



# AmericasBarometer Insights: 2011

Number 68

## Political Knowledge Levels across the Urban-Rural Divide in Latin America and the Caribbean

By Frederico Batista Pereira  
[frederico.b.pereira@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:frederico.b.pereira@vanderbilt.edu)  
Vanderbilt University

**Executive Summary.** This *Insights* report explores why citizens from some rural areas tend to be less politically knowledgeable than citizens from urban areas in Latin America and the Caribbean. Using data from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer surveys, the report examines to what extent this difference is explained by motivation versus opportunity. Indicators of each of these dimensions are used in the analysis, and the results provide strong support for the hypothesis that it is due to lack of opportunity rather than motivation that citizens from rural areas tend to be less informed about politics than citizens from urban areas. More specifically, differences are best explained by education and access to media at home. Such factors disadvantage rural populations in Latin America and the Caribbean by limiting political knowledge; to the extent that this in turn reduces their political power, this contributes to a vicious circle hampering the ability of those in rural areas to access resources comparable to those living in urban areas.

The *Insights Series* is co-edited by Mitchell A. Seligson, Amy Erica Smith, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.

[www.AmericasBarometer.org](http://www.AmericasBarometer.org)

The knowledge citizens have about political events, politicians, and institutions is an important resource for democratic participation. In general, citizens need to have at least some basic information about political matters in order to be able to hold governments accountable for policy outcomes. Moreover, citizens must have some knowledge about politics in order to form opinions that are to be taken into account by representative governments. Hence, the distribution of this resource, political knowledge, is an important topic in the study of democracy.

Many scholars have provided evidence that this resource is unevenly distributed among citizens (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986). One aspect of this unequal distribution regards the differences between citizens from urban and rural areas. Especially in Latin America, the striking socioeconomic differences between urban and rural areas are well known, and there is concern about politics in the latter. On the one hand, citizens from rural areas are often viewed as less ideologically sophisticated and as targets for clientelistic offers from powerful elites, often known as “*coronéis*” or “*caudillos*” in Latin America’s rural areas (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Such clientelistic relationships are generally characterized by the exchange of material goods for electoral support, reinforcing asymmetrical power relationships between elites and voters. On the other hand, scholars examine violence and other types of political mobilization among peasants in rural areas (Muller & Seligson, 1987; Seligson, 1996). In both literatures, the extent to which rural citizens are politically knowledgeable and interested appears to play an important role in the nature of rural politics.

This AmericasBarometer *Insights* report will, first, verify the extent to which citizens from rural areas are less knowledgeable about politics. Second, it will examine whether such differences are explained by disparities in opportunities or in motivation to learn about politics. The report looks at three political information questions from the 2010 round of

the AmericasBarometer surveys by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP),<sup>1</sup> in which 40,990 respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean received the following questions:

**GI1.** “What is the name of the current president of the US?”

**GI3.** “How many [provinces/departments/states] does [country] have?”

**GI4.** “How long is the [presidential/prime ministerial] term of office in [country]?”

Incorrect and “does not know” responses were coded as 0, and correct responses were coded as 1. An additive index from 0 to 3 was created and then transformed to range between 0 and 100.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 shows the average score with confidence intervals among citizens of urban and rural areas in each of the 24 countries where these questions were asked.<sup>3</sup>

This figure demonstrates that most of the countries fit the mold with respect to having differences in political knowledge levels, such that these levels are higher among citizens from urban areas. The biggest such differences are of about 20 points in Chile and 17 points in Paraguay (both statistically significant). Differences are not statistically significant in Uruguay, Guyana, Suriname, Argentina, Jamaica, and Venezuela, as shown by the overlap in the bars representing their 95% confidence intervals.

---

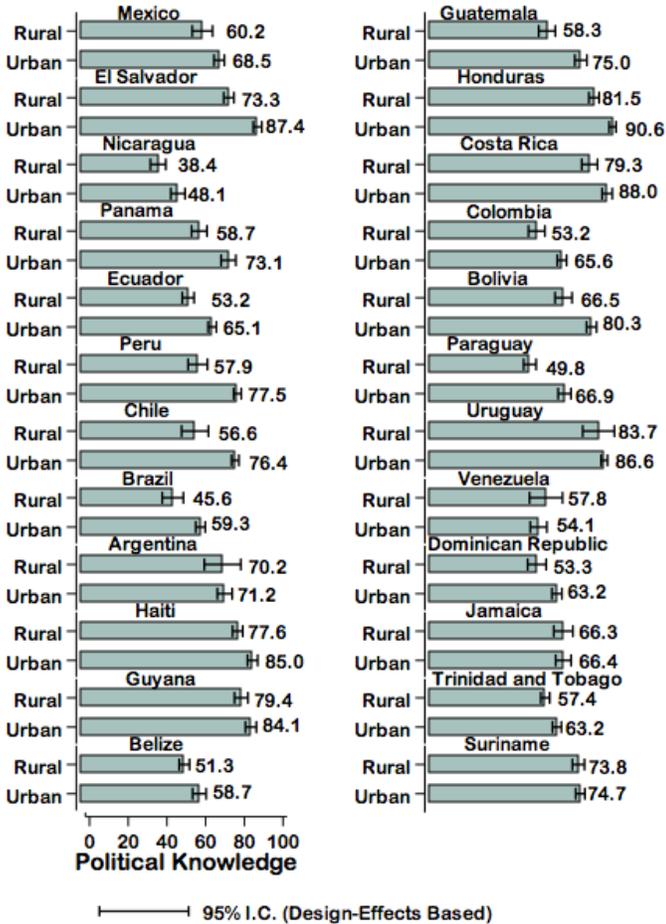
<sup>1</sup> Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. Prior issues in the *Insights* 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>.

<sup>2</sup> Political knowledge items were not administered in the US and Canada. For a comparison of the performance of all citizens in each Latin American and Caribbean country on the political knowledge questions, see AmericasBarometer *Insights* Number 55, which can be found in English at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0855en.pdf> or in Spanish at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0855es.pdf>

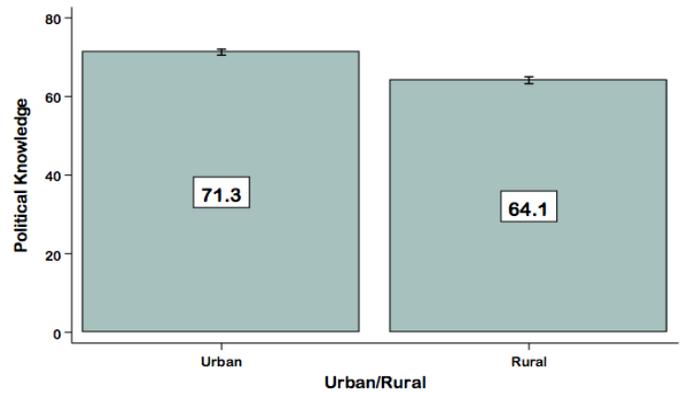
<sup>3</sup> All analyses presented here were conducted using STATA v11.1.

**Figure 1. Political Knowledge in Urban and Rural Areas in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

**Figure 2. Political Knowledge in Urban and Rural Areas in Latin America and the Caribbean, Across All Countries, 2010**



the ability, motivation, and opportunity to do so (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Luskin, 1990; Rennó, 2004). Although ability refers to complex cognitive traits best captured by deeper psychological tests, motivation and opportunity are more easily accessed in survey research.

Using data from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer surveys, the next section tests if the difference in political knowledge between citizens from urban and rural areas in Latin America is due to *motivation* or *opportunity*. In many Latin American countries there are striking differences between citizens from urban and rural areas in both opportunity (the resources to learn about politics) and motivation (their subjective attachment to politics). Citizens from urban areas tend to be wealthier, more educated, and more interested in politics. Which factors cause the rural-urban gap? Are citizens from rural areas less politically knowledgeable because they lack motivation or because they lack opportunity to learn about politics?

### Explaining the difference: *motivation* or *opportunity*?

The effect of *motivation* on political knowledge refers to the notion that some individuals have more reason than others to be actively engaged in political learning. Two indicators of *motivation* are used in the present analysis: political interest

Given that the differences between the levels of political knowledge vary across the countries, it seems plausible to check the overall difference for all the countries analyzed. Figure 2 shows that citizens from urban areas score on average almost 7 points higher than citizens from rural areas in Latin America and the Caribbean.

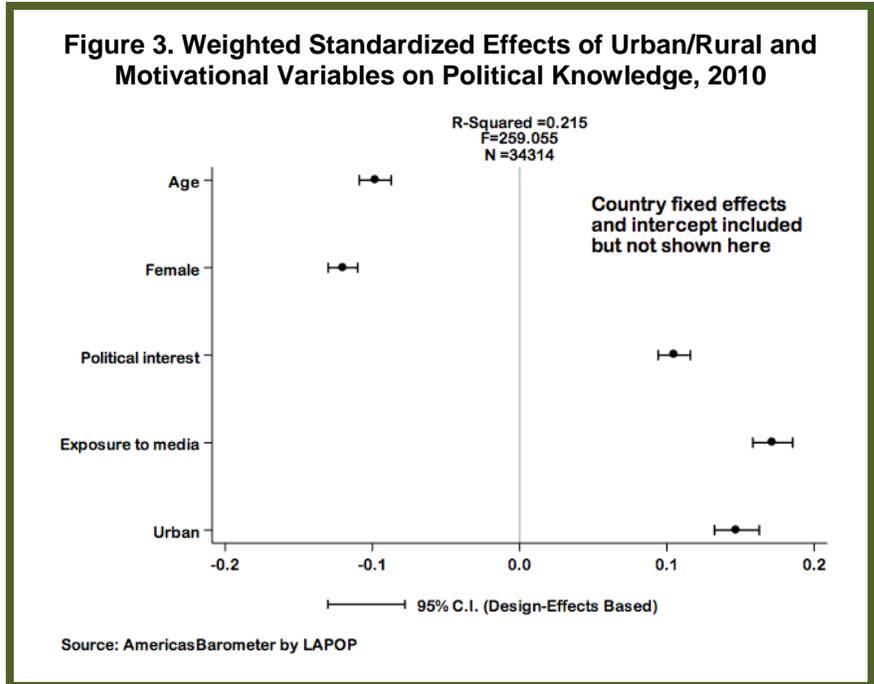
Why are Latin Americans from urban areas, generally speaking, more knowledgeable about politics than ones from rural areas? What individual level factors explain these differences?

The literature examining inequality in political knowledge is premised on the notion that people learn about politics because they have

and exposure to political information in the media.<sup>4</sup>

The strategy for gauging the role of *motivation* in explaining the differences in the levels of political knowledge between urban and rural areas is to check if the relationship between urban/rural residence and knowledge disappears after controlling for the other factors. A first linear regression model (see results in the Appendix) was run using urban/rural residence as the main independent variable, controlling for age, sex, and a binary variable for each country (except for Honduras, which was the country of reference).<sup>5</sup> The results from this first model, found in the first column of the regression table in the Appendix, confirm the relationship shown in Figure 2.

The results in Figure 3 are from a second linear regression model that also controls for motivational variables. Binary (dummy) variables for countries are included in the analysis but are not shown in the figure. In general, motivational factors have a positive effect on political knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Respondents who are more interested in politics and who have more frequent exposure to political information score higher on political knowledge. However, what is most important in these results is that being from an urban area still has a considerable effect on political knowledge, even when



controlling for motivational factors.<sup>7</sup> This means that differences in motivation to learn about politics account for only a small part of the difference in political knowledge levels between respondents from urban and rural areas.

The next step in the analysis is to assess to what extent differences in *opportunity* explain the unequal levels of political knowledge between urban and rural areas. Opportunity refers to the resources available to individuals. Generally, these resources are external to the individual and do not depend only on the individual's will. Three socioeconomic variables represent opportunity. Income is an index comprising 10 income categories.<sup>8</sup> Education is measured in years of schooling.<sup>9</sup> The variable "access to media at home" is an index that results from counting the positive responses to a battery of questions that asked respondents if they had TV, telephone, cell phone, computer, and Internet access in their houses.<sup>10</sup> The income variable tries to capture to what extent more affluent

<sup>4</sup> The question about political interest (POL1) asked: "How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?" Item non-response in the question was about 1%. The question about exposure (GI0) was "About how often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers or the internet?" The responses offered were "Daily", "A few times a week", "A few times a month", "Rarely" and "Never". Item non-response in this question was 0.5%.

<sup>5</sup> The analysis includes only those countries in which there is a knowledge gap in favor of urban areas. However, when I reestimate the models on a sample of all countries, the results are nearly identical.

<sup>6</sup> It is also possible that political knowledge itself increases people's motivations to learn about politics. Although this is an important topic for research, this *Insights* report focuses on motivation as primarily a cause of knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> As can be seen by examining the regression table in the appendix, the standardized coefficient decreases only from 0.17 (model 1) to 0.15 (model 2).

<sup>8</sup> Item non-response in this question (Q10) was 11.3%.

<sup>9</sup> Item non-response in this question (ED) was 0.5%.

<sup>10</sup> Item non-response in this set of questions (r1, r4, r4a, r15, r18) was 0.2%

citizens can access other types media such as the newspaper, magazines, as well as any other possible mechanisms that are not accounted for by the measures of education and “access to media at home.”

Figure 4 displays the results of the third model. In this model opportunity variables are added to the regression. The purpose here is to assess to what extent the effect of urban/rural residence decreases when the differences in opportunity to learn about politics are taken into account, controlling for motivational variables, age and sex.

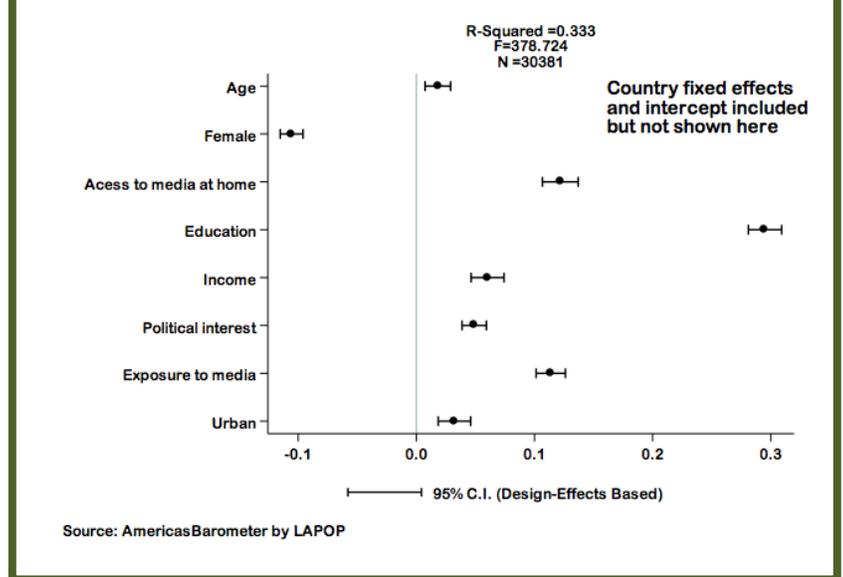
All variables that represent the dimension of opportunity have a positive effect on political knowledge. Education and access to diverse types of media and communications at home have the strongest effects. The result for education corroborates findings from other studies (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986). Income has a small but statistically significant effect on political knowledge. These results indicate that, like motivation, opportunity is an important condition for citizens to learn about politics.

But the most important result displayed in Figure 4 is the substantial decrease in the coefficient for urban/rural residence. The standardized estimate is still statistically significant, but it decreases from 0.15 in Figure 3 (Appendix Model 2) to 0.03 in Figure 4 (Appendix Model 3). This means that the difference in political knowledge levels between citizens from urban and rural areas is to a great extent due to differences in the opportunity to learn about politics. Education and access to media at home are the most important components of this dimension.

## Discussion

This *Insights* report asked why individuals from rural areas tend to know less about politics than ones from urban areas in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to some studies, these

**Figure 4. Weighted Standardized Effects of Urban/Rural, Motivational and Opportunity Variables on Political Knowledge, 2010**



different levels of political knowledge might be explained by variation in motivation and the opportunity to learn about politics. Following such scholarship, this report tested whether the urban-rural knowledge divide in the region is due to motivation or to opportunity.<sup>11</sup>

The findings from the empirical analysis using the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer survey clearly point in one specific direction. Although motivation and opportunity both have strong effects on political knowledge, only the variables representing opportunity account for the different levels of political knowledge between respondents from urban and rural areas. When these variables were controlled in the analysis, the coefficient for urban/rural residence lost most of its effect on political knowledge.

While opportunity is more important than motivation for understanding why individuals from rural areas know less about politics than individuals from urban areas, two specific variables stood out as the most informative.

<sup>11</sup> It is of course theoretically possible to consider the divide could be driven by both, as these could be considered non-rival influences; however, the results empirically rule out this perspective.

Education and access to media at home had the strongest effects on political knowledge and were also responsible for the reduction in the coefficient of urban/rural residence.<sup>12</sup> Rural areas are at substantial disadvantages both in Latin America and the Caribbean. Many people in rural areas face the tradeoff between continuing in school and joining the labor market to increase family income. Moreover, access to school tends to be scarcer in rural areas than it is in urban areas. Additionally, many people in rural areas lack access to informational media that are increasingly common in urban areas, especially the Internet and cell phones. This inequality in means to learn about politics is an important aspect of political inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean, as this report shows with respect to the case of political knowledge.

## References

- Delli Carpini, Michael X. and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Díaz-Dominguez, Alejandro. 2011. "Political Knowledge and Religious Channels of Socialization in Latin America." *AmericasBarometer Insights* 55. Vanderbilt University: Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).
- Kitschelt, Herbert and Steven Wilkinson. 2007. "Citizens-Politicians Linkages: An Introduction." Chapter 1 in *Patrons, Clients, and Politics: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-49.
- Luskin, Robert C. 1990. "Explaining Political Sophistication". *Political Behavior* 12(4): 331-361.
- Muller, Edward and Seligson, Mitchell A. 1987. "Inequality of Insurgency." *American Political Science Review* 81(2): 425-452.
- Neuman, W. Russell. 1986. *The Paradox of Mass Politics: Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rennó, Lúcio. 2004. "Information and Voting: Microfoundations of Accountability in Complex Electoral Environments". *PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh*.
- Seligson, Mitchell A. 1996. "Agrarian Inequality and the Theory of Peasant Rebellion." *Latin American Research Review* 31(2): 140-157.
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

---

<sup>12</sup> The results from an alternative model with just these two variables from the dimension of motivation support this conclusion.

## Appendix. Predictors of Political Knowledge in Latin America

	<b>Model 1:</b>	<b>Model 2:</b>	<b>Model 3:</b>
	Standardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient
	(Standard Error)	(Standard Error)	(Standard Error)
Urban versus Rural (Urban = 1, Rural = 0)	0.169*	0.148*	0.032*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Female	-0.141*	-0.120*	-0.106*
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Age	-0.096*	-0.098*	0.018*
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Exposure to media		0.172*	0.114*
		(0.007)	(0.006)
Political interest		0.105*	0.049*
		(0.006)	(0.005)
Income			0.060*
			(0.007)
Education			0.295*
			(0.007)
Access to media at home			0.122*
			(0.008)
Mexico	-0.140*	-0.139*	-0.161*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
Guatemala	-0.119*	-0.104*	-0.113*
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.009)
El Salvador	-0.031*	-0.030*	-0.056*
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Nicaragua	-0.276*	-0.268*	-0.268*
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Costa Rica	-0.013	-0.024*	-0.048*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Panama	-0.124*	-0.136*	-0.183*
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.011)
Colombia	-0.165*	-0.172*	-0.209*
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Ecuador	-0.227*	-0.231*	-0.296*
	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.012)
Bolivia	-0.105	-0.108*	-0.150*
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Peru	-0.098*	-0.100*	-0.154*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Paraguay	-0.172*	-0.180*	-0.212*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)

*Political Knowledge Levels in Urban and Rural Areas in Latin America*

*Frederico Batista Pereira*

Chile	-0.107*	-0.107*	-0.186*
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.010)
Brazil	-0.255*	-0.239*	-0.250*
	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Argentina	-0.119*	-0.120*	-0.155*
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Dominican Republic	-0.171*	-0.180*	-0.189*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Haiti	-0.031*	-0.016*	-0.033*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Guyana	-0.017	-0.014	-0.067*
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Trinidad and Tobago	-0.162*	-0.166*	-0.217*
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.008)
Belize	-0.195*	-0.191*	-0.208*
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Constant	0.005	0.011	0.014*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.007)
<i>R-Squared</i>	<i>0.170</i>	<i>0.215</i>	<i>0.333</i>
<i>F-test</i>	<i>190.92</i>	<i>259.05</i>	<i>378.72</i>
<i>Number of Observations</i>	<i>34,847</i>	<i>34,314</i>	<i>30,381</i>
<i>*p&lt;0.05</i>			

---

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at \*p<0.05, two-tailed. Uruguay is the reference country.