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Political Connections in the Americas

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Executive Summary. In the Americas, as in much of the world, having political connections is often critical for one's economic, social, and political chances of success. Access to politicians, however, is limited and often highly selective. In this *Insights* report, I explore the question of who knows and has access to politicians in the Americas. I find that nearly a third of citizens in the region report knowing personally a politician or someone who has run for local or national office. Not surprisingly, those individuals with personal access to the political world tend to be more politically active and civically engaged, and also are of a higher social status than those without such personal political connections. Where one lives also affects the chances of having political connections, with those living in smaller cities more likely to have ties with local politicians, and citizens of the smaller Latin American and Caribbean countries more likely to have connections with national-level politicians. These findings highlight the systematic, and non-representative, patterns of relationships between citizens and their representatives across the Americas that tend to exacerbate extant levels of political inequality.

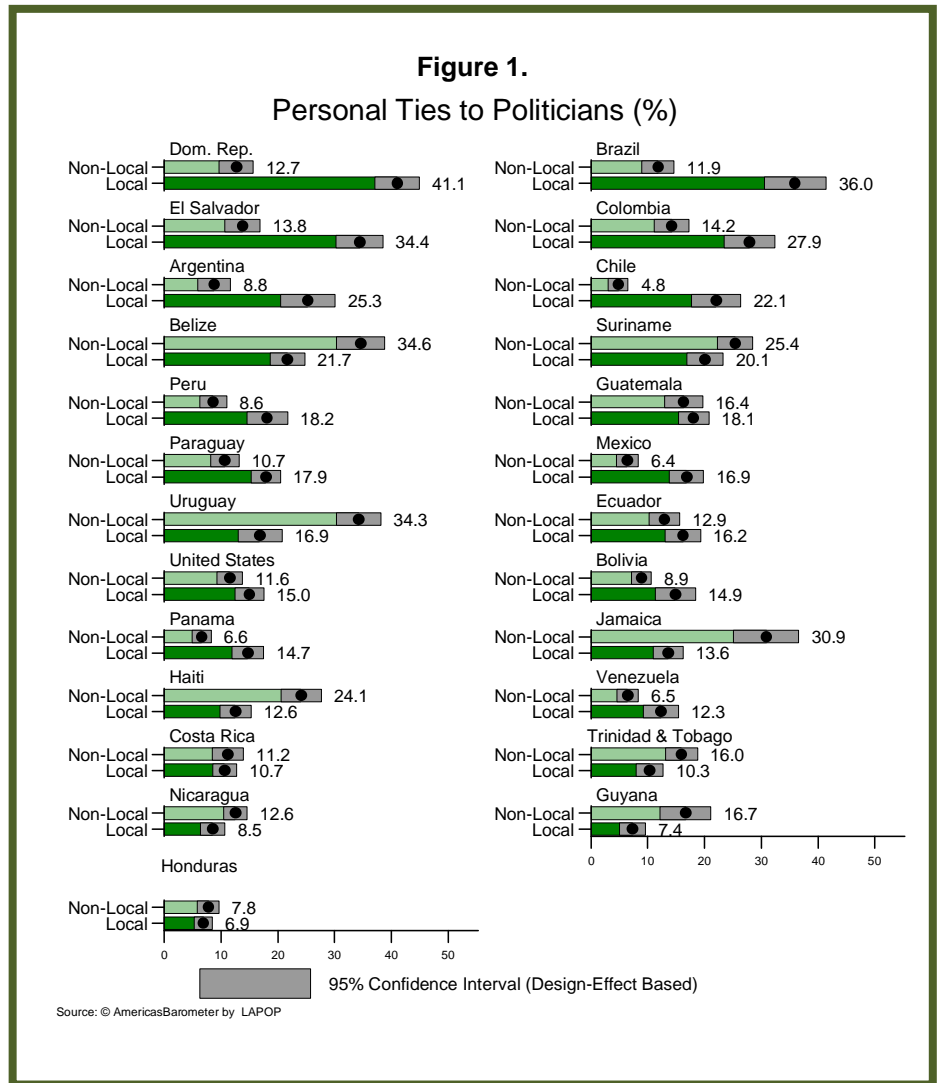
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Social capital – broadly defined as personally or socially useful connections between people – is critical to politics. Many studies emphasize the value of horizontal ties between citizens, especially in community groups (e.g., Putnam 1993, 2000). Yet another form of social capital involves the vertical connections between citizens and politicians. Personal ties to politicians can mobilize citizens politically (Smith 2012), and give the well-connected greater political voice. For instance, a brother-in-law or a high school friend on the city council may be more receptive to one’s concerns about a neighborhood school than an official with no such connections. And often times, such ties are even more useful for addressing personal issues. When the public bureaucracy fails to serve all citizens efficiently and equitably, political ties can help citizens gain selective access to services, from finding space in a public hospital to securing a driver’s license. Political connections can also provide access to patronage. Citizens who know politicians personally may have privileged access to what are often called the “spoils of office,” such as public sector jobs or even, in some cases, contracts. In sum, throughout much of the Americas, political connections can often be a critical component of one’s life chances.

In this *Insights* report, I examine which citizens in the Americas have political connections.¹ The 2012 round of the LAPOP AmericasBarometer

¹ 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>



asked two questions to gauge personal ties to the political world:²

SNW1A. Do you personally know an elected official or some person who was a candidate in the most recent national, state/departmental or local elections?³

² 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.

³ In countries without state or departmental elections (ones at an intermediate tier between local and national), the questions omitted that level. Non-response was 1.5% (SNW1A) and 1.0% (SNW1B). Due to limited questionnaire space, these questions were asked of a split-sample of respondents.

SNW1B. And is this position at the local, state/departmental or national level?

Across the region, 31% of citizens reported a connection; 52% of ties were local, 16% state/departmental, 24% national, and 6% at multiple levels. In Figure 1, I present the percentage of respondents in each country claiming connections to local and non-local (state or national) politicians and candidates. In most countries, local ties are more prevalent than non-local. This is not surprising, since local government is closest to citizens. Local politicians may live in one's own city, village, or even neighborhood, and do not migrate to a distant capital for work. Also, typically there are more local than state or national elected offices, increasing the chances that citizens will develop ties with local politicians. In fact, a common argument for the decentralization of government responsibilities to the local level is that citizens will have a greater opportunity to interact with the political system at the local level, and allow officials to tailor policy to local circumstances (Hiskey and Seligson 2003; Lassen and Seritzlew 2011). Personal ties to local politicians are particularly prevalent in the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and El Salvador, while fewer than 10% of citizens report such ties in Nicaragua, Guyana, or Honduras.

At the same time, non-local ties outstrip local ones in Uruguay and many Caribbean and Central American countries. These results suggest that citizens have better access to non-local politicians in smaller countries. In countries such as Uruguay (population 3.4 million), Jamaica (2.7 million) and Belize (310,000), commutes from outlying areas to the capital may often be relatively short, and national-level politicians may live in the same localities as constituents. In addition, though small countries have smaller national legislatures, they nonetheless have more legislators per capita.⁴ Furthermore, the role of

local governments in the lives of citizens in these smaller countries tends to be subsumed by a more powerful national government, making the value of national political connections far greater than in larger countries where local governments have a more significant role in the lives of citizens.

Who Has Political Connections?

In the following sections I explore which citizens are most likely to have personal ties with the political world. I start with the individual characteristics of the politically connected. Because the individual-level determinants of non-local and local connections turn out to be similar, I analyze the two types of ties together.⁵

With little research directly related to the question of political connections, I begin with the proposition that those individuals more engaged with their political system will be more likely to have personal political connections. Thus, I consider such factors as levels of community participation, political activism, interest in politics, socioeconomic status, gender and age. I deal with each of these in turn.

First, involvement in community groups may allow for increased access to politicians. Not only do politicians seek out such groups to contact many constituents at once, but such groups also may contact politicians to promote their own interests. This may be true even of groups that are not explicitly political, such as religious and school organizations. I therefore include as one predictor of political connections membership in several types of community organizations: community improvement

correlation between a country's population and number of legislative seats is .83, but the correlation between the population and *per capita* size of legislature is -.31.

⁵ In the appendix I present tables with full results breaking out the determinants of local and non-local connections separately.

⁴ Analysis is author's own, based on data from the UNDP and the World Bank Database of Political Institutions. The

committees, religious organizations, and school-related parents' associations.⁶

My next expectation is that those actively engaged in politics will be much more likely to know politicians. Some people become acquainted with leaders through political activism; for others, personal ties to politicians may *lead to* political activism. Whichever way the causal arrow points, I expect to find a correlation between activism and political ties. I examine two aspects of activism: participation in meetings of a political party or organization; and work for a party or candidate during a political campaign.⁷

Third, and relatedly, those who are more engaged with and interested in politics on a psychological level should be more likely to make the effort to know politicians. Thus, I include as predictors of political connections a measure of political interest, as well as variables for whether an individual identifies with a political party and whether she identifies with the political left or right.⁸

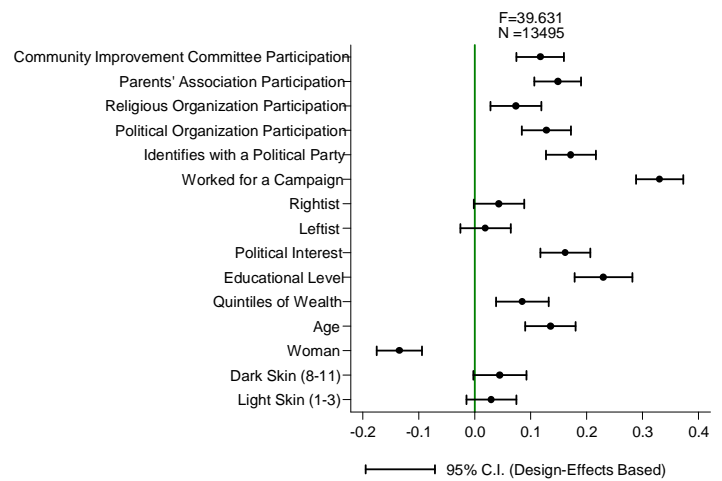
Fourth, socioeconomic status (SES) should also affect the probability of knowing a politician. Citizens with high SES are more likely to grow up with future politicians, to live in their neighborhoods as adults, and to have politicians in their personal or professional networks. I therefore include both respondents' education levels and wealth quintiles to assess

⁶ Variables CP6, CP7, and CP8 are each recoded on a 0-100 scale, with higher values representing more frequent participation.

⁷ Campaign work is an indicator based on PP2, with activists recoded as 100. Participation in political meetings is based on CP13, and is recoded on a 0-100 scale, with higher values indicating more frequent participation.

⁸ Political interest, based on POL1, is again recoded 0-100. To measure ideology, indicator variables are coded 1 for those who identify as 1, 2, or 3 (leftist), or as 8, 9, or 10 (rightist) on the 1-10 ideological self-placement scale (variable L1). Party identification is an indicator based on VB10, with identifiers recoded as 100, and non-identifiers as 0.

Figure 2. Individual Characteristics of the Politically Connected in the Americas



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

the role of socioeconomic status in the development of personal ties to politicians.⁹

Fifth, we might also expect age and gender to influence the likelihood of knowing a politician. Women and young adults may be less likely than older men to have politicians in their peer groups, and also less likely to have professional networks that overlap with the political world. Similarly, with the political elite of many countries historically made up of largely white and light-skinned individuals, we might also expect skin color to be a predictor of political connections. More recently, though, an indigenous political class has emerged in some countries that may increase the likelihood that indigenous citizens will also have political connections. I include dummy variables, then, to account for these two possibilities.

In Figure 2, I assess the individual-level determinants of political connections and find strong support for many of the propositions put forth. The figure presents coefficients from a logistic regression model. When the dot

⁹ Education is based on variable ED, and is recoded 0) no education, 1) elementary, 2) secondary, and 3) higher education. Wealth quintile is coded 1-5, as described in Córdova (2009).

corresponding to a variable falls to the right of the green axis at 0.0, that variable is positively related to knowing politicians; when it falls to the left, it is *negatively* related to political connections. The bracket surrounding each dot is the 95% confidence interval for the estimate. When the confidence interval does not overlap the axis at 0.0, we can be 95% confident that the respective variable is significantly related to political connections. Because the coefficients are standardized, the size of the coefficient represents the magnitude of the variable's association with social capital.

We see from Figure 2 that, as expected, those involved in any of the three community organizations included in the model are more likely to know politicians. Using an index of these three kinds of community activism, I find that moving from the minimum to maximum levels of engagement raises the likelihood of knowing a politician from 26% to 48%.¹⁰

Political activism matters even more than community participation. Among those who say they have worked for a campaign, 65% are predicted to know a politician, versus only 27% of those who have not done so. Similarly, 58% of those who attend party meetings are predicted to know politicians, as opposed to 27% of non-attenders.

Not surprisingly, citizens across the Americas who are more interested in politics and who identify with parties and ideological positions are more likely to become acquainted with politicians. Political interest and party identification are particularly important, while identifying with the ideological right or left does not seem to have a significant impact on the likelihood of knowing a politician.

Social status is, as expected, strongly associated with political connections. Among those with higher education, 39% are predicted to know a politician, as opposed to only 21% of those who report no formal education. Household wealth

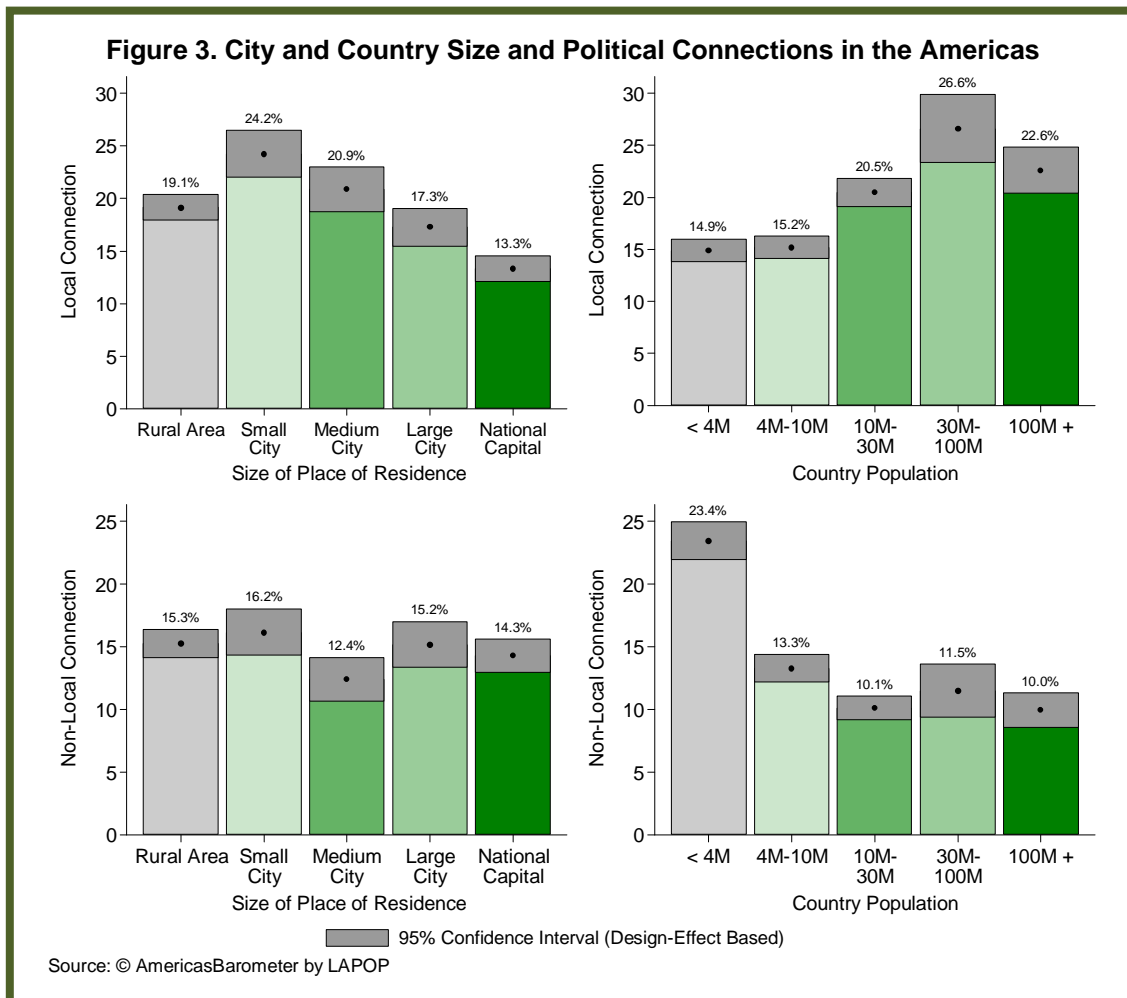
is a significant but more minor determinant, raising the probability of knowing a politician from 29% in the bottom quintile to 34% in the top. Gender and age also matter. Only 29% of women, compared to 35% of men, are predicted to know politicians. In an analysis not shown here, I find that the relationship between age and political connections is curvilinear, with respondents between the ages of 45 and 65 the most likely to know a politician. Finally, once accounting for the impact of all of these factors, the impact of skin color on political connections appears to be minimal.

What Kinds of Places Encourage Political Connections?

The results from the previous section show that those who know politicians in the Americas are quite different from those who do not. The politically connected are better educated, more involved in their communities and in politics, more engaged with the political system, and somewhat older and more likely to be male. At the same time, the discussion presented in the introduction suggests that citizens in some places have more opportunities to get to know politicians than citizens in other places.

In this section, I consider the role an individual's community and country play in the probability that she knows a politician. I focus first on the size of one's community. Opportunities to know *local* politicians should be strongly related to city size. In smaller cities, residents are more likely to meet any given other resident, politicians included. In part, this is simply about geographic proximity: residents of towns and small cities are likely to live closer to the seat of power than are residents of large cities. And with denser networks, residents of small cities can meet local politicians through multiple personal acquaintances.

¹⁰ All percentages discussed in this section are predicted probabilities, holding all other variables at their means.



Moreover, as I have shown in the case of Brazil, the number of local politicians per capita is higher in small cities, since city councils and local party systems do not scale in direct relation to city size (Smith 2012). Still, despite many politicians per capita, rural areas may provide fewer opportunities to meet those politicians, due to geographic isolation, the dispersion of the population, and thinner social networks, suggesting a nonlinear relationship between one’s community size and the probability of knowing a politician.

Country size should also be strongly related to both local and non-local political ties. In countries with relatively low populations and that are small geographically, national-level politicians are proportionately more numerous, and they may live closer to their constituents. At the same time, small countries tend to have highly centralized, unitary political systems

where local governments are of little real import. Thus, I expect connections between citizens and politicians in smaller, unitary systems to be characterized more by non-local relationships in which citizens will be more likely know national-level politicians.

In Figure 3, I examine the bivariate relationships between political ties, on the one hand, and size of place of residence and country population, on the other.¹¹ I find, as hypothesized, that city size is strongly related to local political ties; while a quarter of residents in small cities know a local politician, only an eighth of residents of national capitals are personally acquainted with someone who has run for or held local office. Again as

¹¹ See Appendix A for full, multivariate hierarchical logistic regression models confirming the statistical significance of these results.

expected, local connections are somewhat less common in rural areas than in small cities. By contrast, there is no clear relationship between size of place of residence and non-local connections. Turning to country size, Figure 3 indicates that in the smallest countries non-local connections are much more common than in those countries that are larger and tend to have more decentralized political systems.

This discussion suggests that in countries where the electoral and party systems produce more candidates – in particular, where the ratio of candidates to citizens is higher – more citizens will know politicians. In a preliminary analysis, I developed a rough estimate of the per capita number of candidates in national elections by multiplying the number of seats in the national legislature by the number of parties, assuming each party runs a candidate for every seat, and dividing by the population. This preliminary estimate turns out to be strongly related to both measures of connections, especially non-local connections. Nonetheless, further research is needed to develop a better estimate and to confirm the robustness of the results.

Conclusion

Scholars often emphasize the democratic potential of citizens' horizontal connections with each other within civil society. Yet data from the 2012 AmericasBarometer reveal that many citizens also have vertical ties to people in positions of power. This form of social capital may convey a number of advantages, such as increased political voice, access to resources, and information. Elsewhere, I have shown that these connections in Brazil both mobilize citizens to take part in politics and provide increased access to clientelism (Smith 2012). The implications of such ties are thus ambiguous, promoting democratic engagement

and at the same time increasing personalization of politics.

What fosters such ties? Political connections are to a large extent self-selected; they are much more common among those who are more politically and civically engaged. Political ties also accrue to those whose social networks contain more socially prominent contacts in general: those with higher education, men, and older citizens. At the same time, this important form of social capital is a product of not only personal but also contextual factors. Thus, a country's geographic and demographic characteristics are important determinants of the supply of potential political contacts. As institutional designers consider modifications to electoral systems, they may consider the potential social capital consequences of different configurations of institutions.

Citizens in some places have more opportunity to get to know politicians.

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Appendix

Table 1. Determinants of Local and Non-local Political Connections in the Americas, 2012 (Multilevel Logistic Regression Models)

	Local Connections	State or Federal Connections
Educational Level	0.240* (0.036)	0.349* (0.040)
Woman	-0.179* (0.047)	-0.239* (0.052)
Age	0.007* (0.002)	0.011* (0.002)
Quintiles of Wealth	0.069* (0.018)	0.071* (0.019)
Light Skin (1-3)	0.052 (0.057)	-0.017 (0.068)
Dark Skin (8-11)	0.087 (0.083)	0.191* (0.081)
Political Interest	0.006* (0.001)	0.011* (0.001)
Leftist	0.083 (0.059)	0.171* (0.064)
Rightist	0.072 (0.055)	0.194* (0.061)
Religious Organization Participation	0.002* (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Parents' Association Participation	0.004* (0.001)	0.004* (0.001)
Community Improvement Group Participation	0.004* (0.001)	0.006* (0.001)
National Capital (Metropolitan Area)	-0.764* (0.070)	-0.171* (0.073)
Large City	-0.439* (0.075)	0.301* (0.080)
Medium City	-0.029 (0.074)	0.096 (0.086)
Small City	0.347* (0.071)	0.219* (0.081)
Country Population (Logged)	0.097 (0.106)	-0.297* (0.091)
Federal Country	-0.070 (0.420)	0.017 (0.364)
Constant	-3.611* (0.936)	-1.118 (0.806)
<i>Number of Observations</i>	13942	13942

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