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## Asking for Help in the Americas: The Importance of Needs, Efficacy, and Political Engagement

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**Executive Summary:** This AmericasBarometer *Insights* report examines the factors that influence citizens' likelihood of requesting help from the local government. Taken as a whole, our results highlight the role of needs related to both financial and physical security in motivating requests for help: those of a lower quintile of wealth and those who have been victimized by crime are more likely to request help. In addition, we find that those with higher political efficacy and those who participate in politics in other ways are more likely to request help. Given the importance of needs, efficacy, and political engagement, we conclude that political education programs and the opening of more opportunities for citizens to participate in the political system will increase citizens' tendencies to request help.

*LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar in the Spring of 2012. That class, HONS186, was taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister and Margarita Corral acted as teaching assistant. Author names are listed here in alphabetical order; biographies of the authors are provided in the report appendix.*

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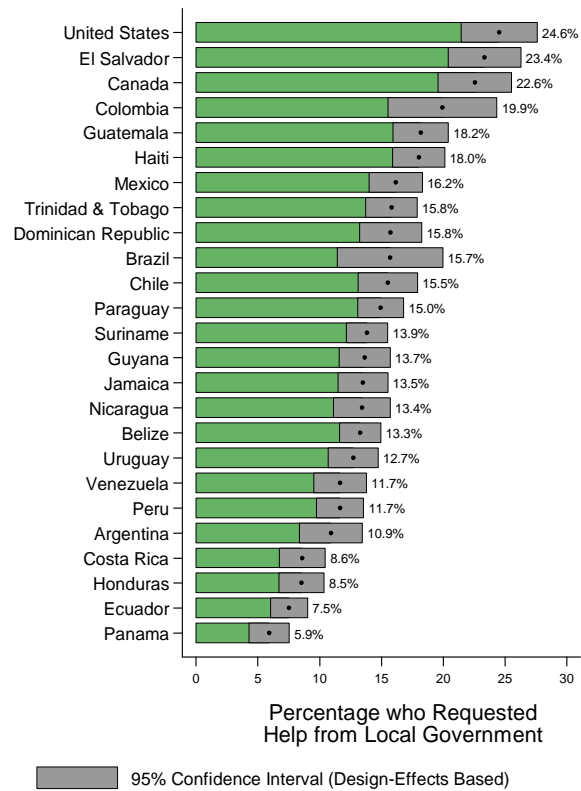
As citizens we may ask ourselves, why should we participate in politics in our societies at all? Many argue that the answer to this question is that participation deepens democracy by teaching civic skills and demonstrating government responsiveness to individuals (see, for example, Goldfrank 2007). Analysts claim that Latin American democracies are “shallow” and that increasing citizen participation opportunities is a potential solution (Caputo 2004). Benefits of political participation at the local level include the strengthening of civil society and the improvement of reliability and responsiveness of local government. As this is the closest level of government to citizens, such involvement in turn leads to the overall strengthening of democracy (Goldfrank 2007).

One important way that citizens become involved in politics is by reaching out to their local governments to request help. This AmericasBarometer *Insights* report looks at the extent to which citizens request help from their respective local governments in the Americas. We then investigate individual-level determinants that may account for variation between and within these countries in frequency of requesting help. A key issue we test is whether requests for help are more likely to come from those with greater *resources* or from those with greater *needs*. As we will show, needs trump material resources in explaining who seeks help from local government, while participation in other domains of politics and feelings of internal efficacy also appear to matter.

The data for this report come from the 2010 round<sup>1</sup> of the Latin American Public Opinion

<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

Figure 1. Asking Local Government for Help in the Americas, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer 2010, by LAPOP

Project (LAPOP) survey,<sup>2</sup> in which respondents from 25 countries in the Caribbean and North, Central, and South America<sup>3</sup> were asked to answer yes or no to the following question:<sup>4</sup>

**CP4A.** In order to solve your problems have you ever requested help or cooperation from a local public official or local government, for example a mayor, municipal council, councilman, provincial official, civil governor or governor?

<sup>2</sup> 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>3</sup> This question was not asked in Bolivia.

<sup>4</sup> The response rate for this question for the pooled sample was greater than 99%. In the US and Canada the question was asked to only 750 individuals in each of these two countries.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of respondents in each country who responded “yes” to the question—meaning that they have requested help from the local government. On average, 14.6% of respondents in each country answered “yes.” While all countries report percentages under 25%, there is some variation among the 25 countries, as the response rates span 18.7 percentage points. The United States, El Salvador, Canada, and Colombia have the highest percentages of respondents answering “yes,” at 24.6%, 23.4%, 22.6%, and 19.9% respectively. Looking at the other extreme, Panama, Ecuador, Honduras, and Costa Rica have the lowest percentages of respondents who have requested help, with respective percentages of 5.9%, 7.5%, 8.5%, and 8.6%. The remaining countries vary slightly and lie between these two extremes.

What factors explain whether or not people request help? Hirlinger (1992) suggests that participation in multiple avenues of political activism increases the likelihood of partaking in additional politically-relevant activities, such as requesting help from the local government. Do other forms of political participation actually predict the likelihood of asking for help from the local government? What other factors play a role in determining whether or not a citizen will request help? To assess these questions we first turn to a simple regression model that investigates a set of classic socioeconomic and demographic measures as predictors of requesting help from local government.

## **Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors**

Extant literature pertaining to political involvement and civic engagement in the Americas justifies an expectation that socioeconomic status (SES) will help predict who seeks help from a local public or government official. Two key factors within SES are income (which we measure by quintiles of

wealth<sup>5</sup>) and level of education (Hiskey and Seligson 2003). The ability to examine income and education separately is a key point in our analysis. While wealth and education are frequently found to be closely linked, it is possible that they have distinct effects on our dependent variable.

Current scholarship presents mixed findings about the relationship between quintiles of wealth and our dependent variable. Two conflicting theories emerge from this literature. One position is that a positive correlation exists between these variables because the wealthy have access to the time and resources required to be politically active (West and Zuckerman 1985). Since one mode of activism is political contacting, this theory suggests we should find that the wealthier are more likely to contact local government for assistance. Another theory centers on perceived needs, claiming that those who are poorer feel the need to reach out to local government for assistance more often and are thus more likely to initiate contact (Cornelius 1974; Hirlinger 1992; Oliver 1999). We find the latter perspective more persuasive, especially in the Latin American and Caribbean context, as we believe that needs trump availability of resources. We assert that the desire to acquire essential services (especially among the poor) is a strong motivator for contacting, whereas an abundance of free time does not necessarily push an individual to become politically engaged in the manner we examine here.

Considering education, a significant amount of research in the field suggests that the educated are more likely to participate in politics (see, for example, Galston 2001). However the explanation as to why this is the case varies considerably. One theory is that education

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<sup>5</sup> See Abby Córdova, 2009, “Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth using Household Asset Indicators” for a description of the construction of the wealth index:

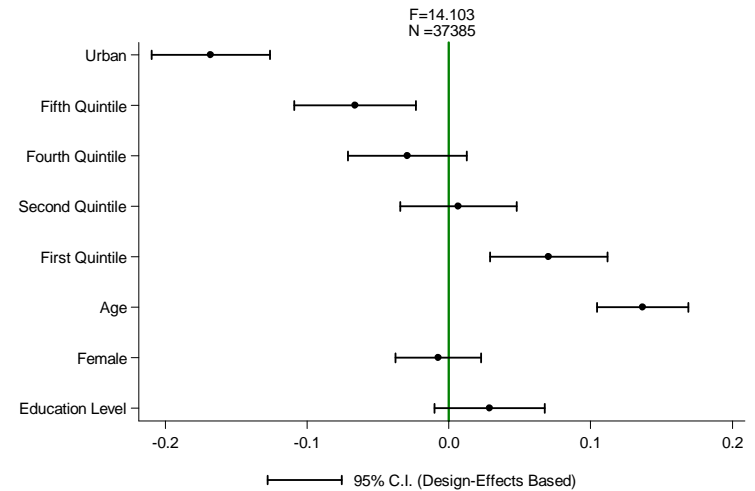
<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0806en.pdf>

increases political ties and thus increases contacting (West and Zuckerman 1985). Another theory is that education increases an individual's understanding of personal and community interests, making him or her more inclined to make contact (Galston 2001). We imagine that those who feel confident in their political knowledge and access to the system are more likely to use the resources of the system—one of which is contacting local officials to ask for help. Thus, we expect education to be positively correlated with our dependent variable.

To test these expectations, we seek to predict the likelihood that an individual says that they have contacted local government for help by looking at the following variables: urban, quintile of wealth, age, gender, and level of education. Figure 2 shows the results of this basic logit regression analysis.<sup>6</sup> The values on the horizontal axis represent the relative effect of each independent variable on our dependent variable. Those variables with confidence intervals crossing the 0-line are deemed to be statically insignificant, although the variable may positively correlate (falling to the right of the green line) or negatively correlate (falling to the left of the green line) with our dependent variable.

The results of Figure 2 show that there is a direct and significant relationship between wealth and asking local government for help. In the analysis, we included four quintiles of wealth and compare the effects of these to the omitted comparison (or baseline) category—the third quintile. The extremes (the first and fifth quintiles) are statistically significant. This means that, compared to the middle categories, the highest quintile of wealth group is *less* likely to report having asked for help while the lowest

**Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Requesting Help from Local Government**



quintile of wealth group, i.e., the poorest, is more likely to have done so. These results support our expectations about the role of needs in motivating requests for help from local government: the poorest seek help, while the richest do not. This demonstrates that it is needs, and not free time or available resources, which motivates this form of political participation. This finding is also consistent with a conclusion of Booth and Seligson (2008).

Additionally, although we expected level of education to positively correlate with our dependent variable, Figure 2 shows that the relationship is positive but statistically insignificant. Such a result leads us to two conclusions. First of all, the variables of education and quintile of wealth are not always capturing the same traits, a finding that supports Hiskey and Seligson's (2003) conclusion that SES needs to be broken down into more defined factors. Secondly, of these two factors, wealth is the more important SES indicator with respect to our dependent variable.

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. and Canada are excluded from this and all subsequent analyses in this report. Full details of the analysis are available in the report appendix.

Other non-SES factors were included in Figure 2 to create a broader picture of the general characteristics of those who are more likely to ask for help at the local level. Gender (female) is statistically insignificant and negatively correlated with requesting help; age is statistically significant and positively correlated<sup>7</sup>; and urban is statistically significant and negatively correlated. In the next section we investigate additional predictors of our dependent variable—crime victimization and political participation—in an attempt to develop a more thorough explanation of *who* specifically asks for local-level help.

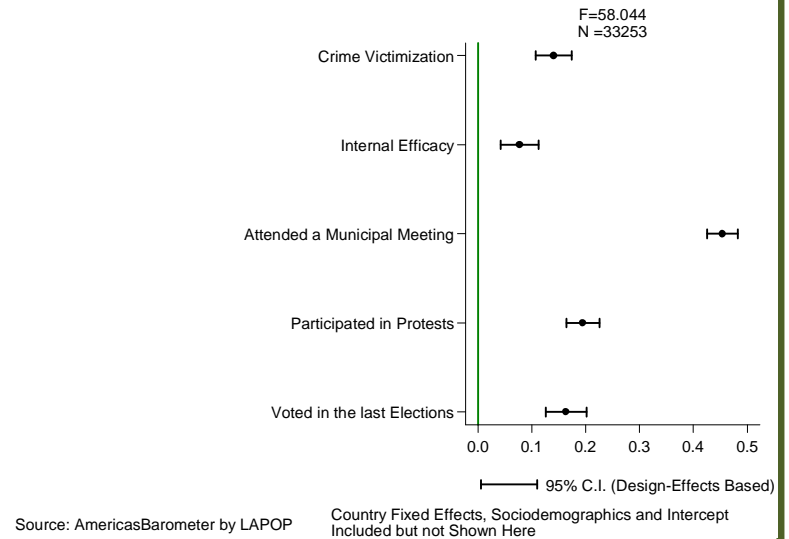
## Political Participation, Crime Victimization, and Requesting Help

In the previous section, we argued that needs motivate requests for help and we examined this with respect to wealth. Here we extend that framework to include crime victimization as a motivator for requesting help. In addition, we examine whether other forms of political participation and internal political efficacy are predictors of requesting local help.

Prior scholarship links victimization to various forms of political engagement, but not specifically to requesting help from the local government. Rather, we found scholarship suggesting a strong and positive correlation between crime victimization and general political engagement (Bateson 2009). Other literature indicates that being a victim of crime leads to increased voting and political efficacy (Blattman 2009; Bellows and Miguel 2009). While none of these works focus on requesting help, it is possible that crime victimization has a

<sup>7</sup> While not shown in this figure, when the independent variable age was further broken down into groups there was a curvilinear relationship between age and asking for help. The age range of 46 to 55 years is the most likely to ask for help.

**Figure 3. An Extended Model of Predicting Requests for Help from Local Government**



similar positive effect on this type of participation, as crime victims may be motivated to request help from local government out of need for help or desire for justice.

In considering political participation more generally, we propose that high levels of participation in other political domains should be associated with an increased likelihood of requesting help from the local government. Research suggests that previous participation in political activities will make a person more likely to become involved in additional political actions, such as requesting help (Hirlinger 1992). Thus, we expect that attendance at municipal meetings will also be related to increased likelihood of asking for help. We assert that attending meetings demonstrates political interest and involvement that would increase one's likelihood to ask for help due to increased knowledge of the municipal government.<sup>8</sup> This hypothesis is supported by LAPOP's 2010 *Report on the Americas*, which states that those who attend municipal meetings are most likely to make a demand or request from a local

<sup>8</sup> It is also possible that some citizens actually make their requests for help at municipal meetings.

government official (Seligson and Smith 2010, pp. 137-138).

Booth and Seligson (2005) also suggest that citizens with ties to political actors and citizens who are more engaged in civil society activism are more likely to request help from the government. Following this broader perspective, we expect that protesting and voting in past elections will also positively correlate with asking for help. In a related vein, we also expect that internal political efficacy will be related to increased likelihood of requesting help because confidence in personal knowledge of the political situation in one's country should fuel political engagement.<sup>9</sup>

To test these expectations, we ran a multiple variable analysis that includes (but does not show) the individual-level characteristics from Figure 2 while also assessing the effects of the factors mentioned above. We measure the effect of crime victimization on the likelihood of requesting help by using a question from the AmericasBarometer 2010 on crime victimization. In order to measure political participation, we include the following variables: attendance at a municipal meeting, participation in protests, and voting in the last election. In addition, we include a measure of internal efficacy. Results from the logistic regression analysis are shown in Figure 3.<sup>10,11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The item that measures crime victimization is **VIC1EXT**. "Now, changing the subject, have you been a victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months? That is, have you been a victim of robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, violent threats or any other type of crime in the past 12 months?" We used **EFF2** "You feel that you understand the most important political issues of this country. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?" to measure internal efficacy. We also used the item **NP1**. "Have you attended a town meeting, city council meeting or other meeting in the past 12 months?" To measure participation in protests, we used **PROT3**. "In the last 12 months, have you participated in a demonstration or protest march?" And finally, to measure voting we used the item **VB2**. "Did you vote in the last presidential elections (year of last presidential elections)?"

<sup>10</sup> Once we include the new independent variables for Figure 3, the effects for age, urban versus rural, and quintiles of

We hypothesized that crime victimization, other forms of political participation, and internal efficacy would all positively predict an individual's likelihood of requesting help. The results show that crime victimization, internal efficacy, attendance at a municipal meeting, participation in protests, and voting in the last election are all significantly and positively correlated with the dependent variable. Attendance at a municipal meeting is the strongest correlate of requesting help, while internal efficacy is the weakest. The results show that those who are victimized by a crime, those who participate more in other political activities, and those who have greater levels of internal political efficacy are more likely to request help from the local government. The positive and significant finding for crime victimization suggests that financial needs are not the only issues that motivate individuals to seek help from local officials, but rather needs related to physical security matter as well.

## Conclusion

In sum, this *Insights* report indicates multiple factors that predict citizens' likelihood of requesting help from their respective local governments. In support of our hypotheses, crime victimization, political efficacy, and various components of political participation (participation in protests, voting, and attending a municipal meeting) all positively predict an individual's likelihood of requesting help. Our finding that political participation in various arenas is positively correlated with our dependent variable supports Hirlinger's (1992) theory that one avenue of political participation

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wealth remain unchanged, but education is now negatively correlated yet still statistically insignificant, and female is now positive and statistically significant (see Appendix for full results).

<sup>11</sup> We also expected trust in institutions to positively correlate with our dependent variable. After running a separate analysis, we found trust in the national government is statistically significant and positively correlated while trust in the justice system is not correlated; for the sake of parsimony we left this out of the body of our report.

increases activity in other forms of political participation. We further found that needs, not availability of resources, drive requests for help. While level of formal schooling is not a significant predictor, lack of wealth and crime victimization are significant determinants of requesting help from local government.

For politicians and policy makers, a pertinent finding from our study is that political efficacy and political participation increase likelihood of requesting help from local government. These findings indicate that citizens with more knowledge of the political system and current political situation in their country will be more active. This underscores the importance of political education programs to increase a citizen's basic knowledge and confidence in his or her understanding of the political system. In addition, policies that create more opportunities for citizens to participate in the political system (through activities such as voting and attending government meetings) are likely to increase the likelihood of requesting help from local government. Through the efforts of such programs and policies, citizens become more likely to engage in multiple forms of political participation, potentially strengthening democracy in their countries.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Predictors of Requesting Help in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Education	0.029	0.020	-0.043	0.022
Female	-0.008	0.015	0.036*	0.017
Age	0.137*	0.016	0.085*	0.019
Urban	-0.168*	0.021	-0.148*	0.023
1 <sup>st</sup> Quintile of Wealth	0.070*	0.021	0.099*	0.022
2 <sup>nd</sup> Quintile of Wealth	0.007	0.021	0.014	0.023
4 <sup>th</sup> Quintile of Wealth	-0.029	0.021	-0.027	0.024
5 <sup>th</sup> Quintile of Wealth	-0.066*	0.022	-0.094*	0.024
Crime Victimization			0.140*	0.017
Internal Efficacy			0.077*	0.018
Attended a Municipal Meeting			0.454*	0.014
Participated in Protests			0.195*	0.016
Voted			0.164*	0.019
Mexico	0.049*	0.023	0.064*	0.026
Guatemala	0.061*	0.023	0.047*	0.026
El Salvador	0.128*	0.023	0.129*	0.026
Honduras	-0.098*	0.028	-0.086*	0.029
Nicaragua	0.005	0.025	-0.003	0.027
Costa Rica	-0.089*	0.028	-0.071*	0.030
Panama	-0.166*	0.032	-0.131*	0.033
Colombia	0.094*	0.029	0.130*	0.031
Ecuador	-0.150*	0.037	-0.148*	0.040
Peru	-0.022	0.024	0.034	0.025
Paraguay	0.023	0.023	0.095	0.031
Chile	0.048	0.028	0.107	0.045
Brazil	0.068	0.044	-0.024	0.030
Venezuela	-0.007	0.026	-0.033	0.029
Argentina	-0.020	0.030	-0.013	0.026
Dominican Rep.	0.040	0.024	0.048	0.027
Haiti	0.062*	0.025	0.031*	0.027
Jamaica	-0.013	0.024	-0.001	0.028
Guyana	-0.015	0.026	0.040	0.026
Trinidad & Tobago	0.031	0.023	-0.020	0.027
Belize	-0.006	0.023	0.012	0.027
Suriname	-0.001	0.022	-1.977	0.031
Constant	-1.870*	0.025	0.064*	0.026
F	14.10		54.04	
Number of Observations	37,385		33,253	

\* p<0.05

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at \*p<0.05, two-tailed. The country of reference is Uruguay. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Quintile of Wealth is the category of reference for wealth variables.

### **Appendix: Author Biographies\***

At the time this report was written, **Megan Lynch** was finishing her freshman year at Vanderbilt University. She is a member of the College Scholars Program and is majoring in Neuroscience and potentially Medicine, Health, and Society. Over the next couple of years at Vanderbilt Megan hopes to become involved in Neuroscience research on campus. Additionally, Megan is an active member in the Global Medical Brigades organization on campus.

**Sylvie Render** was finishing her junior year at Vanderbilt University. She is a member of the College Scholars Program and is majoring in Psychology and minoring in Medicine, Health, and Society. She is very active in Vanderbilt Hillel, serving her second term on the Executive Board. After graduation Sylvie hopes to attend graduate school for speech-language pathology.

**Megan Twomey** was finishing her junior year at Vanderbilt University. She is a member of the College Scholars Program and is double majoring in Mathematics and Physics. She is part of the founding cohort of the Susan Gray-Murray House Fellowship Program and is currently the Co-Chair of Vanderbilt Alternative Spring Break. After graduation Megan hopes to work for a few years for a service organization and then return to school to get a graduate degree in public policy.

*\*Author names are listed alphabetically. Margarita Corral, a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at Vanderbilt University, acted as a technical consultant on this report.*