



# AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2013

Number 87

## Power to the People? Support for Direct Democracy in the Americas

By Juan Camilo Plata  
[juan.c.plata@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:juan.c.plata@vanderbilt.edu)  
Vanderbilt University

**Executive summary.** This *Insights* report explores public opinion in the Americas regarding support for having direct government by the people rather than representative democracy. While average levels of support are low, on average, there is quite a bit of variation across countries and individuals. This report examines individual-level variation in support for direct government. Initial analyses reveal that the wealthy, urban and more educated are more supportive of representative government, while the young and indigenous are more receptive to some form of direct government. A second set of analyses finds that direct democracy supporters tend to feel more politically efficacious and be more supportive of their political system and popular elections, but less supportive of political parties. When taken together, these findings suggest that support for direct democracy is more a reflection of citizens' desires for more effective outlets for their collective political voice than a rejection of the system and core democratic processes.

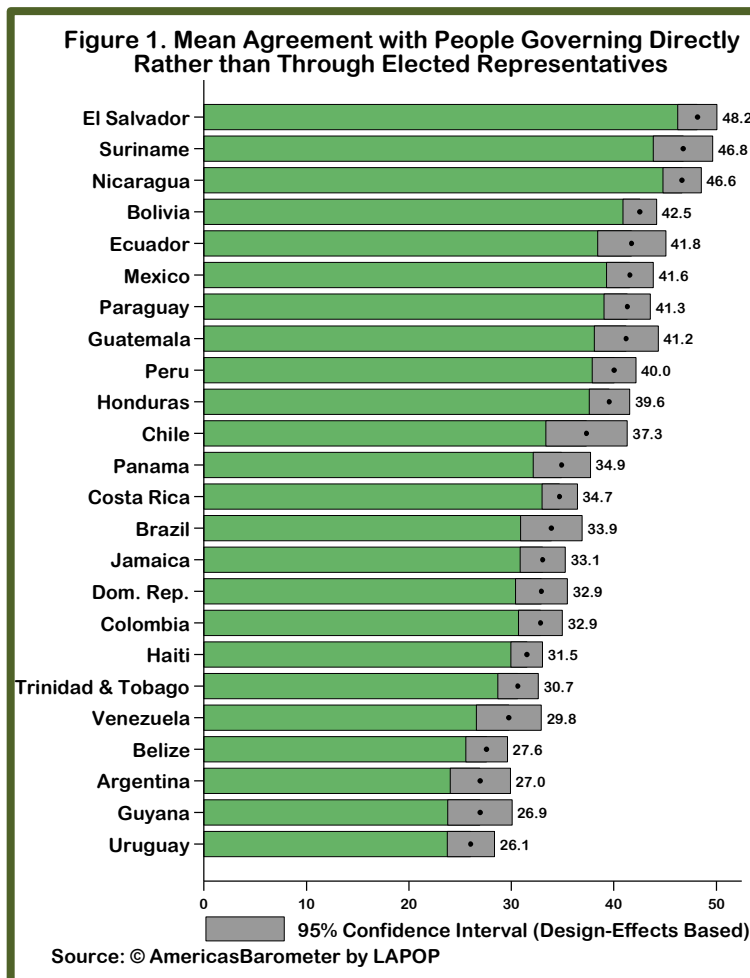
*The Insights Series is co-edited by Jonathan T. Hiskey, Mitchell A. Seligson, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.*  
[www.AmericasBarometer.org](http://www.AmericasBarometer.org)

Contemporary democracies have favored the election of representatives as a governance mechanism well-suited for large, complex, modern nation states. Yet from their seats in various institutions, such as the office of the president and the parliament, elected officials can appear prone to infighting and deadlock (Linz 1990). These days, trust in parties and support for party-based democracy exist at moderate to low levels across the Americas (Ahern et al. 2012). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that a fair number (but far from the majority) of individuals in Latin America and the Caribbean express a preference for bypassing elected officials via a system of direct democracy.

In this *Insights* report<sup>1</sup> I explore the extent to which there is agreement across the Americas that the people should govern directly, rather than through elected representatives. I focus the analysis on the following question from the 2012 AmericasBarometer<sup>2</sup> survey by LAPOP, in which 38,631 survey respondents from 24 countries<sup>3</sup> were asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement:<sup>4</sup>

**POP107.** The people should govern directly rather than through elected representatives. How much do you agree or disagree?

This question thus helps to distinguish between those who agree with direct government and



those who prefer a system of elected representatives.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 shows mean levels of agreement that direct democracy is preferable to representative democracy. At one extreme we find Uruguay, Guyana and Argentina, where mean agreement with having direct government is at or less than 27 units on the 0 to 100 scale. At the other extreme we find El Salvador, Suriname and Nicaragua where agreement with direct government reaches a mean level of just over 45 units.

<sup>5</sup> The original scale from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”) was rescaled from 0 to 100 to facilitate interpretation. It is important to note that about 35% of respondents answered that they “strongly disagree”, which indicates that a lot of people have strong reservations about direct democracy; on the other side of the scale, only about 8 percent “strongly agree”.

<sup>1</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>

<sup>2</sup> Funding for the 2012 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.

<sup>3</sup> The United States and Canada were excluded in keeping with the tendency for *Insights* reports to focus on the Latin American and Caribbean region.

<sup>4</sup> Non-respondents are 6.1% of the LAC sample.

In the upcoming analyses, I first explore if higher levels of support for direct government are associated with specific socio-demographic groups across Latin America and the Caribbean. Thereafter, I try to clarify the motivations for preferring one form of government over the other.

To foreshadow my results, I find higher support for direct government among individuals who support the political system in general, believe in the importance of elections and a citizen's role in politics, but see political parties as unnecessary for democracy to function. These are interesting results, as they suggest that it is not discontent with the current system per se that fuels preferences for direct democracy, but a search for an alternative mode of input into it (e.g., one devoid of parties). I discuss these results in greater detail later in the report. First, though, I assess what subgroups express greater levels of support for direct democracy.

## **Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Support for Direct Governance**

Political scientists (Arrow 1963; Bartels 2003) have shown that the contemporary system of representative democracy often fails to satisfy the normative expectation that public policy will correspond with the will of the people. Studies distinguish between representatives who act as "trustees" and follow the preferences of the public and those who act as "delegates" and independently decide what kind of policies are

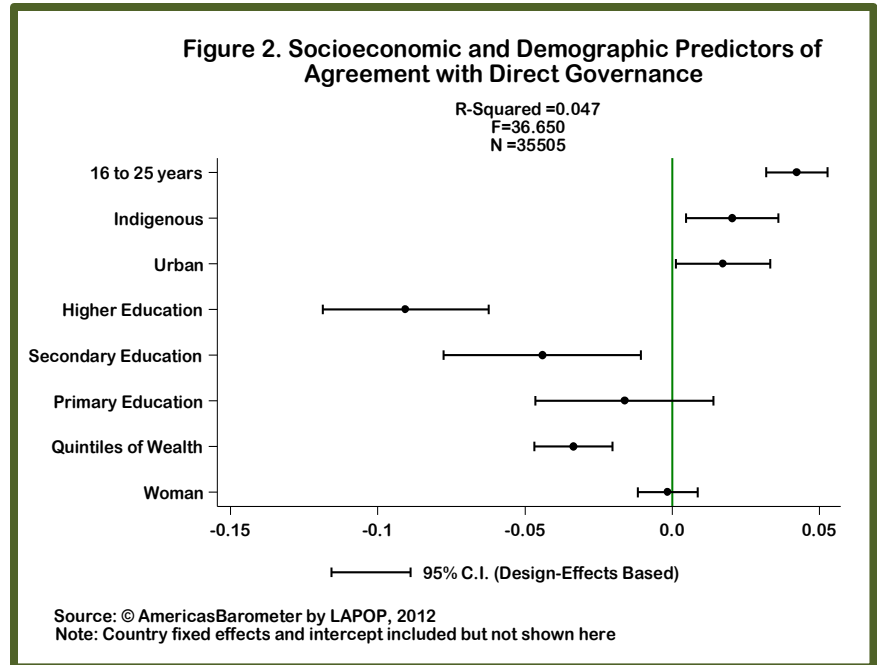
best for their constituents (O'Donnell 1994; Rehfeld 2009). This distinction highlights the possibility that at least some representatives may be unresponsive to the public's input. Underrepresentation has been identified as a critical challenge for particular social groups that tend to be "marginalized" in the policy domain: women (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005), the indigenous (Yashar 1998), the poor (Bartels 2010), the less educated (Besley and Reynal-Querol 2011), and the rural population (Tarrow 1971). Given these representation biases in many contemporary systems, we might expect to find higher levels of support for direct government among these socio-economic groups.

*It is not discontent with the system that fuels preferences for direct democracy, but instead a search for an alternative mode of input into it.*

In order to examine the extent to which socioeconomic and demographic characteristics predict favoring direct government, I develop a linear model predicting respondents' level of agreement with the notion that the people should govern directly. In line with the above discussion, the expectation is that women should be more supportive of direct government, given the comparatively marginal position of women's interests in representative forms of democracy (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005). Those who self-identify as indigenous should also express greater agreement with the idea of governing directly. Such an attitude is consistent with the modern surge of indigenous organizations willing to promote their interests directly without relying on alliances with political parties (Van Cott 2000).

Conversely, more educated and wealthier citizens should be more likely to prefer representative democracy, as this form of government tends to favor these groups (Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Besley and Reynal-Querol 2011). Education may matter for other reasons as well: those people with higher education are more likely to develop civic skills in daily life and be invited to participate in political activities (Schlozman et al. 2005). Other factors that may affect support for direct government include a respondent's place of residence (rural vs. urban) and age, where younger people may be more open to a move toward direct democracy while older citizens may be more aware of the negative consequences a move away from representative government could entail (Seligson 2007).<sup>6</sup>

The standardized results of the model are presented in Figure 2. The estimated effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable is represented by a dot. If the dot and its corresponding bars, which indicate the 95% confidence interval, fall to the left of the 0 line, then the relationship is considered both negative and statistically significant; if the dot and bars



fall to the right of the 0 line, the relationship is considered positive and statistically significant.

Interestingly, and counter to the above expectations, these results show that all else equal women's support for direct government does not differ significantly from that of men. We do find, however, that respondents identifying as indigenous are more likely to be in favor of direct forms of government when compared to those who self-identify as non-indigenous. Also, as expected, the wealthier a person is, the less she prefers direct government as an alternative to elected representatives. With respect to education, we find that those with higher and secondary education express greater support for a system of elected representatives than do those with no education. The urban population is only marginally more likely than the rural population to prefer direct government. And finally, compared with respondents over 25 years, those between 16 and 25 years are more open to considering some form of direct government.<sup>7</sup> Although these

<sup>6</sup> I coded female as 1, and 0 for male. I also coded as 1 those who identified themselves as indigenous and 0 any other alternative. Education was coded in four categories: "No education", "Primary education", "Secondary education" and "Higher education." "No education" is used as the reference category. 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>  
 I coded 1 the respondents living in the urban area, and 0 those living in a rural setting. And finally, I coded age into two groups to highlight the preferences of the youngest (those between 16 and 25 years) versus those above 25 years. Note that in most cases, those aged 17 and below are excluded from the study; an exception is the case of Nicaragua, where the voting age is 16.

<sup>7</sup> Initial analyses showed the difference in the preferences between the youngest and any of the older age categories was very similar. Therefore, to keep the presentation as

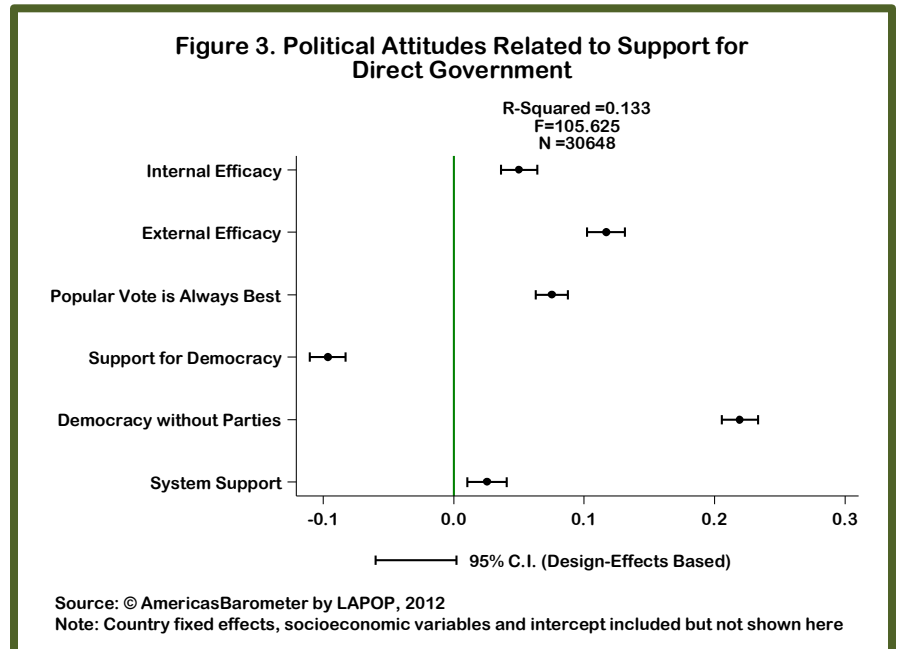
results are statistically significant, substantively they exert only marginal influences on the dependent variable. Thus, I now explore the possibility that attitudes toward the system, efficacy, and disenchantment with parties and democracy might explain support for direct government.

### The Role of Support for Democratic Institutions and Political Efficacy

The argument underlying the above discussion is that certain groups are more satisfied with indirect representative democratic politics than others, and oppose change to this status quo. It is possible to go further and test whether general disenchantment with the components of democratic governance (system support, embracing the use of elections, preferring democracy to any alternative, and favoring the existence of political parties) explains support for direct government. Furthermore, it is also important to clarify if the preference for people governing directly is related to having a high perception of one's own ability to understand and impact politics. Political efficacy promotes political activism, which is a key incentive for politicians to be responsive in a democratic context (Almond and Verba 1965). Political efficacy (both internal and external) is also an indication of having the necessary resources to take part in politics as direct government requires.

In a model that builds on the results shown in Figure 2, I now include measures of system support, attitudes toward elections, political parties and democracy in general; and, as well, I

parsimonious as possible, I focus on the difference between the youngest and respondents any older than 25 years.



include measures of internal and external efficacy. I measure system support with an index based on one's perception that the state guarantees a fair trial, respect for political institutions, perception that the system protects basic rights, level of pride related to living in the country and the extent of belief that one should support the system. I also test if those who agree that democracy can exist without parties are more approving of direct government.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, I examine the relationship between one's view of elections and willingness to empower unelected officials with the level of support for direct democracy.<sup>9</sup> Finally, I evaluate if having higher levels of political efficacy is related to a greater preference for

<sup>8</sup> DEM23. Democracy can exist without political parties. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

<sup>9</sup> ING4. Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. AUT1. There are people who say that we need a strong leader who does not have to be elected by the vote of the people. Others say that although things may not work, electoral democracy, or the popular vote, is always best. What do you think? (1) We need a strong leader who does not have to be elected. (2) Electoral democracy is the best.

governing directly rather than through representatives.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 3 shows the results of this new, extended model (see Appendix for the full model, which includes all the variables included in the analysis reported in Figure 2). Those respondents with higher levels of system support are *more likely* to agree with people governing directly rather than through elected representatives. Thus, it is not discontentment with the system (beyond parties) but rather satisfaction with and support for the system that predicts a preference for direct government. And while support for democracy in the abstract is associated with lower levels of support for direct government, those respondents who agree that “the popular vote is always best” are more open to some form of direct democracy. Yet another noteworthy result here is that thinking democracy can work without parties predicts greater openness to an alternative for the current representation system. Finally, an individual who believes she understands politics and that the system is responsive also is more likely to support direct government.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusions

Wealthy, more educated, urban respondents are more likely to embrace representative democracy according to the results presented here. Conversely, the young and indigenous are more open to the possibility of governing directly. The attitudinal analysis of support for direct democracy finds that respondents who

feel more politically efficacious, supportive of their political system and electoral democracy, but skeptical of the role of political parties in democracy are more receptive to direct government.

Overall, these results suggest that supporting direct government may be an expression of the inclination to engage in politics, and a reaction to the deficiencies political parties and democracy in the abstract are perceived to have. Although political engagement is a central component of democratic governance to keep politicians accountable, this participatory impulse leads to looking for alternatives to the status quo system of indirect democratic governance.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in addition to signaling high levels of efficacy and potentially having positive implications for civic engagement, high levels of support for direct government could also be seen as a signal of a failure of the traditional party system and of democracy in the abstract but, not, it seems of elections or the political system itself.

## References

- Ahern, P., et al. (2012). "Can Democracy Exist Without Parties? Education Increases Support For Party-Based Democracy In Latin America And The Caribbean." *Insights Series*. Nashville: Latin American Public Opinion Project, Vanderbilt.
- Almond, G. and S. Verba (1965). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes And Democracy In Five Nations*. Boston, Little.
- Arrow, K. (1963). *Social Choice And Individual Values*. New York, Wiley.

<sup>10</sup> EFF1. Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

EFF2. You feel that you understand the most important political issues of this country. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?

<sup>11</sup> These results hold even if we exclude any given variable. Notice that the correlation between “Popular Vote is Always Best” and “Support for Democracy” is only -0.22, which confirms that both variables are capturing different attitudes about the democratic regime.

<sup>12</sup> Additional analyses not included here show that respondents supporting direct government also are more likely to approve the violent overthrow of the government and other contentious methods.

- Bartels, L. (2003). "Democracy With Attitudes." In *Electoral democracy*. M. B. MacKuen and G. Rabinowitz. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press: 48-82.
- Bartels, L. (2010). *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy Of The New Gilded Age*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press.
- Besley, T. and M. Reynal-Querol (2011). "Do Democracies Select More Educated Leaders?" *American Political Science Review* 105 (August): 552-566.
- Linz, J. J. (1990). "The Perils Of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* 1 (December): 51-69.
- O'Donnell, G. (1994). "Delegative Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 5 (January): 55-69.
- Rehfeld, A. (2009). "Representation Rethought: On Trustees, Delegates, And Gyroscopes In The Study Of Political Representation And Democracy." *American Political Science Review* 103 (May): 214-230.
- Schlozman, K. L., et al. (2005). "Inequalities Of Political Voice." In *Inequality And American Democracy: What We Know And What We Need To Learn*. L. R. Jacobs and T. Skocpol. Washington D.C. , Russell Sage Foundation: 19-87.
- Schwindt-Bayer, L. A. and W. Mishler (2005). "An Integrated Model Of Women's Representation." *Journal of Politics* 67 (May): 407-428.
- Seligson, M. A. (2007). "The Rise Of Populism And The Left In Latin America." *Journal of Democracy* 18 (July): 81-95.
- Soroka, S. N. and C. Wlezien (2008). "On The Limits To Inequality In Representation." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41 (April): 319-327.
- Tarrow, S. (1971). "The Urban-Rural Cleavage In Political Involvement: The Case Of France." *The American Political Science Review* 65 (June): 341-357.
- Van Cott, D. L. (2000). "Party System Development And Indigenous Populations In Latin America." *Party Politics* 6 (April): 155-174.
- Yashar, D. J. (1998). "Contesting Citizenship: Indigenous Movements And Democracy In Latin America." *Comparative Politics* 31 (October): 23-42.

## Appendix 1. OLS model explaining preference for direct government rather than through elected representatives

	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error
System Support	0.025***	0.007
Democracy without Parties	0.219***	0.007
Support for Democracy	-0.096***	0.007
Popular Vote is Always Best	0.075***	0.006
Internal Efficacy	0.116***	0.007
External Efficacy	0.050***	0.007
Women	0.004	0.005
Wealth Quintal	-0.025***	0.006
Primary Education	-0.011	0.016
Secondary Education	-0.042	0.018
Superior Education	-0.085***	0.015
Urban	0.011	0.007
Identify as Indigenous	0.013	0.007
16 to 25 years	0.032*	0.005
Mexico	0.077***	0.007
Guatemala	0.052***	0.008
El Salvador	0.100***	0.008
Honduras	0.052***	0.008
Nicaragua	0.108***	0.007
Costa Rica	0.062***	0.005
Panama	0.056***	0.008
Colombia	0.039***	0.007
Ecuador	0.074***	0.009
Bolivia	0.112***	0.008
Peru	0.076***	0.007
Paraguay	0.081***	0.006
Chile	0.058***	0.010
Brazil	0.045***	0.008
Venezuela	0.039***	0.008
Argentina	0.021***	0.008
Dominican Republic	0.026***	0.007
Haití	-0.023**	0.008
Jamaica	0.052***	0.007
Guyana	0.004	0.007
Trinidad & Tobago	0.036***	0.009
Belize	0.008	0.007
Suriname	0.104***	0.009
Constant	0.008	0.007
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.133	
<i>Observations</i>	30648	

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

'No education' is the reference category for education, 'over 25 years' for age, and Uruguay for country fixed effects.