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Social Assistance Policies and the Presidential Vote in Latin America

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Executive Summary. In this *Insights* report we use a cross-national analysis of nine Latin American countries to determine what correlations, if any, exist between participation in social assistance programs, including conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs, and support for the incumbent presidential candidate or party. We find that in almost every country examined, social assistance recipients are more likely to vote for the incumbent than non-recipients, even after accounting for social class, economic perceptions, and national context. These results highlight that social programs have political effects in addition to their social and economic effects.

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Over the last two decades, Latin American governments have transformed their social policies (Barrientos and Santibáñez 2009). Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs are one of the more visible innovations. Programs like *Bolsa Família* in Brazil or *Oportunidades* in Mexico generally provide cash assistance for impoverished families on the condition that they keep their children in school and make use of public health services.

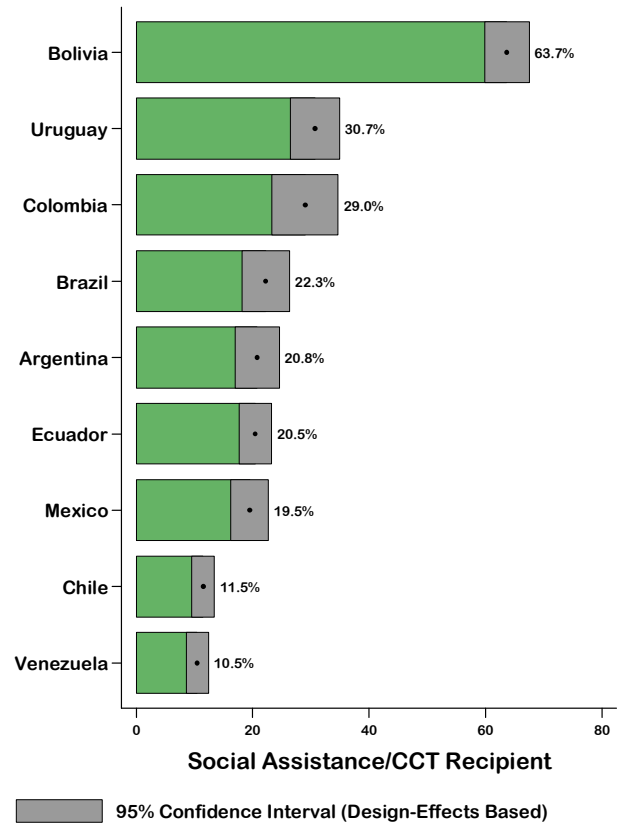
We explore the political effects of CCT and other social assistance programs. CCT program designs arguably streamline the provision of social assistance in ways that reduce or circumvent strategic manipulation by politicians (Fiszbein and Schady 2009). Nevertheless, many scholars have criticized social assistance programs in Latin America as legalized vote-buying schemes implemented with political expediency in mind (Bruhn 1996; Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2004; Calvo and Murillo 2004; Diaz-Cayeros 2008; Graham and Kane 1998; Penfold-Becerra 2007; Rocha-Menocal 2001; Schady 2000). A core of literature has built around the effects of participation in CCT programs on presidential electoral outcomes, particularly in Mexico and Brazil (Bohn 2011; Carraro, Araújo Junior, Damé, Monasterio, et al. 2007; Hunter and Power 2007; Licio, Rennó, and Castro 2009; Nicolau and Peixoto 2007; Zucco 2008).¹ In keeping with the spirit of that debate, the purpose here is to use a broader cross-national analysis to determine what correlations, if any, exist between participation in social assistance programs and support for the incumbent presidential candidate or party.

This AmericasBarometer *Insights* report takes advantage of a question from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer asking respondents whether they receive public social assistance.²

¹ Two other studies assess the relationship between voting and social assistance using the AmericasBarometer (Luna and Zechmeister 2010; Camargo and Rodríguez-Raga 2011).

² Funding for the 2010 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

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents Receiving Social Assistance in Latin America, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Respondents from nine countries in Latin America answered the following question:

CCT1. “Do you or does someone in your household receive monthly assistance in the form of money or goods from the government, for example, from [name of program(s)]?”

A response of “No” was coded as ‘0’, whereas affirmative responses were coded as ‘1’.³ Figure

Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>.

³ Non-response was 1.16% (weighted) across the nine countries. All analyses presented here were conducted using STATA v.11.2. The question also appeared in Peru, but we exclude Peru from the analysis given the lack of meaningful

1 presents the percentage of respondents in each country who receive social assistance (see Appendix A for a list of the programs).

Figure 1 shows that large proportions of the populations in these countries receive government assistance. About 10.5 percent of Venezuelans reported receiving assistance whereas 63.7 percent of Bolivians did so. Most countries analyzed here assist somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of their populations through social programs. These results highlight the wide variation in program coverage across the Americas.

In part the difference in coverage is a function of the programs mentioned in the question. For example, in Bolivia the AmericasBarometer

interviewers asked about *Bono Juancito Pinto*, *Renta Dignidad*, or *Bono Juana Azurduy*. According to the World Bank CCT Program Profile, the *Juancito Pinto* program targets all children up to the 6th grade, providing cash transfers to the students so long as they attend 75% of their classes (Fiszbein and Schady 2009). Clearly, such a universalistic program will have much wider participation than the means-tested programs adopted elsewhere.

Brazil's *Bolsa Família* is exemplary of means-tested CCT programs. According to the most recent legislation enacted by the Brazilian government, recipient families cannot earn more than R\$140 per month in household *per capita* income. Depending on the number and age of the children, families are then eligible to receive between R\$32 and R\$242 monthly. The program requires recipient families to vaccinate children under the age of 7 and keep children ages 6-15 in school for 85% of their classes each month. Sixteen- and seventeen-year old children are required to attend 75% of classes. Moreover, expectant mothers must participate in prenatal treatment. According to government figures,

responses on our dependent variable, because there was no viable candidate from the incumbent party.

more than 12 million families currently participate.⁴

The programs examined in Venezuela (*Misión Ribas*, *Misión Sucre*, and *Misión Madres del Barrio*) provide yet another view of social assistance in Latin America. The Chávez administration has implemented a broad range of social programs termed Bolivarian Missions, none of them conditional. *Misión Ribas* and *Misión Sucre* aim to help low-income adults complete secondary degrees and access higher education, while *Misión Madres del Barrio* provides cash grants and other services to very low-income women with dependents.

Despite the differences across nations and programs, it is important to assess what the *political* effects of such social

programs may be. This is particularly the case given their potential role in creating linkages between citizens and politicians in democratizing nations (Kitschelt 2000).

Presidential Voting and Social Assistance: Mechanisms of *Group Interest* and *Self-interest*

This *Insights* report explores whether participation in social assistance programs across Latin America relates to increased support for incumbent presidents in a hypothetical election.

Why might social assistance programs affect presidential voting? Incumbent presidents may seek to increase their vote share by claiming credit for or politicizing social assistance programs. These electoral strategies might play out through several mechanisms at the citizen level. First, not unlike lower income recipients of Social Security in the United States (Campbell 2003), social assistance recipients have a strong

⁴ For more information on the program, access the program webpage at <http://www.mds.gov.br/bolsafamilia>

self-interest in maintaining benefits, on which they heavily depend. There may be some uncertainty whether the opposition candidate or party would continue to fund the program; therefore, whether or not such trust is ultimately justified, those who currently receive social assistance will vote for the incumbent at higher levels because they are familiar with that candidate or party's first term behavior (Stokes 2001, 61), including implementing or maintaining the social policy that directly improves their economic condition.

Program beneficiaries may also see government assistance as a kind of group benefit provided to others like themselves. Vote share for the incumbent would then depend on the level of benefits provided in the community. As beneficiaries observe a broader policy impact in their community, the electoral rewards for the incumbent should grow. In this report we focus principally on the former explanation, though see Footnote 16 for an exploration of the latter argument's implications.

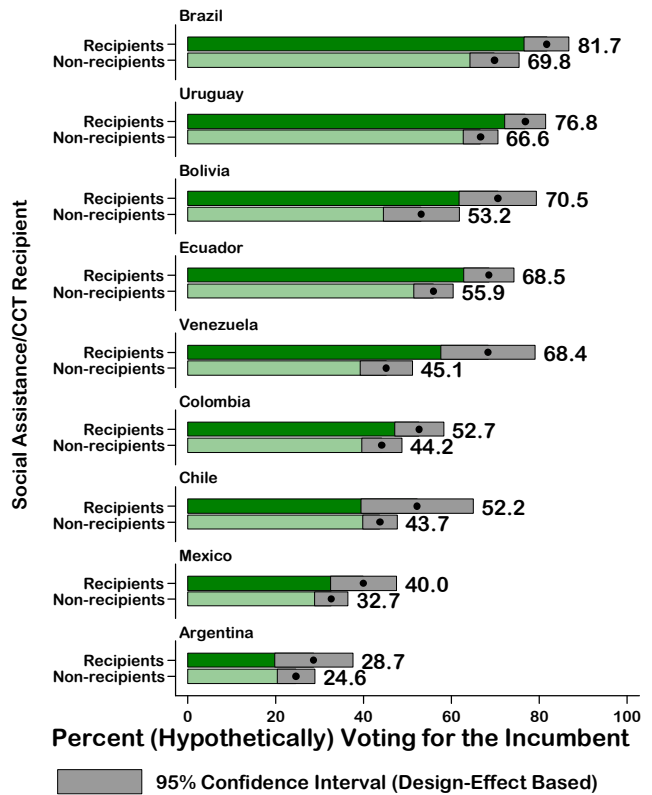
Figure 2 presents preliminary evidence that there are statistically significant differences between social assistance program recipients and non-recipients in a hypothetical vote for the incumbent – at least in some of the countries of Latin America. To assess who respondents would vote for, interviewers asked the following question:

VB20. If the next presidential elections were being held this week, what would you do?⁵

Respondents could indicate that they would not vote, they would vote for the incumbent candidate or party, they would vote for a non-

⁵ The question for Colombia is COLVB20; for Chile it is CHIVB3A. In Chile, where President Sebastián Piñera had just taken office, the question asked not about a hypothetical future vote, but rather about the actual vote in the recent presidential election. Supporters of Eduardo Frei were coded as voting for the incumbent party. Since those who said they would not vote or would vote blank were coded as missing, non-response across the region was very high: 40.8% (weighted). Still, this is a reasonable reflection of election turnout figures. We therefore feel that responses are a valid indicator of how a true election would play out.

Figure 2. Percent Who Would Vote for the Incumbent by Social Assistance Status, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

incumbent candidate or party, or they would vote but would leave their ballot blank. The vote percentages for the incumbent shown in Figure 2 are based only on individuals who indicated they would go to the polls and would not vote blank.

Without exception, a higher percentage of social assistance recipients would cast a hypothetical vote for the incumbent than would non-recipients. Pooling all the countries together, there is a statistically significant mean difference between recipients and non-recipients of 15.45 percentage points ($p < 0.000$). Still, there is considerable cross-national variation in the percentage difference. Argentina, for example, has a very narrow and insignificant gap (only 4.1 percentage points; $p = 0.404$) between recipients and non-recipients. Venezuela, by contrast, has the largest gap at 23.3 percentage points ($p < 0.000$).

Although these results are suggestive of a relationship between social assistance and a hypothetical vote for the incumbent, they are not definitive nor do they distinguish between the theoretical causes of such a relationship. The key problem is that, given its nature, social assistance is not randomly distributed in any of these countries. Therefore, these aggregated differences of means may disguise what are the true correlates of incumbent vote based on social class and individual level attitudes.

Social Assistance as a Determinant of the Presidential Vote

The model of presidential vote choice offered here attempts to isolate the relationship between social assistance receipt and the vote, independent of social class, evaluations of the incumbent president, and national context.

Because social assistance recipients are, by design, from poorer socioeconomic classes, we include controls for level of wealth⁶ and level of education. Thus, we isolate the correlations between social class and vote choice from the analysis of the effects of social assistance programs. In addition, many programs (especially CCT programs) target *female* heads of household; this necessitates a control for gender of the survey respondent to ensure that the effects observed are not due to gender. Furthermore, due to suggestions that social assistance programs are biased in favor of rural areas (*Economist* 2010; but see Layton 2010), the model controls for the size of the respondent's area of residence.

It could be argued that, even after controlling for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, there is something about the attitudes of social assistance recipients that would lead them to approve of an incumbent who has supported interventionist social policies. Those who are

predisposed to support public intervention may be more likely to make the effort to enroll in social assistance programs, leading to a spurious relationship between social assistance receipt and support for the incumbent. To alleviate any such concerns the model includes an index of support for interventionist policies.⁷ If the relationship between support for the incumbent and receipt of social assistance is driven by such attitudes, then including this measure should diminish or erase the effect of program participation.

Economic factors may also confound the effects of program participation. A large literature highlights economic conditions as a vital predictor of vote choice (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck 1988). Although social assistance might affect economic evaluations, given its effects on individual and group material conditions, we seek to determine whether the impacts of economic assistance are independent of broader economic perceptions. To this end the model includes a series of variables accounting for a respondent's perception of the current national economic situation⁸ and, at the household level, whether the respondent or a family member lost their job in the last two years⁹ and whether their household income has decreased in the last two years.¹⁰ The expectation is that any decrease in reported or perceived economic well-being will cause the respondent to have a lower likelihood of voting for the incumbent.

Finally, evaluations of the overall effectiveness of the current government should correlate strongly with support for the incumbent candidate or party. The model captures this

⁶ See Abby Córdova, 2009, "Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth using Household Asset Indicators" for a description of the construction of the wealth index:
<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0806en.pdf>.

⁷ This index is constructed using the last five questions from the Role of State (ROS) series. These questions ask respondents to indicate on a seven point scale to what extent they agree or disagree that the government is responsible for guaranteeing the well-being of citizens, creating jobs, reducing income inequality, supplying retirement benefits, and providing health care.

⁸ Based on responses to question SOCT1. Respondents evaluate the current state of the national economic situation on a five point scale.

⁹ Based on responses to questions OCUP1B1 and OCUP1B2.

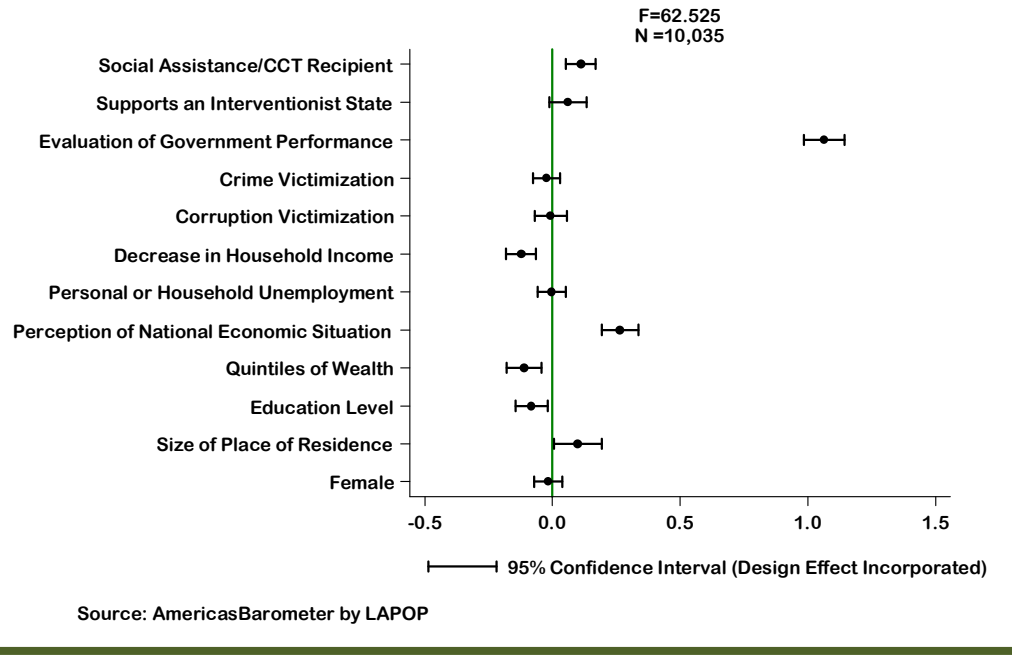
¹⁰ Based on responses to question Q10E.

concept using an indicator for crime victimization,¹¹ an index of corruption victimization¹² and an index of government effectiveness.¹³

Respondents who have been victimized by crime and corruption in the previous year may well show lower levels of support for the incumbent. More directly, those who perceive the government as more effective overall should be more likely to support the incumbent, all else equal. Of course, receiving social assistance might affect government performance evaluations, reducing the coefficient for beneficiary status. These controls thus provide a conservative test of the impact of social assistance on the vote.

Figure 3 presents the results of a logistic regression model where hypothetical vote for the incumbent (versus voting for the opposition) is the dependent variable.¹⁴ In this figure, the points and horizontal bars represent the coefficient estimates and 95% confidence interval for each variable (design-effects based). The relationship between the variable and vote for the incumbent is statistically significant if the horizontal bar does not cross the vertical line at

Figure 3. Logistic Regression Results for a Hypothetical Vote for the Incumbent, 2010



'0.0'. The relationship is positive if the bar falls to the right of the line and negative if it falls to the left. Since coefficients are standardized, their relative magnitude indicates variables' importance.

The key finding from Figure 3 is that there is a significant relationship between participating in a social assistance program and presidential voting, holding all else constant. Program participants are more likely than non-participants to express a hypothetical vote for the incumbent candidate or party.¹⁵

Figure 3 also shows that evaluations of government performance are by far the strongest predictor of vote for the incumbent. Those who see the current government as more effective are more likely to vote for the incumbent candidate or party. Second only to these evaluations, perceptions of the national economy are also an important predictor of the vote. Individuals who perceive a better current

¹¹ Based on responses to question VIC1EXT.

¹² Based on responses to the EXC series questions 2, 6, 11, 13, 14, 15, and 16. These questions ask respondents to indicate whether they were asked to pay a bribe by the police, a public employee, the municipal government, at work, in the courts, for health services, or at school.

¹³ This index is constructed using the N series questions 1, 3, 9, 11, and 12. These questions ask respondents to indicate on a seven point scale to what extent they would say that the government fights poverty, protects democratic principles, fights corruption, improves security, and fights unemployment.

¹⁴ The model also includes fixed effects for country which are not shown in the figure (Brazil is the reference country). A table with the full model results is presented in Appendix B.

¹⁵ The magnitude and significance of the variable for social assistance receipt remains unchanged when we introduce a control for the number of children; moreover, there is no evidence of an interactive effect such that social assistance receipt might matter more to those with children at home.

national economic situation are more likely to vote for the incumbent. Neither corruption nor crime victimization, however, are significantly associated with support for the incumbent.

Removing evaluations of government performance from the model also reveals that the correlation between social assistance and the vote appears to be mediated in part by performance evaluations. When the latter variable is removed, the standardized coefficient for social assistance receipt rises by 50%.¹⁶ Thus, part of the bivariate association between social assistance and incumbent voting that we found in Figure 2 is likely due to social assistance recipients concluding that the government is doing a good job.

The only household-level economic variable that is significant is whether the household has lost income in the past two years. Respondents whose household has lost income are less likely to vote for the incumbent.

In addition, socioeconomic class is related to vote for the incumbent. Respondents from higher quintiles of wealth and higher levels of education are both less likely to vote for the incumbent than the less educated or respondents from lower social classes.

Gender, size of the place of residence, support for interventionist policies, and unemployment do not show statistically significant relationships with vote for the incumbent, all else equal.

To aid in interpretation of the effects presented in Figure 3, we estimate the predicted

¹⁶ A test of the mediated relationship for binary dependent variables (see, e.g., Mackinnon and Dwyer 1993) reveals that 43% of the total effect of social assistance receipt is mediated by performance evaluations, and that the indirect effect is statistically significant at $p < .05$. Tests were run using the Stata program `binary_mediation`, with bootstrapped standard errors.

probability of voting for the incumbent, based on the logit model results. Once we control for the many differences between social assistance recipients and non-recipients in factors such as social status, economic circumstances, and performance evaluations, the difference between social assistance recipients and non-recipients in incumbent voting drops substantially from the 15.45 percentage points reported in the bivariate analysis in the previous section. The average difference in predicted probability of voting for the incumbent between the two groups is now only 5.5% across all countries. Still, even though the effect of social assistance is reduced, these results should not be dismissed; elections are often won by much smaller margins than this.¹⁷

Even after taking into account many confounding factors, social assistance participants are more likely than non-participants to express a hypothetical vote for the incumbent candidate or party.

Discussion

With the transformation in social assistance programs in Latin America in recent years, questions have surfaced regarding such programs' political effects. The first and most basic question relates to their effect on vote choice. A substantial new literature has developed on CCTs and other social assistance programs, on the one hand, and the vote, on the other hand, in a few countries in Latin America. However, there has to date been no evidence regarding whether these findings hold when considering the region as a whole.

¹⁷ Above, we argued that citizens might reward incumbents not only for benefits that they individually receive, but also for programs perceived to benefit the ingroup. To test this argument, we estimated a mixed logit model including all the predictors from Figure 3, plus a measure of the percentage of citizens on social assistance within the sub-national strata (variable *estratopri*), taking into account the complex sample design. The analysis is fragile due to the difficulty of estimating a multilevel logit model with random effects at both the national and strata level. Nonetheless, results appear to indicate that *both* regional levels of social assistance *and* personal receipt are associated with the vote.

The results presented here indicate that in almost every country examined, social assistance recipients are more likely to vote for the incumbent. In multivariate analysis we find that the association is attenuated once we take into account other variables related to social status and evaluations of the incumbents' performance. Nonetheless, even accounting for these confounding and mediating factors, we still find that social assistance receipt has a significant independent association with the vote.

An important puzzle remaining for future research is to understand the variation in the effect of social assistance across countries. Figure 2 shows great heterogeneity in the relationship between assistance and voting for the incumbent. We suspect that this heterogeneity is related to the extent to which the incumbent president plausibly claims credit for social assistance programs; and we further suspect that plausible credit-claiming is associated with the president's ideological orientation. That is, leftist presidents may be able to reap a bigger electoral windfall from the social programs they oversee than rightist presidents.

This report underscores the point that the region's new social assistance programs have become not only important tools of social programming, but also potentially important electoral tools. Moreover, such programs may have other effects on citizenship and political mobilization more broadly. Understanding these effects is a scholarly task that awaits completion.

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Appendix A

As discussed in the text, item CCT1 asked: “Do you or does someone in your household receive monthly assistance in the form of money or goods from the government, for example, from [name of program(s)]?” The following programs were listed in each country:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Programs</i>
Mexico	Oportunidades; PROCAMPO
Colombia	Familias en Acción
Ecuador	Bono de Desarrollo Humano
Bolivia	Bono Juancito Pinto; Renta Dignidad; Bono Juana Azurduy
Chile	Chile Solidario; PASIS; Chile Crece Contigo
Uruguay	Food baskets; family benefits (<i>asignaciones familiares</i>); Plan de Emergencia
Brazil	Bolsa Família
Venezuela	Misión Ribas; Misión Sucre; Misión Madres del Barrio
Argentina	Asignación Universal por Hijo; Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogar; Plan Familias

Appendix B

Logit results: Social assistance and performance and demographic variables predicting (hypothetical) vote for the incumbent

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Social Assistance/CCT Recipient	0.111***	0.030
Supports an Interventionist State	0.055+	0.033
Evaluation of Government Performance	1.073***	0.041
Corruption Victimization	-0.007	0.033
Crime Victimization	-0.025	0.028
Income Loss	-0.118***	0.029
Personal or Household Unemployment	-0.004	0.029
Evaluation of the National Economic Situation	0.246***	0.034
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.110**	0.035
Female	-0.016	0.028
Size of Area of Residence	0.088*	0.043
Education	-0.079*	0.031
<i>Country Fixed Effects</i>		
Mexico	-0.4178**	0.050
Colombia	-0.293***	0.050
Ecuador	-0.218***	0.064
Bolivia	-0.161+	0.086
Chile	-0.639***	0.056
Uruguay	-0.236***	0.050
Venezuela	-0.163**	0.052
Argentina	-0.365***	0.054
<i>Constant</i>	0.119*	0.047
<i>Number of observations</i>	10,035	
<i>Design-adjusted Wald Test (probability)</i>	63.86 (0.000)	

Note: Coefficients are standardized, and are significant at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; + $p < .10$. Brazil is the country of reference.