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Who is Interested in Politics?

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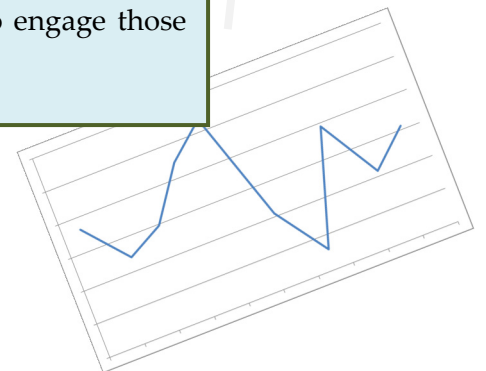
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Main Findings:

- Years of schooling is a positive and substantively important predictor of self-reported political interest
- Both news consumption and Internet use are positively correlated with one's reported political interest
- Engagement in local (community) activities and political interest appear mutually reinforcing
- Satisfaction with the executive, measured by high approval, positively predicts self-reported interest in politics; those who have moderate to low levels of executive approval are less interested in politics, suggesting a need for deliberate efforts to engage those critical of the incumbent administration.

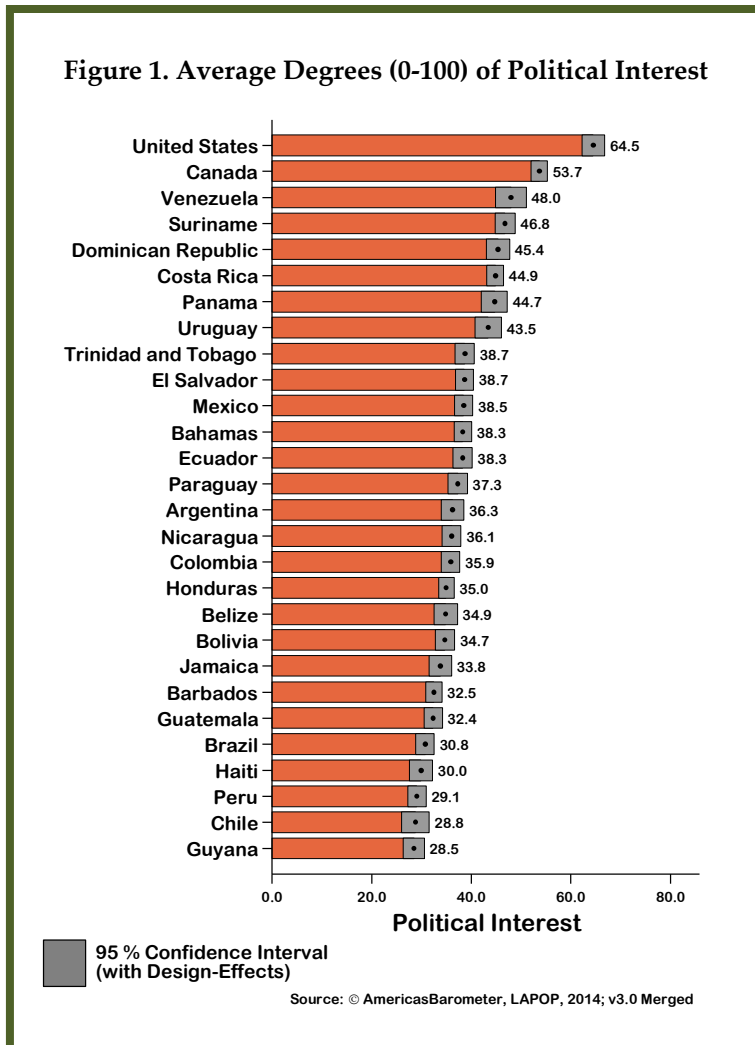


Democratic government requires a public that pays at least minimal attention to political affairs.¹ In this *Insights* report, we assess the characteristics of those in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region who are more or less interested in politics. Political *participation* is widely studied and valued for its relevance to electoral and policy outcomes (Zukin et al. 2006), yet fewer studies explore political *interest*. Those studies that do explore this phenomenon often find that political interest mirrors political participation (Prior 2010). Thus, one can think of political participation as a *behavioral* engagement and political interest as a *cognitive* engagement. From this perspective, factors that predict political engagement in one form (e.g., behavior) ought to predict engagement in the other (e.g., interest).

In assessing factors that fuel political interest in the Americas, we find that education, news consumption, Internet use, and community participation are strong, positive predictors. In addition, we find that those who approve of the executive’s job performance report higher levels of political interest, while those who are dissatisfied report comparatively lower levels of interest.

This report focuses on the following question from the 2014/15 round of the AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP, in which over 49,000 individuals in 28 countries were asked:

Figure 1. Average Degrees (0-100) of Political Interest



POL1: How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, a little, or none?

Figure 1 shows the average degree of the public’s political interest across the Americas.

¹ As Thomas Jefferson stated in a 1789 letter, “[W]herever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government.” <http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/118>

The black dot represents each country's mean level of "Interest in Politics," measured on a scale from 0 to 100 (horizontal axis in Figure 1), while the grey region identifies the 95% confidence interval around the estimate. Small values represent lower average degrees of interest in politics and large values correspond with higher degrees of interest.

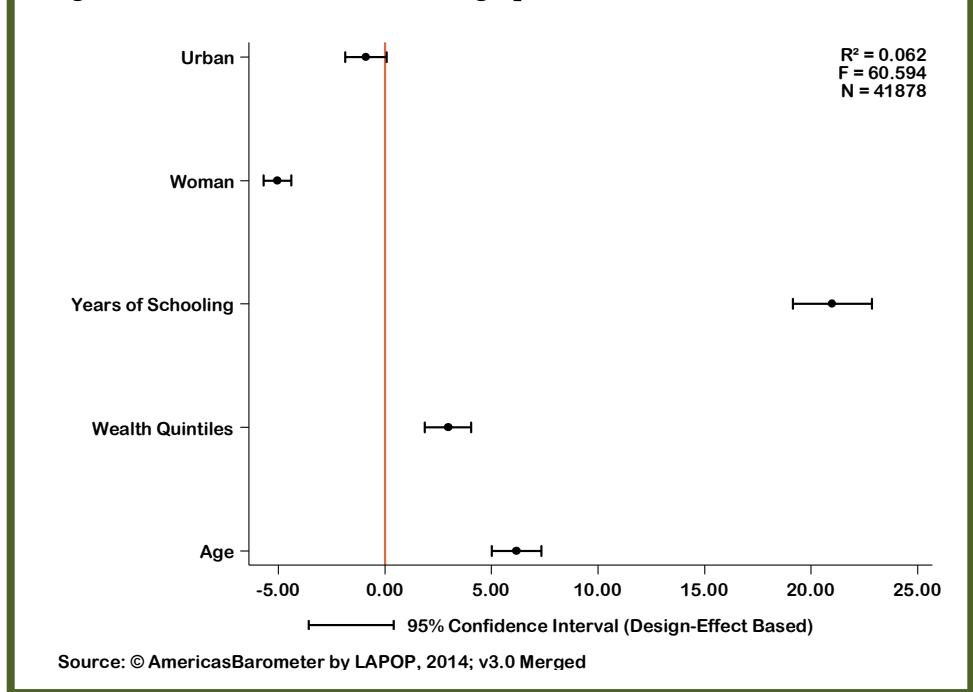
There is substantial variation across the 28 countries, with mean values ranging from a low of 28.5 in Guyana to a high of 64.5 in the United States. The region's longest-standing democracies, the United States and Canada, show the highest levels of political interest, with mean scores of 64.5 and 53.7 degrees, respectively.

Two of the four countries with the lowest levels of political interest, Guyana and Haiti, are characterized by low levels of development. However, countries with similar political and/or economic challenges are also found higher on the chart. Chile's low mean value for political interest is surprising, given that it is one of the more developed democracies in the region; yet, discontent simmering in Chile in recent years may have motivated withdrawal by some at the same time that it motivated others to protest in the streets (Guzmán-Concha 2012).²

² It may also be that the Chilean presidential election, which was held shortly before the survey data were collected, exhausted individuals' interest in politics (see Arches 1997; Bunker 2014). Whether and when elections are mobilizing or demobilizing with respect to political interest is something that ought to be explored, but is outside the scope of this report.

³ Urban is a dummy variable, coded as 1 if the respondent lives in an urban region, and 0 if in a rural area. The gender dummy variable takes the 1 value if the respondent is female. The wealth measure is a five-category variable that is generated using a series of items about household

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Political Interest



Who is the Politically Interested Citizen?

We answer the above question with a regression analysis that explores the relationship between political interest and five socioeconomic and demographic factors: years of schooling, wealth, place of residence, gender, and age.³ The results are shown in Figure 2, where independent variables are listed on the vertical axis, and the coefficients (that is, the estimates of their predicted effects on the dependent variable) are plotted on the horizontal axis. The dot in the middle of each horizontal line represents the predicted effect of the variable, and the width of the bar represents the confidence interval. Those

possessions (for more information see Córdova 2009 <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/10806en.pdf>). Age is divided by cohort, with respondents grouped into the following categories: 16 (or voting age in the respondent's country)-25, 26-35, 36-45, 56-65, and 65+. All independent variables are recoded on a scale of 0 to 1. The United States, Canada, Bahamas and Barbados are excluded from all multiple variable analyses presented here because of missing key variables. The wealth measure is not available for the United States and Canada, whereas the community participation variable included in later analyses is not available in Barbados and Bahamas.

bars that do not intersect the red vertical “0.00” line are statistically significant at a 95% confidence level.⁴ Each independent variable is coded from 0 to 1, which means that each coefficient can be understood as the maximum predicted effect the independent variable has on the 0-100 political interest scale.^{5,6}

Figure 2 reveals that years of schooling, wealth, and age are all positive predictors of political interest, while being a woman is a negative predictor of political interest. The effect of living in an urban versus a rural area is not statistically significant. All else equal, a maximum increase in wealth (that is, comparing the poorest to the wealthiest quintile) results in a 3-degree increase in political interest. More striking is the fact that, all else equal, a maximum increase in years of schooling (from no education to advanced degree work) results in a 20-degree increase in political interest. This substantial effect of education on political interest suggests that schools can play a key role in cultivating an attentive public. A maximum increase in age results in an approximately 6-degree increase in political interest.

The results for gender show that an individual who is female reports political interest levels that are 5 degrees lower than her male counterparts, when all other factors are held constant. It may be that the barriers to political participation that women face from socialization into particular gender roles (see Batista 2012) manifest into a lower tendency to engage cognitively in politics.

⁴ Country fixed effects are included but not shown in the figure for the sake of simplicity.

⁵ Analyses not shown here indicated that the effects of wealth and age are linear. For this reason, and in the interest of parsimony, we have collapsed age and wealth cohorts to one value that represents the overall effect.

How News Consumption, Community Participation, and Executive Approval Matter for Political Interest

Political interest is likely to be higher among those who are motivated to engage with the broader society. Thus, to determine additional factors that may be relevant to political interest, we turn to scholarship on political participation. We do so because “political interest is a strong

predictor of many important political behaviors” (Prior 2010, p. 763). In short, if political behavior reflects political interest, we are justified in applying studies on political participation to our dependent variable.

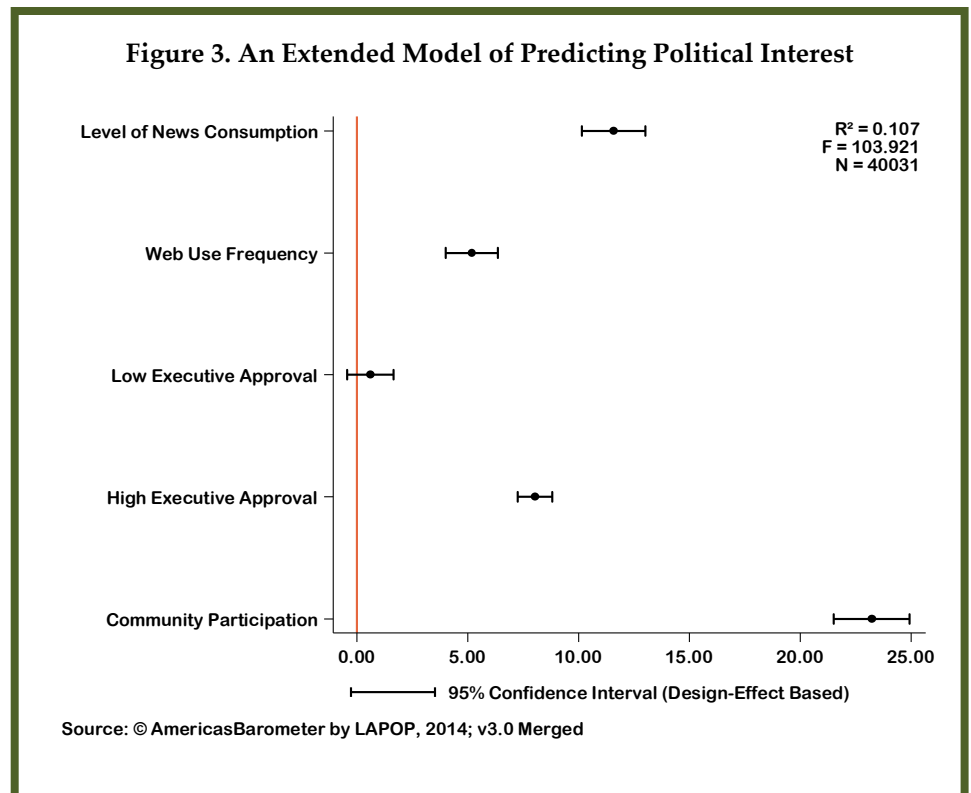
Higher rates of news consumption and Internet use, along with greater community involvement, strongly correlate with higher political interest.

⁶ In the AmericasBarometer survey, political interest is measured using a 1-4 scale; for the purposes of this *Insights* report, we have recoded the variable so that it runs from 0 to 100, with 0 indicating “no interest” and 100 indicating “high interest.”

The first factor we consider is news consumption. Salzman (2012) examines how information and mass media are vital to an active participatory political system and finds that the consumption of news media strongly correlates with political behavior. Theoretically, information and interest each affect the other: individuals' increased exposure to, or understanding of, their nation's political situation sparks political interest, while being interested in politics makes one more likely to seek political information. In brief, we expect that individuals who report higher levels of news consumption (via the radio, print, or Internet) will have higher levels of political interest.

In recent years, especially among younger cohorts, modes of political participation have extended to include online engagement. This includes posting links to political articles or commenting on political events via social media (Van Deth 2001, Pew Research Center 2014). As with more traditional forms of media engagement, online users may also be "soft news" consumers. Soft news consumption can captivate and motivate information seeking even among those who are otherwise less inclined to pay attention to formal news sources. Baum and Jamison (2006, p. 958) describe this as "The Oprah Effect," by which "low-awareness talk show consumers enhanced their propensity to vote consistently to such an extent that they effectively caught up to their highly aware or highly interested counterparts." Therefore, in addition to assessing the relevance of news consumption *per se*, we also examine the relationship between web use and political interest.

If political interest mirrors political participation, then we should also expect to find



that individuals who engage actively in their communities report higher levels of political interest. Existing literature finds a close relationship between broad interest in national politics and local political participation or community engagement. For example, Booth and Richard (2012) report that social capital is related to political interest and participation in Latin America, while Klesner (2009, 59) notes that the strongest factor in determining political engagement is "involvement in social-capital generating activities" such as volunteer work and non-political memberships. Extending this framework to political interest, we posit that a higher level of involvement in local, community activities is likely to reflect, reinforce, and fuel a broader interest in politics.

Finally, we consider a different factor that might motivate political interest: satisfaction with the governing administration. Some evidence suggests that those who lose elections respond by expressing negative affect towards the executive and, sometimes, withdrawing from political activities like voting (Anderson et al. 2005, 4). At the same time, Valentino et al. (2001)

finds that negative emotions, specifically anger, can spur political participation. Assuming that frameworks explaining political participation can be transported to studies of political interest, two competing perspectives emerge. On the one hand, those who disapprove of the executive's performance might be expected to withdraw cognitively from politics, for example by expressing less interest. On the other hand, negative affect might be linked to negative emotions that, in turn, *increase* interest in politics. To adjudicate between these perspectives, we test the relationship between satisfaction with the executive and political interest.

We test these expectations for news consumption, frequency of web use, community participation, and executive job approval⁷ in a multiple variable regression analysis that controls for all of the demographic independent variables included in Figure 2 (not shown for the sake of parsimony) and these new independent variables.⁸ The results are presented in Figure 3. Once again, the dependent variable, political interest, is scaled from 0-100 with higher values

indicating greater political interest, and the independent variables are scaled from 0-1. Thus, Figure 3 shows the maximal effects of our independent variables on political interest.⁹

In accordance with our expectations, higher rates of news consumption and Internet use, along with greater community involvement, strongly correlate with higher political interest. We also find that low approval of the executive does not have a significant relationship with political interest, though high approval does.¹⁰

As expected, we find a positive relationship between frequency of news consumption and of web use, respectively, and one's reported political interest. News consumption has a larger positive effect, which we theorize is due to a more active form of information consumption and cognitive engagement than web use. We also find that community engagement is associated with higher political interest. The high association of political interest with local community involvement supports the intuition that involvement in community activities not only reflects, but may also

⁷ In most countries this is equivalent to "presidential approval," but in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago the question asks about the prime minister, and as such we refer to it as "executive approval."

⁸ "Level of News Consumption" is evaluated using the variable GI0, which asks, "How often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers, or the internet?", with responses being (1) Daily, (2) A few times a week, (3) A few times a month, (4) Rarely, (5) Never. "Web use frequency" is evaluated using the variable www1, which asks, "How often do you use the Internet?", with responses being (1) Daily, (2) A few times a week, (3) A few times a month, (4) Rarely, (5) Never. The question for "community participation" is created by combining four questions: CP5: "In the last 12 months have you tried to help solve a problem in your community or in your neighborhood? (1) Once a week (2) Once or twice a month (3) Once or twice a year (4) Never . 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? (1) Yes (2) No. NP2: Have you sought assistance from or presented a request to any office, official or councilperson of the municipality within the past 12 months? (1) Yes (2) No. CP8: Meetings of a community improvement committee or association? Do you attend them (1) Once a week, (2) Once or twice a month, (3) Once or twice a year, (4) Never. Each of these items was rescaled to run

from 0 to 1, and then an additive index was created (which was again rescaled to range from 0 to 1). Executive approval is evaluated using the variable M1, which asks "Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President/Prime Minister [Name]?", with responses being (1) Very Good, (2) Good, (3) Neither Good nor Bad, (4) Bad, (5) Very Bad. High approval and low approval are plotted in comparison to the baseline response of "neither good nor bad." All independent variables have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1, with 1 meaning "more of" the referenced variable or a response of "yes". Thus, higher values of "levels of news consumption" mean that the individual reports consuming more news media. Country fixed effects are also included in the analysis, but not presented.

⁹ There are only 40,031 cases in Figure 3, versus 41,878 in Figure 2. This difference in number of respondents is due to non-response for the independent variables analyzed here, in particular for the community participation item in conjunction with the executive approval item.

¹⁰ We also examined the relationship between political interest and religion. Although the importance of religion in an individual's life (Q5B) was positively associated with political interest, attendance at meetings of a religious organization (CP6) was not. Even when Q5B was excluded from the model, the insignificant effect of CP6 on political interest remained. We found this to be an interesting non-finding and so report it here for the interested reader.

reinforce or even spur on, a broader interest in politics.

Finally, the analysis shows a positive relationship between executive approval and self-reported interest in politics, with the most approving citizens expressing the most interest. Those who report low levels of executive approval are not statistically different in their levels of political interest than those who give neutral ratings of the executive.

Considering the theory of the utility of “loser’s consent” for democracy (that is, the willingness of those who support the losing candidate to remain engaged in and loyal to the system), our findings are not ideal (Anderson et al. 2005; Nadeau and Blais 1993). When a voter’s preferred candidate loses an election, there are two counterbalancing processes influencing her evaluation of the democratic system as fair, or legitimate. On the one hand, there is participation, which often boosts diffuse support of the system. On the other hand, there is negative affect toward the winner, which is associated with lower system support (Nadeau and Blais 1993). Nadeau and Blais suggest that participation will foster democratic legitimacy and compensate for the negative impact of critical feelings toward the incumbent. With this in mind, it is troubling that those with lower executive approval have significantly less political interest (which we have argued fosters political participation) than those with high approval. In other words, presidential disapproval may both undercut specific support at the moment it is expressed, and may have a second order effect by dampening diffuse political legitimacy to the extent that those who disapprove have lower levels of political interest, which in turn lowers political participation.

Conclusion

We find that – across the Latin America and Caribbean region – the politically interested person is often involved in socio-political

activities in his or her community, frequently seeks out news media and uses the Internet, and more often than not, is approving of the executive. We cannot provide strong evidence regarding causality or predictive direction here; yet, we can highlight the characteristics of a person with high political interest and we suggest that these factors are likely mutually reinforcing. The fact that those who are more critical of the executive are less interested in politics suggests the need to integrate those who disapprove of political actors into political life, encouraging their interest and participation so that the voice of opposition, fundamental to democratic society, is heard.

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The data on which they are based can be found at: <http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop/raw-data.php>

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Appendix

Determinants of Political Interest	(Figure 2)	
	Coefficients	(t)
Age	6.177*	(10.38)
Wealth Quintiles	2.964*	(5.33)
Years of Schooling	20.995*	(22.35)
Woman	-5.038*	(-15.01)
Urban	-0.890	(-1.79)
Guatemala	-3.362*	(-2.47)
El Salvador	0.869	(0.68)
Honduras	-1.516	(-1.24)
Nicaragua	-0.281	(-0.21)
Costa Rica	6.530*	(5.11)
Panama	3.535*	(2.04)
Colombia	-3.173*	(-2.46)
Ecuador	-2.186	(-1.57)
Bolivia	-5.270*	(-3.91)
Peru	-11.856*	(-8.99)
Paraguay	-2.035	(-1.47)
Chile	-12.542*	(-7.44)
Uruguay	3.665*	(2.42)
Brazil	-6.668*	(-4.92)
Venezuela	7.531*	(4.20)
Argentina	-3.765*	(-2.61)
Dominican Republic	6.410*	(4.19)
Haiti	-9.329*	(-6.19)
Jamaica	-5.978*	(-3.96)
Guyana	-10.694*	(-7.26)
Trinidad and Tobago	-2.112	(-1.61)
Belize	-3.309*	(-2.16)
Suriname	7.631*	(5.29)
Constant	27.322*	(23.16)

F = 60.59

No. of cases = 41878

R-Squared = 0.06

* p<0.05

Note: For the country fixed effects in the model, the comparison (baseline) category is Mexico.

Determinants of Political Interest (Figure 3)

	Coefficients	(t)
Community Participation	23.214*	(26.72)
High Executive Approval	8.040*	(20.29)
Low Executive Approval	0.617	(1.16)
Web Use Frequency	5.195*	(8.70)
Level of News Consumption	11.579*	(15.76)
Age	5.380*	(8.12)
Wealth Quintiles	0.533	(0.91)
Years of Schooling	14.972*	(15.38)
Woman	-4.405*	(-13.06)
Urban	-0.659	(-1.34)
Guatemala	-2.836*	(-2.08)
El Salvador	-2.192	(-1.71)
Honduras	-3.928*	(-3.07)
Nicaragua	-3.729*	(-2.87)
Costa Rica	7.595*	(5.87)
Panama	0.913	(0.57)
Colombia	-3.981*	(-3.12)
Ecuador	-6.100*	(-4.47)
Bolivia	-7.267*	(-5.56)
Peru	-11.267*	(-8.49)
Paraguay	-3.543*	(-2.61)
Chile	-15.263*	(-8.34)
Uruguay	0.277	(0.18)
Brazil	-8.602*	(-6.35)
Venezuela	8.884*	(4.79)
Argentina	-4.191*	(-2.84)
Dominican Republic	0.857	(0.58)
Haiti	-8.592*	(-5.61)
Jamaica	-6.037*	(-4.33)
Guyana	-9.865*	(-6.73)
Trinidad and Tobago	-1.809	(-1.38)
Belize	-2.925*	(-1.99)
Suriname	6.313*	(4.50)
Constant	13.768*	(10.51)

F = 103.91

No. of cases = 40031

R-Squared = 0.11

* p<0.05

Note: For the country fixed effects in the model, the comparison (baseline) category is Mexico.