

AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2014

Number 105

Bridging Inter-American Divides: Views of the U.S. Across the Americas

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Executive Summary. The United States has long suffered from an image problem across much of the Americas, due in large part to the many cases of U.S. involvement in Latin American and Caribbean affairs. As these legacies of military and economic interventions perhaps begin to recede in the minds of Latin Americans, the question arises as to what factors influence the views of the U.S. among citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean? In this analysis of 2012 AmericasBarometer survey data, I find that the growing levels of economic and social ties between the U.S. and some countries in the Americas are a source of more positive views of the U.S. Alternatively, citizens living in those countries with fewer direct connections to the U.S. tend to express more negative views of the U.S. This study examines these relationships and the resulting policy implications.

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

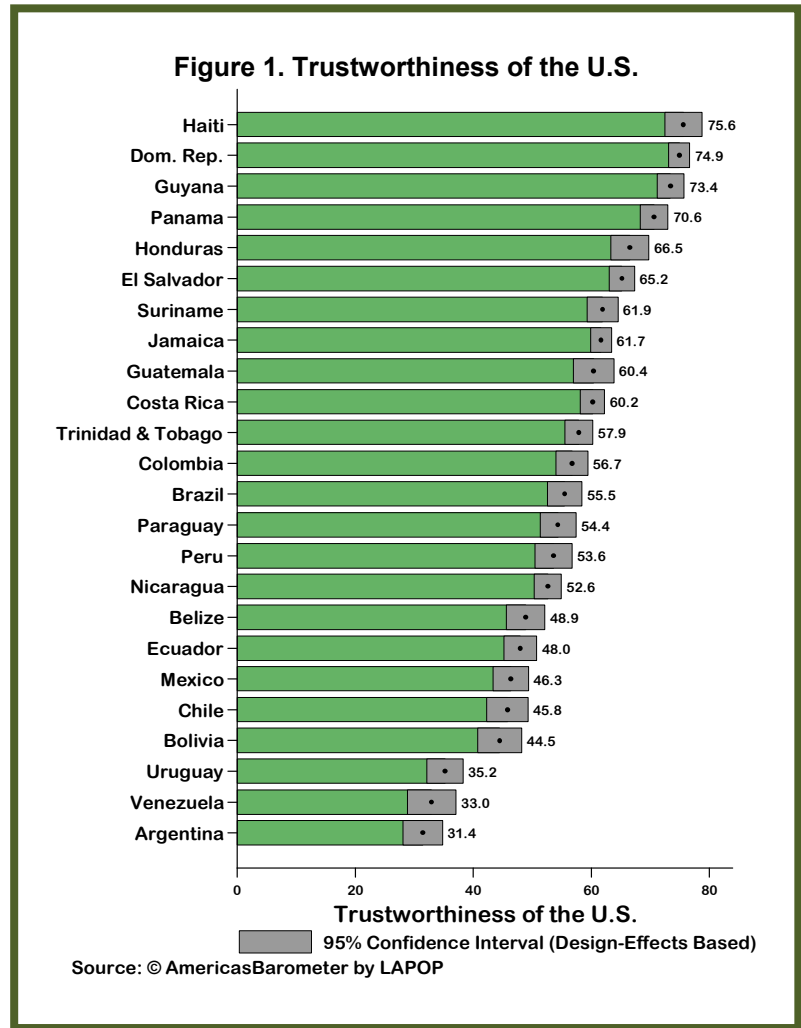
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The image of the U.S. among Latin American publics oftentimes has reflected the decidedly mixed legacy of U.S. involvement in Latin American affairs. One recent example of this emerges from the perceived, if not actual, U.S. role in the region's debt restructuring and market-based economic reform agenda of the 1980s. Now more than two decades removed from these watershed, and often painful, economic reforms, a persistent question among observers of inter-American affairs concerns the attitudes of Latin Americans toward the United States. Are their views colored by the "lost decade" experiences of the 1980s or do Latin Americans today view the United States in a positive light given the ongoing expansion of economic and social connections between the two regions?

In this *Insights*¹ report, I examine public opinion in Latin America and the Caribbean toward the United States, using data from the 2012 AmericasBarometer. Consistent with Baker and Cupery's recent research (2013), I find that the degree to which citizens and countries in Latin America are connected to the United States greatly influences their views of the trustworthiness of the U.S. However, in contrast to Baker's cross-national, aggregate analysis, I offer support for this "connectedness hypothesis" through analysis of individual-level factors, such as receipt of remittances from family members in the U.S., as well as the possible role of ideological affinities with the U.S. in enhancing citizens' positive feelings towards their northern neighbors.

Baker and Cupery (2013) argue that economic exchange with the U.S. (in the form of trade, aid, migration, and remittances) in fact promotes goodwill among Latin Americans. They find support for this hypothesis in

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>.



analyses of three measures of economic exchange: total trade flows with the U.S. as a percentage of each country's GDP, the amount of aid flowing into each country from the U.S. as a percentage of its GDP, and the effects of migration (by examining migrant workers in the U.S. as a percentage of the local working population and remittances from the U.S. as a percentage of each country's GDP). Relying on survey data collected across Latin America and the Caribbean, I test these ideas with individual-level analyses. My findings offer further support for the idea that as connections among the people of the Americas grow more extensive, trust of their respective countries grows as well.

The 2012 AmericasBarometer survey by the Latin American Public Opinion Project

(LAPOP) allows an evaluation of the theoretical perspective that Latin Americans with direct or indirect connections to the U.S. will be more likely to express positive views toward the country, including a high level of trust. In data gathered from over 19,000 individuals across 24 countries, I analyze the following question:

Now, I would like to ask you how much you trust the governments of the following countries. For each country, tell me if in your opinion it is very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy, or not at all trustworthy, or if you don't have an opinion.

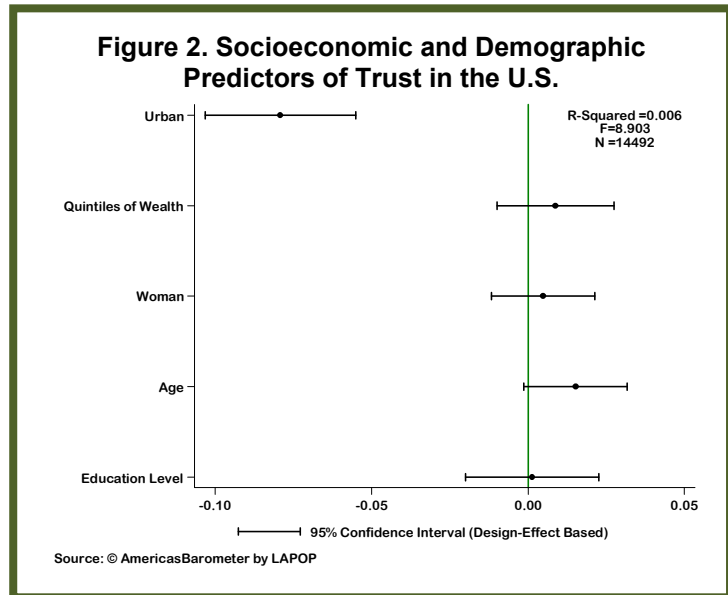
MIL10E. United States. In your opinion, is it very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy, or not at all trustworthy, or do you not have an opinion?^{2,3}

Figure 1 displays, on a recoded 0-100 scale, average levels of trust in the United States government among citizens of the 24 countries included in the AmericasBarometer survey. The data are coded so that higher values indicate greater trust. Mean levels of trust range from an average of 31.4 in Argentina to an average of 75.6 in Haiti. As one can see from this cross-national graph, trust in the United States government varies greatly across the Americas.

From Figure 1 we can draw some initial inferences regarding these cross-national variations. The countries with the lowest values of trust in the U.S. (Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Argentina) are among those that are furthest away, suggesting that

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. This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.

³ Of the 19,184 people who were asked this question, 4,190 responded Don't Know, and 255 chose No Response.



countries with greater physical distance from the U.S., and less extensive migration connections, have less trust in the U.S. Of the ten countries with the greatest values of trust, three are Caribbean countries (Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica) and five are Central American countries (Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica), which further suggests that both physical distance and migration networks are related to higher levels of citizen trust in the United States. Below, I assess whether variation in levels of trust in the U.S. can be explained by cultural or economic connections. First, though, I examine whether basic socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of an individual reveal any more information regarding varying levels of trust across Latin Americans.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors

Figure 2 shows the results from an OLS regression model that evaluates the extent to which age, quintiles of wealth, education, gender, and urban/rural residence predict individuals' levels of trust in the U.S. Standardized coefficients of these socioeconomic and demographic factors are represented by a dot, with the bars at either end representing the 95% confidence interval

for the estimated effect of each variable. Effects to the left of and never crossing the green 0.0 line are negative and statistically significant, and effects to the right of and never crossing the green 0.0 line are positive and statistically significant.

Urban residence is strongly correlated with less trust in the U.S., as those who live in urban areas have lower levels of trust in the U.S. government. At a less conservative level of statistical significance, it appears that age is positively correlated with trust in the U.S., meaning that there is some evidence that those who are older have higher levels of trust in the U.S. than those who are younger. Quintiles of wealth, gender, and education level are not statistically significant predictors.

Economic and Ideological Predictors

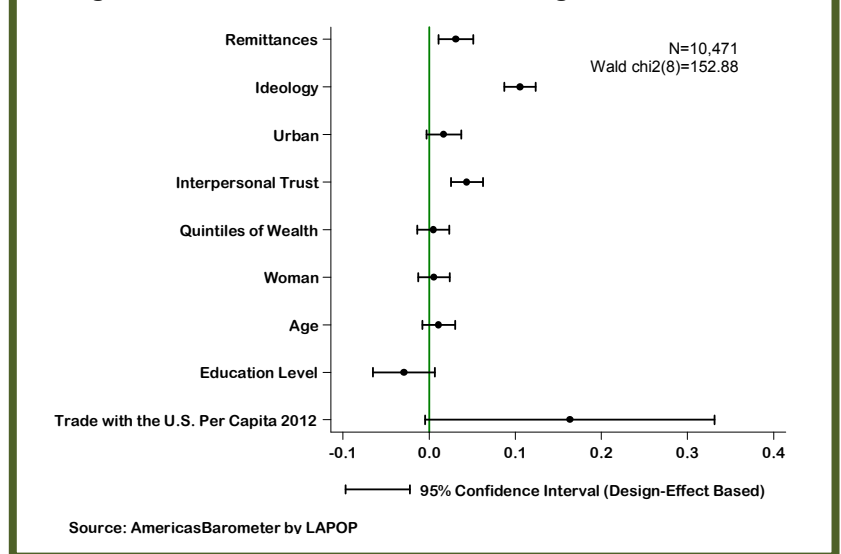
Figure 3 assesses individual receipt of remittances, self-identification on a left-right scale, and a country-level variable of trade flows with the U.S. as predictors of trust in the U.S., alongside the socioeconomic and demographic measures from the previous analysis.⁴ The individual-level variable of interpersonal trust was also included to control for differences in how trusting individuals generally are.

In this OLS regression model, left-right (liberal-conservative) ideological identification is a strong predictor of trust.⁵ According to a January 2012 Gallup poll (Saad 2012), conservatives continue to be the largest ideological group in the U.S., with 40% of polled Americans describing their views as conservative (right-wing), 35% as moderate,

⁴ Of the countries included in this analysis, all but Guyana were asked about left-right orientation. In Guyana, the question explicitly referenced a conservative-liberal ideological orientation.

⁵ Ideological identification was coded from 1-10, with 1 representing Left and 10 representing Right.

Figure 3. An Extended Model Predicting Trust in the U.S.



and 21% as liberal (left-wing). In short, the U.S. population and public policies tend to be to the right-of-center with respect to the role of the state in the economy. It is noteworthy, then, that people who share this same political view in Latin America are more inclined to trust the U.S. government. Conversely, those who self-identify on the political left are significantly less likely to express trust in the U.S., a finding perfectly consistent with the Latin American left's long-held suspicions of U.S. involvement in the region's political and economic affairs (Pew Research Center 2013). Additionally, it is interesting to note that when ideology is included in the model, it greatly lessens the predictive power of urban residence. This is likely because those who live in urban areas tend to be more politically oriented to the left.

Receipt of remittances is also an important predictor of trust in the U.S.^{6,7} Those who

⁶ The remittances variable comes from Question Q10A, which asks, "Do you or someone else living in your household receive remittances, that is, economic assistance from abroad?" The data was recoded from 0 to 1, with 0 representing the response No and 1 representing Yes.

⁷ Since the data does not specify from which countries these remittances are sent, it cannot perfectly capture the effect of remittances from the U.S. specifically. This is expected to weaken this correlation. However, the U.S. is probably the destination of many of these migrants, and a strong

receive these economic benefits from a family member in the U.S. tend to have more trust in the country. This suggests that Latin American citizens with personal connections to individuals living in the U.S. have greater affinity for the country – a product likely due to both the economic benefits that flow from the U.S. as well as the impact of “social remittances” that help to promote a positive image of U.S. culture in other countries (Levitt 1998). This concept of “social remittances” refers to the transnational communication of cultural aspects of an individual’s host culture to friends and family who remain in his country of origin. When a citizen of a Latin American country goes to live in the U.S., his or her letters, emails, and phone calls to family members are likely to include descriptions of U.S. culture, which may cause their family and friends to view the U.S. more favorably. These types of cultural exchanges, then, may help to explain the statistical significance of receipt of remittances in predicting trust in the U.S.

Finally, I examine if citizens in countries that trade more frequently with the U.S., and therefore likely experience national economic benefits as a result of this trade relationship, tend to have higher trust in the U.S. I explore countries’ economic interconnectedness with the U.S. by examining the amount of each country’s trade with the United States. U.S. Census data provides the total value of imports and exports of each country with the U.S. (in millions of US\$) as a percentage of the country’s total GDP (United States Census Bureau 2012). This enables me to study the net trade of goods that are directly connected to the U.S. while controlling for the size of the country’s economy. As the OLS regression model demonstrates, this measure of trade with the U.S. is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, indicating that those respondents living in countries with stronger economic ties to the U.S. are more likely to express trust in the U.S. government.

statistical significance suggests that the effect of remittances sent from the U.S. is very strong.

Implications

Previous studies in the fields of political science and economics have attested to the wariness of Latin American countries to engage with the U.S. because of the harmful nature of past U.S. political aggression and free trade policies (Lowenthal 1993). However, this study of Latin American public opinion data counters that trend. When an individual receives remittances from the U.S., shares ideological values in line with those of Americans, or lives within a country that is highly connected via trade with the U.S. economy, he or she tends to have more trust in the U.S. In short, this report allows us to conclude that increases in the economic or cultural interconnectedness of other countries with the U.S. improve perceptions of U.S. trustworthiness.

These findings have implications for U.S. policymakers who seek to improve the image of the United States internationally. For example, from this work we see that immigration in fact plays a significant role in promoting positive feelings toward the U.S. among Latin Americans. More broadly, if this variation in trust in the U.S. is due to the transfer of “social remittances,” increasing cultural interconnectedness of the U.S. with other countries seems to be a sensible means of improving trust in the U.S. Experiencing the positive aspects of U.S. culture in this way likely improves one’s view of the U.S. government. This conclusion is further strengthened by the strong relationship between ideology and trust in the U.S. Because ideology is an aspect of culture, one of the traits that countries with similar culture likely share is ideology.

In addition to the impact of cultural interconnectedness on trust in the U.S., being tied economically to the U.S. also is positively related to an individual’s perception of U.S. trustworthiness. Thus, the U.S. might consider focusing on improving economic connectedness with countries with which they

desire to improve relations. Further exploring these ideas may have implications for U.S. foreign policy related to countries such as Cuba, a nation with whom the U.S. has engaged minimally in economic terms over the past half-century, or the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership. Indeed, if economic interconnectedness builds trust, and if trust is an important foreign policy goal, then the U.S. might want rethink its embargo with Cuba. In addition, those opposed to free trade deals (often on the left) might take note of the fact that the relations these agreements foster can lead to greater levels of trust among countries. Briefly put, this report suggests it is important to consider and further analyze the policy implications that stem from a finding that increased economic and cultural interconnectedness build trust in the U.S.

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Appendix

	Figure 3		Figure 4		Full Individual Level Model with Country Controls	
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Trade with U.S.			0.160#	0.085		
Education Level	-0.016	0.010	-0.008	0.012	-0.019	0.011
Age	0.026*	0.008	0.017	0.010	0.021	0.010
Female	0.004	0.008	0.003	0.009	0.003	0.009
Wealth	0.022*	0.009	0.008	0.010	0.016	0.010
Urban	0.016	0.010	0.011	0.010	0.015	0.012
Ideological Identification			0.107*	0.009	0.102*	0.010
Receipt of Remittances			0.032*	0.010	-0.025*	0.010
Mexico	0.069*	0.013			0.068*	0.014
Guatemala	0.152*	0.014			0.146*	0.014
El Salvador	0.180*	0.012			0.173*	0.012
Honduras	0.198*	0.015			0.190*	0.016
Nicaragua	0.111*	0.012			0.108*	0.013
Costa Rica	0.152*	0.011			0.140*	0.012
Panama	0.222*	0.013			0.216*	0.013
Colombia	0.131*	0.013			0.124*	0.014
Ecuador	0.080*	0.013			0.072*	0.014
Bolivia	0.082*	0.018			0.083*	0.018
Peru	0.112*	0.013			0.104*	0.014
Paraguay	0.118*	0.013			0.112*	0.014
Chile	0.065*	0.014			0.073*	0.015
Brazil	0.122*	0.013			0.126*	0.013
Venezuela	-0.009	0.015			-0.009	0.015
Argentina	-0.021	0.014			-0.022	0.014
Dominican Republic	0.239*	0.011			0.233*	0.011
Haiti	0.266*	0.015			0.267*	0.016
Jamaica	0.161*	0.011			0.146*	0.012
Guyana	0.234*	0.012			(dropped)	--
Trinidad & Tobago	0.136*	0.012			0.138*	0.013
Belize	0.082*	0.014			0.075*	0.015
Suriname	0.163*	0.013			0.157*	0.014
Constant	-0.057*	0.010	-0.037	0.084	-0.098*	0.012

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed; Country of Reference: Uruguay; # Trade with U.S. is significant at p<.06