban or rural area and lives in the federal district or not.¹⁰ I also control for other demographic factors: sex, age, and education.

⁵ IT1. Now, speaking of the people from here, would you say that people in this community are generally very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy?

⁶ B10A. To what extent do you trust the justice system?

⁷ B18. To what extent do you trust the police?

⁸ B16. To what extent to you trust the PGR?

⁹ Italics are mine.

¹⁰ Díaz-Fuentes' (2004) research on lynching in Mexico shows most cases were concentrated in Mexico City and selected Central and Southern states; he further shows that while typically more prevalent in rural areas, lynching has been growing in the urban context.

Another potentially important factor is the degree to which individuals in the community feel that their investment in the community is at risk. I therefore include in the model the respondents' perception of insecurity and measures of the respondents' involvement in the community (frequency of participation in community improvement meetings).

In addition, it is also possible that support for taking criminal matters into one's own hands is an extreme expression of support for direct (people-led) government; therefore, I include this political variable as a control in the study.

RESULTS

The full results of the multivariate regression analysis are presented in the Appendix.¹¹ The results show that the wealthier a person is, the less she will support people taking justice into their own hands; this is supportive of Black's (1976) hypothesis that wealth is negatively correlated with overriding the rule of law.

Additionally, *ceteris paribus*, an increase in the level of support for direct government is associated, as expected, with an increase in the support for vigilante justice. Likewise, the results show neighborhood insecurity is positively related to support for vigilante justice.

In line with the statistics presented by Díaz-Fuentes (2004) on the incidence of lynching in Mexico, on average, people in rural areas and in Mexico City (the D.F.) show greater agreement with the notion that people take justice into their own hands, compared to non-rural and non-Mexico city areas respectively. The results further show that age is negatively related to the dependent variable: older people are less supportive of vigilante justice.

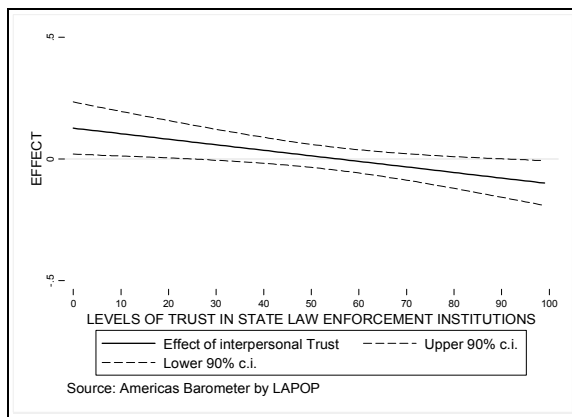
With respect to the principal variables in the model – interpersonal trust and confidence in state law enforcement – the results show a

¹¹ Analyses conducted with STATA v11.

significant interaction between trust in law enforcement institutions and interpersonal trust.

Interaction terms are notoriously difficult to interpret from regression output alone. Therefore, in order to interpret the meaning of this significant interaction (see Kam & Franzese, 2007), I have created Figure 2, which shows how different levels of trust in law enforcement institutions are associated with different effects of interpersonal trust on support for citizen-administered justice.

Figure 2 Changes in the effect of interpersonal trust on support for Vigilante Justice at different levels of trust in law enforcement institutions.¹²



As confidence in law enforcement institutions decreases, the effect of interpersonal trust on support for vigilante justice becomes positive (that is, the effect shifts directions, turning positive at 50 units and distinct from zero at 25 units). This means that under conditions of low confidence in state law enforcement, as interpersonal trust increases people’s support for taking matters in their own hands also increases.

To clarify this point, let us take two ideally identical¹³ persons as an example (Table 1). The first (right side of Table 1) has extremely high levels of trust in law enforcement institutions (a

score of 100); in that case, as her interpersonal trust increases, her support for people taking justice in their own hands decreases. To see this effect in different terms, we can create the predicted level of support for vigilante justice for an individual having the maximum level of confidence in law enforcement institutions at both minimum and maximum levels of interpersonal trust. Holding all other variables constant at their means or modes (for dichotomous variables), the analysis predicts an individual holding the maximum level of confidence in the law enforcement institutions would be expected to express support for citizen-administered justice at a level of 23 units if she has the minimum level interpersonal trust as opposed to 13 units if she holds the maximum level of interpersonal trust.

EFFECTS OF INTERPERSONAL TRUST ON SUPPORT FOR VIGILANTE JUSTICE	
AT LOW LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN STATE LAW-ENFORCEMENT INSTITUTIONS (0)	AT HIGH LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN STATE LAW-ENFORCEMENT INSTITUTIONS (100)
.13* (.065)	-.10* (.057)

However, in a contrasting situation (left side of Table 1), in which a person has extremely low levels of trust in law enforcement institutions (a score of 0), interpersonal trust has the opposite effect: the higher one’s sense of interpersonal trust, the more the person will support citizen-administered justice.¹⁴ Again, considering predicted values on the dependent variable, a person with the lowest levels of confidence in both law enforcement institutions and interpersonal trust would be expected to express support for citizen-administered justice equal to

¹² 90% Confidence Interval calculated with robust standard errors.

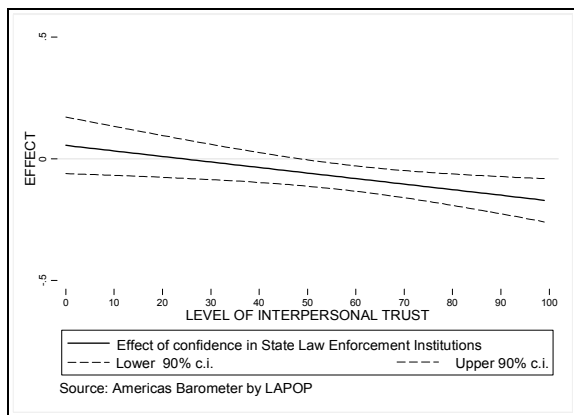
¹³All other relevant variables but interpersonal trust, confidence in the law enforcement institutions and their interaction are held constant.

¹⁴ It is important to point out that nearly 20% of the Mexican sample scored under the level where trust in the law enforcement institutions causes interpersonal trust to have a positive effect on support for citizen-administered justice.

17.5 units (all other variables at their means or modes). For the equivalent person who instead holds the maximum level of interpersonal trust, that predicted value jumps to just over 30 units.

On the other hand, the interaction results also indicate a differential effect of confidence in law enforcement institutions on support for citizen-administered justice at different levels of interpersonal trust. As shown in Figure 3, as levels of interpersonal trust increase (over 50 units), the effect of confidence in state law enforcement becomes negative and statistically significant while it is not statistically differentiable from 0 at low levels of interpersonal trust when holding constant control variables and alternative explanations.

Figure 3 Changes in the effect of confidence in law enforcement institutions on Vigilante Justice at different levels of interpersonal trust.¹⁵



As an example, when interpersonal trust is one standard deviation higher than its mean (86), a decrease of one standard deviation (25.73 units) of confidence in law enforcement institutions predicts an increase of 3.6 units in the support for people taking matters into their own hands.

In short, controlling for other important influences on support for citizen-administered justice, I find clear support for a conditional relationship between social capital

(interpersonal trust) and confidence in state law enforcement institutions in Mexico.

Conclusion

In his celebrated “Democracy in America”, de Tocqueville highlighted the value of a vibrant civic life, fueled by close and frequent associations. In the same way, other scholars have argued that interpersonal trust (and social capital more generally) can indeed be considered beneficial for societal order, democratic values, and even economic progress.

However, this classic vision has important limits. In line with those who caution against an overly-positive vision of social capital, this work confirms the existence of a dark side of social capital. Not only that, it demonstrates one important factor conditioning which “side” of social capital shows its face.

Specifically, the present study indicates that the effect of interpersonal trust on support for vigilante justice is contingent on the confidence that citizens allocate to the institutions in charge of law and order. As the results suggest, at moderately high levels of distrust in state law enforcement institutions, social capital (in the form of interpersonal trust) coheres groups of citizens in support of each other and against deviant (criminal) behavior.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the evidence suggests that social capital itself can serve as a modifier of the effect of attitudes toward the state. As was shown, confidence in state law enforcement institutions only influences attitudes supporting citizen-administered justice for those with high levels of social capital.

Finally, it is worth noting that another significant predictor of support for taking justice into one’s own hands is the amount of insecurity perceived in the neighborhood. This, in conjunction with the results regarding trust in law enforcing institutions underscores the

¹⁵ 90% Confidence Interval calculated with robust standard errors.

importance of building state justice institutions that are not only perceived as effective but indeed do reduce feelings of insecurity among citizens.

In conclusion, the results from this report suggest that democratic values among the mass citizenry, in this case lack of support for citizen-administered justice in Mexico, will be enhanced to the degree that reforms of law enforcement institutions (police, judiciary and the PGR) include: a) measures to increase and ensure strict respect for human rights; b) a strong battle against corruption within these institutions in order to increase accountability and confidence in them; c) program developments that make law enforcement institutions more effective at preventing and punishing crime. Such improvements will help increase confidence in state law enforcement and, in so doing, help keep one of the darker sides of social capital behind its mask.

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Appendix

Table A1.
Determinants of Support for Citizen-Administered Justice

	Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients
Confidence in State law enforcement	.055 (.065)	.123
Interpersonal Trust	.126* (.071)	.048
Confidence in Law x Interpersonal Trust ¹⁶	-.0023** (.001)	-.180
Wealth	-.112*** (.493)	-.076
Education	-.34 (.207)	-.053
Age	-.236*** (.05)	-.051
Insecurity Perception	.069 (.028)	-.133
Direct government	.126*** (.025)	.067
Communitarian improvement participation	-.006 (.032)	-.005
Rural	3.309* (1.84)	.052
DF	7.632*** (2.62)	.077
Women	-2.348 (1.5)	-.04
Constant	31.629*** (5.85)	.
R-Squared	.066	
F	8.49***	
N	1,481	

Ordinary least squares Regression.

Robust Standard Errors in parentheses.

Significance thresholds noted as follows: *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01

¹⁶ Because collinearity can be an issue when working with interactions, I conduct a collinearity test; none of the Variance Inflation Factors is higher than 10 which suggests that collinearity is not a severe issue in this case.

Table A2

Effects of Interpersonal trust on support for citizen-administered justice at different levels of confidence in law enforcement institutions

LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT	Effect of Interpersonal trust
0	.126* (.065)
10	.103* (.056)
20	.081* (.047)
30	.058 (.039)
40	.0354 (.034)
50	.012 (.029)
60	-.010 (.029)
70	-.0329 (.033)
80	-.055 (.040)
90	-.078 (.048)
100	-.10* (.057)

Significance thresholds noted as follows: *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01

Table A3

Effects of confidence in law enforcement institutions on support for citizen-administered justice at different levels of interpersonal trust

LEVEL OF INTERPERSONAL TRUST	Effect of Confidence in law enforcement
0	.055 (.07071)
10	.032 (.0612)
20	.010 (.052)
30	-.013 (.044)
40	-.036 (.037)
50	-.058* (.033)
60	-.082*** (.032)
70	-.104*** (.034)
80	-.127*** (.039)
90	-.15*** (.046)
100	-.173*** (.055)

Significance thresholds noted as follows: *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01