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Honest and Effective Efforts are Rewarded with Trust in National Legislatures in the Americas

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Executive Summary: This *Insights* report examines levels of trust in national legislatures throughout the Americas. Through analyses of the 2010 round of AmericasBarometer survey, we find that the most important predictors of trust in the national legislature are trust in political parties and perceptions of representatives doing a good job. Other, but less consequential, predictors of trust include external efficacy, perceptions of the national economy, and perceptions of the level of political corruption in the country. Considering the results as a whole, we conclude the following: a national legislature whose representatives and parties are perceived to be both honest and reliable will be most trusted by its citizens.

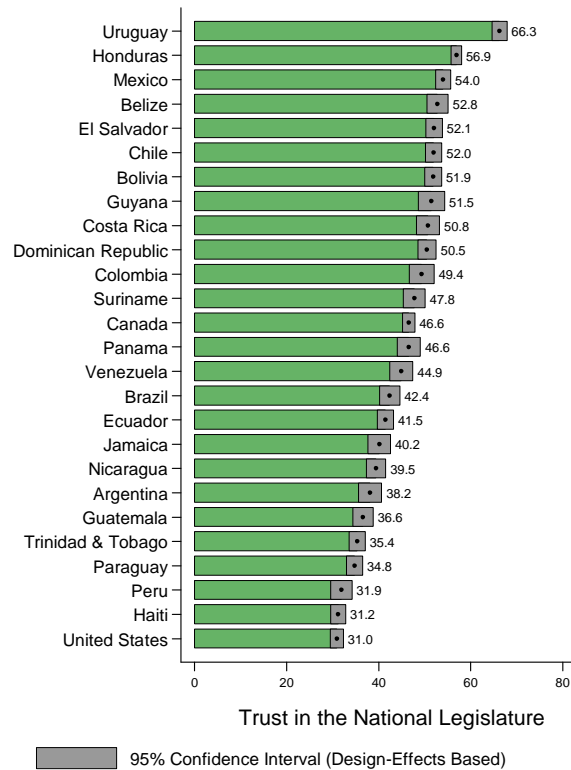
LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar in the Spring of 2012. That class, HONS186, was taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister and Margarita Corral acted as teaching assistant. Author names are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

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A few months ago, a CNN Poll found that the U.S. public's faith in the national government had reached an all-time low, with only 15% of respondents saying that they trust the government in Washington to do what's right always or most of the time.¹ Is such a low level of trust in the government unique to the United States, or are the other countries in the Americas faring the same? National legislatures play essential roles in elections, policy, and representation in modern democratic governments. While some have found that people effectively distinguish between criticisms of the current government and problems with democracy in general, levels of trust in legislatures can be an important indicator of public opinion with respect to the political system and the people in power. Scholarship has suggested that higher levels of trust follow from the enactment of policies that the people want, as "people are more likely to trust things they perceive to be working effectively" (Hetherington 1998, p. 794). The AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP allows us to answer these questions: To what degree do citizens in the Americas trust their national legislatures? What factors explain high or low levels of trust?

This *Insights*² report looks at levels of trust in the national legislature in the Americas and assesses individual determinants of variation in those levels. Past *Insights* reports have examined trust in Supreme Courts (I0854), elections (I0837), and the armed forces (I0827), but trust in the national legislature has yet to be examined. To evaluate this topic, we query the 2010 round of the Latin

Figure 1. Trust in the National Legislature across the Americas, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer 2010, by LAPOP

American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys³, in which 43,990 respondents from 26 countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, the United States and Canada were asked the following question:

B13 "To what extent do you trust the national legislature?"

Respondents were asked to choose an answer from 1 to 7 where "1" represents "Not at all" and "7" "A lot." Responses were recoded on a 0-100 scale following the LAPOP standard, in

¹ "CNN Poll: Trust in government at all time low." CNN. September 28, 2011.

<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/09/28/cnn-poll-trust-in-government-at-all-time-low/>

² 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/surveydata.php>.

³ 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.

order to ensure comparability across questions and survey waves.

Figure 1 displays national average scores with their margins of error (i.e., confidence intervals). The mean response across all countries was 45.18, indicating that most respondents have somewhat low levels of trust in the national legislature.⁴ Uruguay has the highest level of trust with an average of 66.3, followed by Mexico and then Belize. The United States has the lowest with an average level of trust in Congress of only 31.0, followed by Haiti and then Peru. The wide divide of 35.3 points between the countries with the highest and lowest levels of trust suggests that country-level factors might be an important part of a broader study of trust in national legislatures across the Americas, but in this report we focus on the individual level while controlling for country differences.

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At the individual level, what factors explain variation in trust in national legislatures in the Americas? We examine this question by, first, presenting a basic linear regression model that includes classic socioeconomic and demographic independent variables. Then we present a more extensive multiple variable regression analysis that takes into account variables suggested by relevant literature, including measures that tap trust in political parties and perceptions of the government acting in the public's best interest by successfully implementing policy.⁵

⁴ Non-response to this particular question was 4.1% across the sample as a whole.

⁵ All statistical analyses in this report were conducted using STATA v10.1 and results were adjusted for the complex sample designs employed. The analyses include a series of dummy variables accounting for the impact of national context, which is assumed to be "fixed" (or constant) for each respondent within the country. When using this technique we must set one of the dummy variables as the reference, and in this case it is Uruguay.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors and Trust in the National Legislature

We begin by examining how socioeconomic and demographic factors affect the dependent variable, the respondent's trust in the national legislature.⁶ Among the independent variables, we include measures of wealth and education levels. Although intuition might lead one to expect those who are wealthier⁷ and have a higher education level tend to trust the government more because they are clear beneficiaries of the status quo, several scholars find the opposite (Gronke 2004; Hibbing and Theiss-Moore 2002; Moreno 2001). The logic offered for such

a negative relationship – at least for education – is that those with a higher education level have a higher level of political awareness, which leads to criticism and even cynicism towards the government (Gronke 2004). In addition to measures of wealth and education, our analysis also includes age⁸, gender⁹ (coded 0 for male 1 for female), and urban (versus rural) place of residence. While we have fewer *a priori* expectations for these latter variables, we note that Moreno (2001) suggests that age has a positive correlation with the dependent variable.

⁶ As a typical practice for the *Insights* series, we omit Canada and the United States from this and other analyses in the report to focus on the Latin American and Caribbean cases.

⁷ The measure of wealth we use is described in a previous *Insights* report by Abby Córdova (2009), <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0806en.pdf>

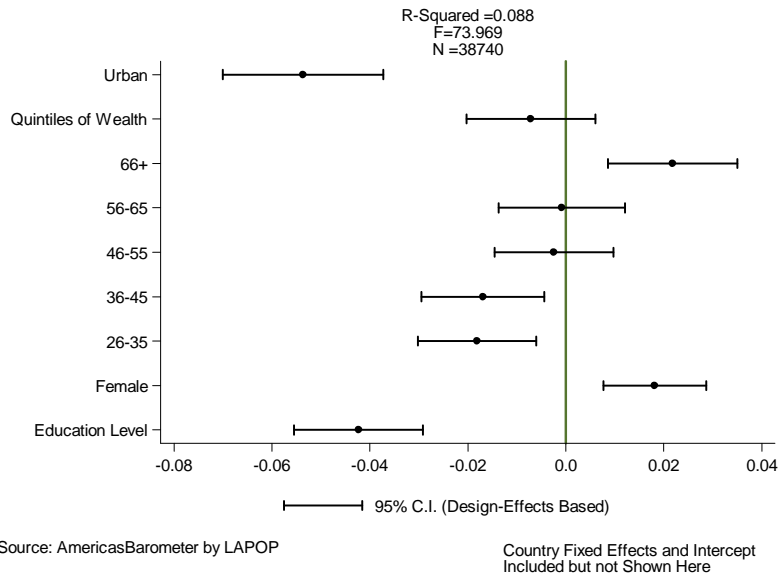
⁸ Age was coded into 5 quintiles that were then compared to the age of 18-25. The quintiles included 66+, 56-65, 46-55, 36-45, and 26-35.

⁹ Gender is included as a control and also because many often speculate that women in Latin America will have more confidence and trust in the national legislature because of the patriarchal societies (Moreno 2001). We include this in our analysis even though there is no theoretical basis to hypothesize the effects of the variable.

To assess our expectations, we created a regression model that tests the relationships

are less likely to trust in their legislature than those who live in rural communities.

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Trust in the National Legislature



between these five individual level factors and trust in government. The results, displayed in Figure 2, show standardized coefficients for ease of comparison (see appendix for full results of this and any subsequent analysis). The estimated effect of each independent variable is shown by a dot. The corresponding bars represent a 95% confidence interval around that estimate. If the dot and the bar fall to the left of the 0 line then the variable is both negative and significantly significant. If the dot and bar fall to the right of the 0 line then the variable is both positive and significantly significant.

As we had expected, we found that those with a higher education level are less likely to trust the government than those with less education. Also, females and older people trust in their national legislatures more than males and younger people. Interestingly, we found that wealth does not have a significant impact on individuals' trust in the national legislature. Finally, those who live in urban communities

Perception of Effective Government and Trust in the National Legislature

Prior research on trust in institutions has led us to identify two sets of factors that should help explain trust in the national legislature. First, trust in the integrity of politicians to act as honest and sincere representatives should matter. Political scandals have been found to be associated with lower trust in the national legislature, possibly because such events cause the public to doubt the sincerity and honesty of legislators (Bowler 2004; Chanley 2000; Nye 1997; Sotero 2005). Trust in political parties is also positively related to trust in the national legislature (Nye 1997, Patterson 1992).

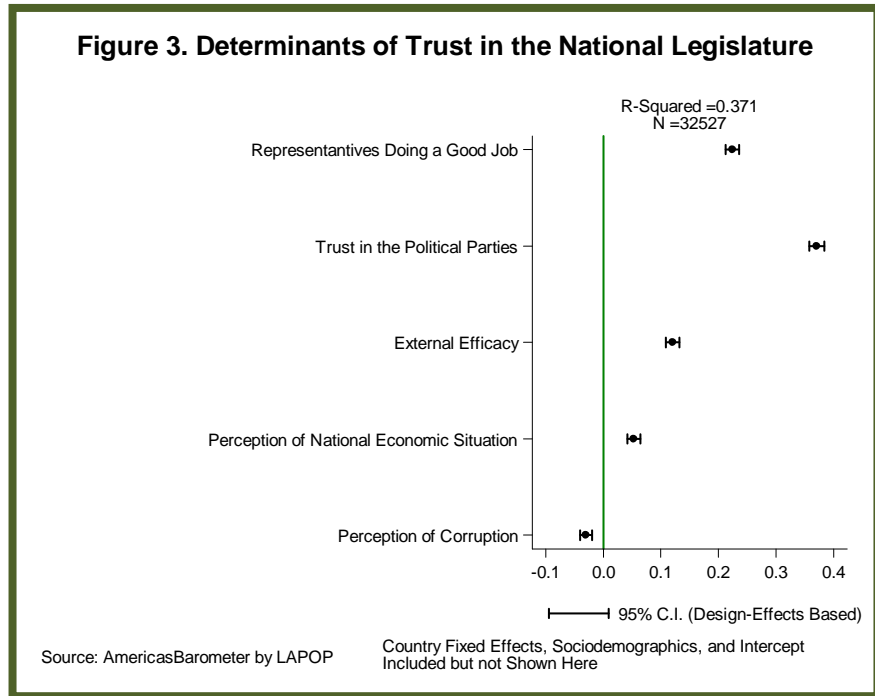
Since political parties are a prime means through which the people and legislators interact, having reliable channels of communication may help strengthen trust. External efficacy, or how much someone feels that their opinion matters and how capable they feel of influencing decision-makers, has also been found to be correlated with higher trust in the national legislature (Catterburg 2000; Patterson 1992). In short, we expect to find that the more people feel that the national legislature is free of corruption and elected representatives are receptive to their priorities, the greater the level of trust in that institution.

Second, trust in the national legislature should also be tied to measures of material performance. Chanley (2000), Levitt (2011), and Patterson (1992, 1997) have found that the perception of the national economic situation is positively related to trust in the legislature, making it plausible that people hold the legislature responsible for the economic

condition of the nation. The overall perception of the work of the legislature is clearly linked with its performance, and also should influence the level of trust in the body (Catterburg 2006; Hetherington 1998; Levitt 2011).

Jointly, with these two themes, sincere interaction and successful implementation of policy, we are suggesting that people come to trust legislatures more when the legislatures prove that they are able and willing to understand the priorities of the citizenry and effectively legislate with these in mind.

To test this model of trust in national legislatures, we conducted a regression analysis that includes the following: perceptions of corruption,¹⁰ trust in political parties, external efficacy, perceptions of the national economic situation, and approval of legislative performance.^{11,12} Figure 3 displays the results for



the analysis, in the same fashion as Figure 2. Each coefficient is standardized to capture the relative impact of each variable and allow for comparison. Standard socioeconomic and demographic variables and country-fixed effects are also included as controls, though not shown in the figure.¹³ Independent variables are significant when their 95% confidence intervals, represented by the brackets, do not intersect the 0 line.

¹⁰ The perception of corruption measure captures the extent to which scandals are frequent in a given context.

¹¹ The data are drawn from the AmericasBarometer survey. The relevant survey questions are: **M2** Performance of Congress (“Now speaking of Congress and thinking of members/senators and representatives as a whole, without considering the political parties to which they belong, do you believe that the members and representative of Congress are performing their jobs: very well, well, neither well or poorly, poorly, or very poorly?”); **B21** Trust in Political Parties (“To what extent do you trust political parties?”); **SOCT1** Perception of the National Economic Situation (“How would you describe the country’s economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad?”); **EFF1** External Efficacy (“Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement.”); and **EXC 7** Perception of Corruption (“Taking into account your own experience or what you

have heard, corruption among public officials is...very common, common, uncommon, very common”).

¹² We also ran a regression analysis for other independent variables. These included trust in elections, trust in the President/Prime Minister, respect for political institutions, and asking for help from a representative from Congress. While our analysis does not focus on these variables, we note the first three were positively correlated with trust in national legislature and the last was statistically insignificant.

¹³ Canada and the United States are again omitted from the model. Figure 3 controls for the same socioeconomic and demographic variables included in Figure 2 as well as country fixed effects. After adding new variables to the analysis, those tested in Figure 2 did not change with the exception of two age variables. The age categories 26-35 and 36-45 were both negatively correlated and significant in Figure 2. However, these variables lost their significance in Figure 3. This indicates that they must in some way be related to the variables that we tested in Figure 3.

The outcome of the regression analysis is consistent with the expectations we drew from the literature. All variables shown in Figure 3 are statistically significant. Thus, we find strong support for our argument that, when individuals believe their legislature is comprised of sincere individuals who take into account the views of the citizenry *and* when legislature are perceived as doing a good job, then people are willing to invest greater trust in the legislative institution as a whole.

A reader might wonder if the results of this analysis remain stable when the U.S. and Canada are included. At the start of this report, we noted public discontent with congress in the United States. Our presentation of mean levels of trust in the legislature across the Americas shows that the U.S. is not exceptional in this regard; some other countries in the Americas have similar low average levels of trust in this institution. If we include the U.S. and Canada in the model presented in Figure 3 (in which case we substitute out the wealth variable for an income measure), our results remain the same.

We also acknowledge that the variable for congressional performance may be too closely related to our dependent variable, so that we are essentially predicting positive views of the legislature with positive views of the legislature. While we acknowledge this as a reasonable concern, we note that the independent variable in our model taps evaluations of performance, while the dependent variable relates to trust. More importantly, when we omit “Representatives Doing a Good Job” from the model, the results for the other factors in the model, and thus our conclusions, remain the

same. For the interested reader, we provide this reduced model in graph form in Appendix B.

Conclusion

The findings from this *Insights* report show that in general those with lower levels of trust in political parties, those who have a lower perception of legislative representatives’ performance, and those with a higher perception of political corruption are the least likely to trust in the national legislature. Furthermore, the report finds that those with lower external efficacy and more negative perceptions of the national economy tend to trust less in the national legislature, though these effects

are smaller than some of the other effects found in this report. These results suggest that the way people relate to their national legislature and evaluate its performance strongly influences their overall trust in the institution. In other words, people will trust more in legislatures when they believe that institution to be run by honest and reliable politicians who have heard their concerns and who implement them into action.

Though not addressed in this report, scholarly research (Catterburg 2006; Hetherington 1998; Levitt 2011) indicates that people who identify with the majority party in the national legislature tend to trust in legislature more. In future work on this subject, researchers might consider extending the analysis we presented here to take into account the majority party in power and the party with which individuals most identify, which could contribute to an even more nuanced understanding of trust in the

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national legislature.¹⁴ We also have reason to believe that the media – by virtue of the fact that it acts as an information conduit - can affect people’s perception of corruption, which in turn would affect their trust in their legislatures. Further investigation is recommended to determine if there is a correlation between attention to the media and trust in the national legislature.

In the meantime, we conclude as follows: Honest and effective translation of the priorities of the people into policies bolsters trust in national legislatures.

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¹⁴ In fact, in a separate analysis not shown here, we found evidence that support for the majority party in the national legislature was positively and significantly correlated with trust in the national legislature, meaning that those who identify with the party with the largest number of seats in the national legislature tend to have more trust in the institution.

Appendix A

Table 1. Predictors of Trust in National Legislatures in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010

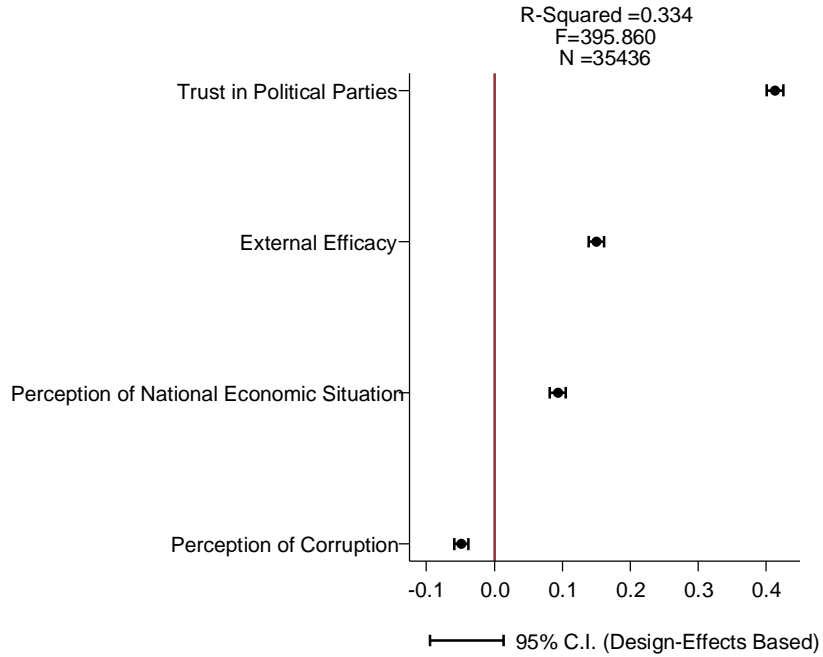
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Education	-0.042*	0.007	-0.020*	0.006
Female	0.018*	0.005	0.011*	0.005
26-35	-0.018*	0.006	-0.003	0.006
36-45	-0.017*	0.006	-0.003	0.006
46-55	-0.002	0.006	0.007	0.006
56-65	-0.001	0.007	0.002	0.006
66+	0.022*	0.007	0.014*	0.006
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.007	0.007	-0.007	0.006
Urban	-0.054*	0.008	-0.027*	0.007
Perception of Corruption			-0.030*	0.005
Perception of National Economic Situation			0.053*	0.006
External Efficacy			0.121*	0.006
Trust in Political Parties			0.371*	0.007
Representatives doing a Good Job			0.224*	0.006
Mexico	-0.077*	0.008	0.018*	0.008
Guatemala	-0.191*	0.009	-0.067*	0.008
El Salvador	-0.094*	0.007	-0.024*	0.007
Honduras	-0.071*	0.007	-0.027*	0.007
Nicaragua	-0.173*	0.009	-0.059*	0.009
Costa Rica	-0.102*	0.010	-0.025*	0.008
Panama	-0.124*	0.010	-0.058*	0.007
Colombia	-0.101*	0.009	-0.031*	0.008
Ecuador	-0.211*	0.011	-0.073	0.011
Bolivia	-0.122*	0.011	-0.012*	0.010
Peru	-0.207*	0.009	-0.085*	0.008
Paraguay	-0.196*	0.008	-0.078*	0.008
Chile	-0.097*	0.009	-0.023*	0.009
Brazil	-0.186*	0.011	-0.075*	0.010
Venezuela	-0.126*	0.010	-0.048*	0.009
Argentina	-0.164*	0.009	-0.048*	0.008
Dominican Rep.	-0.101*	0.008	-0.009	0.008
Haiti	-0.238*	0.008	(dropped)	
Jamaica	-0.165*	0.010	-0.047*	0.009
Guyana	-0.101*	0.011	-0.042*	0.008
Trinidad & Tobago	-0.194*	0.008	-0.069*	0.008
Belize	-0.092*	0.010	0.004	0.008
Suriname	-0.118*	0.010	-0.052*	0.008
Constant	0.071*	0.008	0.057*	0.007
<i>R-squared</i>	0.087		0.37	
<i>Number of Observations</i>	38,740		32,527	

* p<0.05

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed.

Country of Reference: Uruguay

Appendix B: Figure 3 with “Representatives Doing a Good Job” Omitted



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Country Fixed Effects, Sociodemographics, and Intercept Included but not Shown Here

Appendix C: Author Biographies*

Mitchell Boynton is a freshman at Vanderbilt University. He is a political science and economics major and a member of the College Scholar Honors Program. His particular interests include international relations and the influence of religion on politics. He plans on a career in government service in the future.

Regina Lee is a currently a freshman at Vanderbilt University. She is a member of the College Scholars Honors Program. She is majoring in molecular and cellular biology and is considering options for a minor. She is a member of the CommonDore's Programming Council, a subset of the Vanderbilt Student Government, and is on the executive board for the Association of Biology Students. After graduation, she plans to attend medical school with a focus on pediatrics.

Shannon Radomski is a freshman at Vanderbilt University in the College Scholars (Honors) Program. She is studying Medicine, Health, and Society and Spanish with a pre-med concentration. She is a Resident Advisor, on the executive board of Global Medical Brigades, and a sister of Pi Beta Phi Sorority. She plans to study abroad in Bilbao, Spain this summer.

Benjamin Ries is a junior in the Vanderbilt College of Arts and Science and double major in Political Science and Film Studies originally from Roanoke, Virginia. Benjamin is the President of the Vanderbilt College Democrats and a Chancellor's Scholar, a full-tuition scholarship awarded for bridging gaps among diverse groups and demonstrating interests in diversity education, tolerance, and social justice. Benjamin is also a co-founder of the political discussion group Current Events and Critical Conversations, a staff write/senior producer for Vanderbilt's newspaper, a three-time participant in Alternative Spring Break, and a veteran of the Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature program. Benjamin interned for CNN last summer and will be doing research and legal analysis for the First Amendment Center starting this June.

**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.*