

Insights Series #130

Who Expresses Opinions about the United Nations in Latin America and the Caribbean?

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Key Findings:

- The tendency to express an opinion on the United Nations (UN) varies across countries: the percent with an opinion ranges from a low of 48.9% in Paraguay to a high of 70.6% in Uruguay.
- At the individual level, education and wealth positively predict opinion expression about the UN. Education is the strongest predictor.
- Rural (vs. urban) residents and women (vs. men) are less likely to express an opinion on the UN.
- Those who identify with a political party are more likely to express opinions about the UN.
- Those with more political knowledge and political interest are far more likely to be opinionated.



Citizens around the world live in states that are connected politically, financially, and culturally. Through international mediation and cooperation, the United Nations (UN) provides an important arena for nation-states to discuss and resolve critical international issues, such as terrorism, climate change, human rights violations, and armed conflicts.

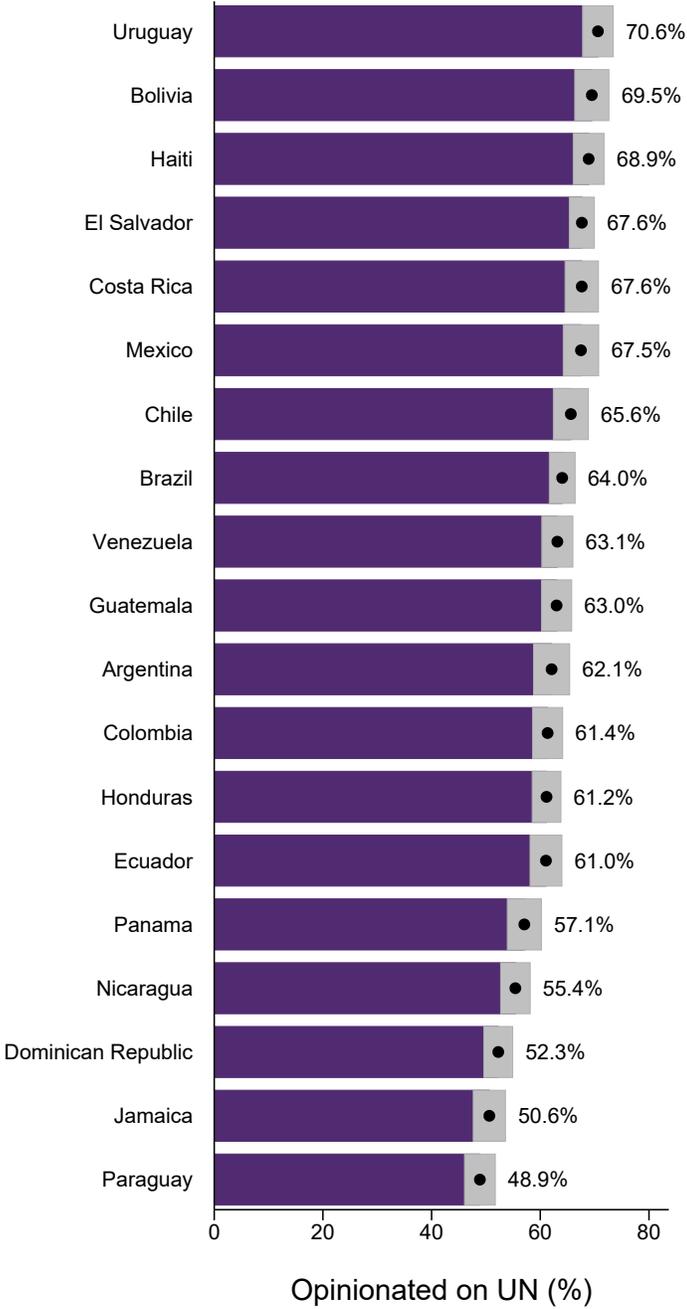
Though its values and roles can be a source of debate, the UN has made efforts to advance global peace, security, and stability (Grieco et al. 2011; Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2015; Jasper 2012; Weiss 2009). To an important extent, the efficacy of the UN depends on whether it is perceived as a legitimate global actor. One aspect of that legitimacy is the extent to which citizens of UN member countries trust in and are knowledgeable of the institution.

This *Insights* report offers an assessment of the extent of public awareness of the UN, gauged by whether individuals express an opinion on the trustworthiness of the institution. The focus is on the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, in which the UN is active¹: it has official regional and system offices and is engaged in operations such as conducting peacekeeping missions, providing humanitarian aid, and implementing human rights campaigns.²

In the 2016/17 round of AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the following question was asked in 19 countries³ to 30,149 individuals:

MIL10UN. The UN, United Nations. In your opinion, is it very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy, or not at all trustworthy, or do you not have an opinion?

The focus of this report is *opinionation*: whether individuals provided a response, or not, to this question.⁴ I refer to individuals who either did not respond or gave the response “don’t know” to the survey question on trustworthiness of the UN as *non-opinionated*. Individuals who answered the question with a response indicating any degree of trustworthiness are referred to as *opinionated*.



95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2017; GM_v.07172017

Figure 1: Percent Expressing an Opinion on the United Nations

Figure 1 displays, for each of the Latin American and Caribbean countries, the percentage of individuals who expressed an opinion (by attaching some degree of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness to the UN) in answering the above question. The grey area represents the 95% confidence interval around the estimate. The percentage of the mass public that is opinionated varies significantly across countries, from a low of 48.9% in Paraguay to a high of 70.6% in Uruguay.

Who Expresses an Opinion on the United Nations?

To examine who expresses an opinion on the trustworthiness of the UN, I analyze the relationship between opinion expression and five demographic and socioeconomic factors: education, gender, wealth, age, and place of residence. Forming and then expressing an opinion requires an individual to use information to develop values and then to translate those values into stated opinions on specific issues (Hennessy 1970; Highton 2009; Zaller 2012). These steps in the opinion expression process require accessing, retaining, and then translating information. In this way, opinionation is related to (but not equivalent to) political sophistication. Political sophistication or political knowledge is often defined as possessing the information or cognitive ability required for constructing and organizing judgements on political issues and entities (Gastil and Dillard 1999; Highton 2009; Harbers, Vries, and Steenbergen 2012; Luskin 1987; Milesi 2016; Neuman 1986).

These general factors—political knowledge and political sophistication—are frequently predicted by education levels (Lambert et al. 1988; Maghami 1974; Rasmussen 2015). Furthermore, research on opinionation itself has generally found a positive relationship between education and opinion expression (Converse 1976; Durand and Lambert 1988; Ferber 1956; Herzon 1975; Krosnick 1991; Krosnick and Milburn 1990).

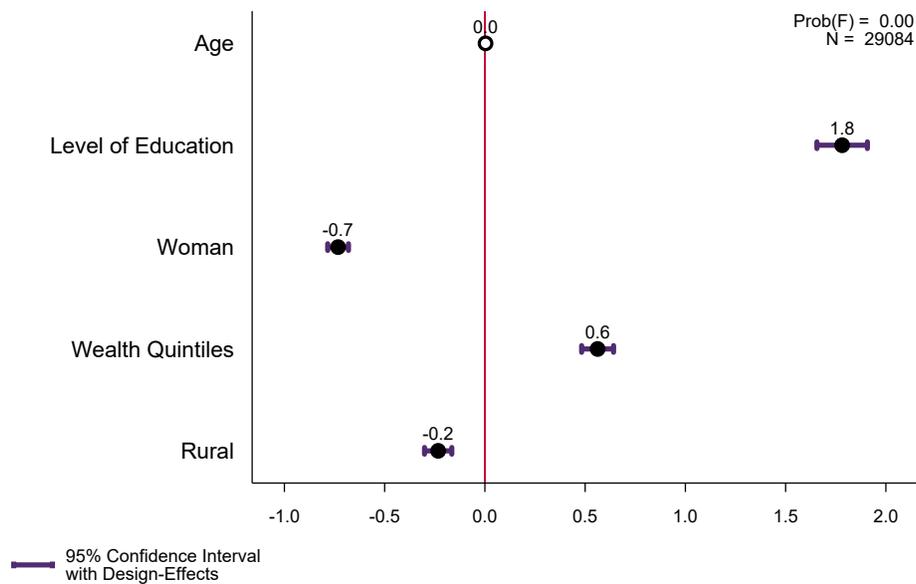
With respect to other factors, some research suggests men are more likely to be politically knowledgeable and engaged (Highton 2009). How-

ever, other studies have demonstrated that apparent gender gaps in political knowledge may be attributed to socialization differences, differences in willingness to express opinions or to guess responses, and the methods and instruments used to measure political knowledge (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Dow 2008; Durand and Lambert 1988; Ferber 1956; Fortin-Rittberger 2016; Lizotte and Sidman 2009; Mondak and Anderson 2004; Batista Pereira 2016).

Wealth is another conventional predictor of political knowledge and cognitive capacity to form political opinions (Dellmuth 2016; Highton 2009; Maghami 1974). There is some evidence of a relationship between income and “don’t know” responses to political survey questions (Ferber 1956; Laurison 2015). There is little extant substantive research on the effects of age and residential location on opinion formation and expression. Although age has been studied, it has not been emphasized in recent literature and the results are inconclusive (Ferber 1956; Glenn 1969; Krosnick and Milburn 1990). Existing literature on the effects of residential location on opinion expression is sparse; therefore, results on this variable will add to existing findings.

Using a logistic regression model, I examine the role of five individual characteristics in predicting whether an individual expresses an opinion about the trustworthiness of the UN.⁵ Specifically, the independent variables are education level,⁶ gender,⁷ wealth quintiles,⁸ age (measured in cohorts),⁹ and rural (versus urban)¹⁰ place of residence. The analysis includes country controls (fixed effects), which are not displayed in the graph for the sake of parsimony. The dependent variable is whether the individual is opinionated (coded as 1) or non-opinionated (coded as 0).

Figure 2 presents the results of the regression model. The dots represent the coefficients of the variables. Shaded-in black dots indicate the relationship between a given independent variable and opinionation on the UN is statistically significant, while hollow white dots indicate the variable is not significant. Significant coefficients to the left of the red line at zero show a negative correlation with the probability of being opinionated, while coefficients to the right show a positive correlation with the



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Figure 2: Demographic Factors Predicting UN Opinionation

probability of being opinionated. Because logistic regression coefficients are not substantively interpretable, I calculated the predicted probability of expressing an opinion about the UN associated with a maximal change in each independent variable, and discuss these changing probabilities below.

Four of the five demographic and socioeconomic factors significantly predict the probability of opinionation on the trustworthiness of the UN. The variable with the greatest substantive effect is education. The higher a person's education level, the more likely they are to express an opinion about the trustworthiness of the UN. A maximal increase in education is associated with a 40.9 percentage point increase in the likelihood that an individual will express an opinion about the trustworthiness of the UN. Furthermore, the likelihood of opinionation on the UN increases as an individual's wealth level increases. A change in an individual's wealth level from the lowest to the highest quintile increases the likelihood they will be opinionated by 12.9 percentage points.

Residential location and gender both predict opinionation: rural residents (vs. urban residents) and women (vs. men) are less likely to express an opinion on the UN. Rural residents are 5.4 percentage points less likely to be opinionated towards the UN, while women are 16.7 percentage points less likely. Age is the only variable to have no significant effect on the likelihood of opinion expression.

The results of the analysis conform to expectations derived from existing research on opinion expression and formation. Findings on the effect of education, wealth quintiles, and gender are consistent with other studies. Though research on the variable is more limited, the negative and significant effect of rural residence—after controlling for factors such as education and wealth—is an interesting finding that future scholarship might address. The findings regarding the age variable suggest that, on average, knowledge about an international institution such as the UN does not significantly increase as one ages, but further research on this topic is necessary before confidently reaching such a strong conclusion.

Political Factors and Opinion Expression on the United Nations

As previously discussed, the process of opinion formation requires the ability to process, organize, and translate information. To express an opinion on the United Nations, an individual must be knowledgeable of the UN and have the capability to convert information on the institution into an expression of its degree of trustworthiness.¹¹ Besides these two requirements, some researchers argue that individuals must have some general interest in politics to be motivated to express political opinions (Hennessy 1970; Krosnick and Milburn 1990).¹²

In identifying factors that may influence whether an individual expresses an opinion towards the UN, I consider mechanisms by which an individual might receive and process political information and factors influencing his knowledge of the United Nations. Sources of political information

are numerous, and include the media (such as television, news, or social media sites), membership or involvement in a political party, participation in a political group or movement, engagement with politically active friends and family members, being an active member of the political system, and so on.

From this long list, I choose to examine identification with a political party as a possible source of the knowledge and cognitive capacity necessary to express an opinion on the UN. Existing research provides justification for hypotheses regarding the effect of this variable. Chiefly, political parties have been consistently cited as helping with forming and organizing attitudes and opinions (Harbers, Vries, and Steenbergen 2012; Petersen, Slothuus, and Togeby 2010; Zaller 2012; Zechmeister and Corral 2013). Even if individuals are not very knowledgeable about the UN, they may be able to formulate an opinion on the institution by relying on their party's general values as a reference. Using this reasoning, I expect identification with a political party to be positively predictive of opinion expression.

Additionally, I consider the extent to which political interest predicts opinionation on the UN because of its potential role in motivating the development and expression of political opinions. I expect to find a positive correlation between political interest and opinion expression. Although the topic is under-studied, some extant research has previously reported evidence that supports this hypothesis (Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber 1980; Judd, Krosnick, and Milburn 1981; Zechmeister and Corral 2013).

Finally, I use political knowledge as a measure of capacity to express opinions on political issues. Responding "don't know" to a survey question is theorized to be due to a lack of political knowledge, and studies have reported evidence supporting this notion (Faulkenberry and Mason 1978; Krosnick and Milburn 1990; Perrin and McFarland 2011; Rapoport 1982; Zechmeister and Corral 2013). Therefore, I expect political knowledge to be positively correlated with opinion expression.

These three variables—party identification, political interest, and political

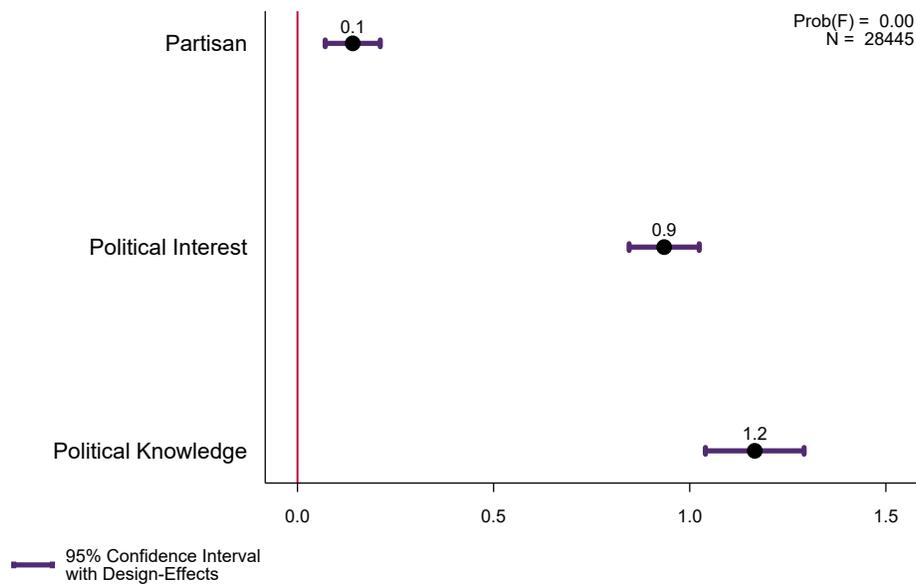


Figure 3: Political Factors Predicting UN Opinionation

knowledge—are the key independent variables in the following analyses. The variable, *Party Identification* (**VB10**), measures whether the individual identifies with a political party with “no” coded as 0 and “yes” coded as 1. *Political Interest* (**POL1**), is measured with a question that asks the respondent’s level of interest in politics, coded from “a lot” (1) to “none” (4); it is recoded here so that higher values mean more interest. *Political Knowledge* (**CONOCIM**), is based on the interviewer’s assessment of the political knowledge of the respondent on a five-point scale, ranging from “very low” (5) to “very high” (1); it is recoded here so that higher values mean more political knowledge.¹³

Figure 3 reports the results of the logistic regression analysis.¹⁴ All three variables are significant predictors of individuals expressing an opinion about the trustworthiness of the UN. Furthermore, the results confirm my expectations with respect to the direction of the relationships for all three variables.

Identification with a political party, political knowledge, and political

interest positively predict having an opinion on the UN. Consistent with expectations, individuals who identify with a political party, who have higher levels of political knowledge, and who are more interested in politics are more likely to express an opinion on the trustworthiness of the institution.

Both political knowledge and political interest have substantial predictive power, while the estimated effect of identification with a political party is substantially smaller. Again, because logistic regression coefficients are not directly interpretable, I calculated predicted probabilities for a maximal change in each independent variable, holding all other variables constant at their means. These probabilities indicate that individuals who identify with a political party are 3.1 percentage points more likely to be opinionated about the UN than those who do not identify with a political party. In contrast, a maximal increase in political interest increases the likelihood of being opinionated towards the UN by 20 percentage points, while a maximal increase in political knowledge increases the likelihood by 26.2 percentage points.

Conclusions and Implications

Citizens across the Americas differ substantially regarding whether they are opinionated about the UN. Those who hold an opinion are more educated, wealthy, male, and live in urban areas, on average. Besides these demographic characteristics, those who are opinionated towards the UN are also more partisan, interested in politics, and politically knowledgeable. These results support existing hypotheses and expectations on factors influencing opinionation and add to what, for some of the measures examined here, is a limited body of research.

In order to have an opinion about the UN, individuals must first be informed about the institution. Knowledge of the UN is thus necessary for finding it trustworthy and therefore integral to the legitimacy of the institution. To increase its effectiveness in its role in the international

community, the United Nations might consider improving its information dissemination and changing how it interacts with the public to promote not only feelings of trustworthiness, but knowledge of the UN and its mission more broadly.¹⁵

Notes

1. All formally independent and internationally recognized countries in the LAC region are members of the UN. Therefore, all countries included in the AmericasBarometer are members.
2. Specifically, the United Nations has regional offices, sub-regional offices, and country offices in over 24 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Many of the UN's system offices are in Panama, such as the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations Children's Fund, UN Women, and offices representing the International Monetary Fund. The center of UN activity in the Americas is Chile, where the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean is located. For more information, please visit <http://www.un.org/en/sections/where-we-work/americas/>. The UN also has one active peacekeeping mission in Haiti, and past missions in Guatemala, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. The UN has also conducted human rights efforts in 33 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean. For more information, please visit <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/LACRegion/Pages/LACRegionIndex.aspx>.
3. The 19 countries in which that question was asked are Paraguay, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, Ecuador, Honduras, Colombia, Argentina, Guatemala, Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Haiti.
4. Some individuals who say they do not know may, in fact, hold opinions about the UN that they prefer not to express to interviewers. I am unable to assess this possibility here.
5. I assessed the probability of non-linear effects of wealth, age cohorts, and education levels on opinion expression. I found no support for non-linear relationships, and so estimated all demographic relationships as linear.
6. The education variable (**EDR**) measures the highest level of education completed by each respondent using four categories: none, primary, secondary, and post-secondary.

7. Gender is measured using the variable **MUJER**, which takes the value of 1 if female and 0 if male.
8. The wealth measure, **QUINTALL**, uses household asset indicators for a more reliable measure of relative wealth; for more information about this measure, see Córdova (2009).
9. Age is measured using **EDAD**, which groups individuals into the following cohorts: 16-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, 66+.
10. Rural is measured using **UR**, which takes the value of 1 if urban and 0 if rural.
11. I define knowledge of the UN as knowing who the UN is and what it does. Specifically, an individual who is knowledgeable of the UN knows it is an international organization and can identify at least one of its activities in the region. Is it possible that individuals who are not knowledgeable of the UN express opinions on the institution? Yes. In fact, there is some evidence that politically knowledgeable and educated individuals are more likely give responses to survey questions on fictitious issues (Schuman and Presser 1980; Sturgis and Smith 2010). However, I do not believe this is occurring in this case, because the United Nations is not 'fictitious' and these results were largely dependent on whether "don't know" responses were offered as a response option (Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick 1986; Sturgis and Smith 2010; Schuman and Presser 1980). The survey question used for this analysis offers "don't know" as an option.
12. I refer to opinions on the United Nations as political opinions due to the nature of it being an international governing institution and its inherent bureaucratic structure. While the UN does engage in a variety of operations throughout the LAC region, many of which that are not inherently political, the broad nature of the question and my definition of knowledge (see note 11) compels me to categorize opinions on the institution as political.
13. In past rounds of the AmericasBarometer, political knowledge was measured using a series of political information questions. However, this battery performed unreliably across contexts, so was replaced in the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer. See the forthcoming *Methodological Note* by Cohen and Zechmeister for more information. For the analysis, all three variables are recoded to range from 0 to 1.
14. Country-fixed effects are included in the analysis. The five socio-demographic variables are included in the logistic regression analysis but not displayed in the figure to conserve space.

15. While increased opinionation on the UN may result in increased expressions of trust towards the institution, it could also result in increased expressions of distrust. Regardless, increasing expressions of either opinion requires knowledge of the institution, so increasing the number of individuals who perceive the UN as trustworthy requires increasing individuals' knowledge of the institution.

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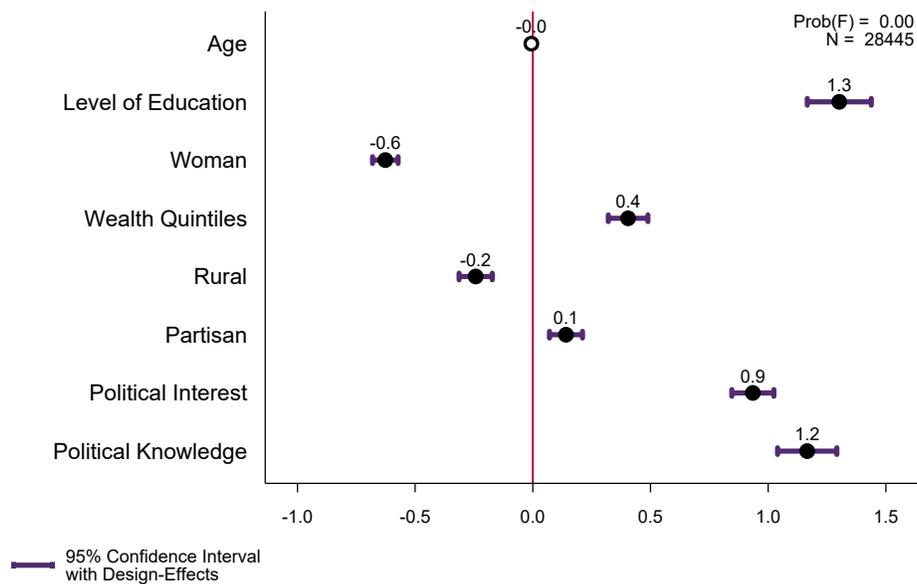
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Appendix



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Figure 4: Factors Influencing Opinionation towards the United Nations

Table 1: (Figure 2)

	Coefficients	(t)
Age	0.00	(0.37)
Level of Education	1.78*	(27.76)
Woman	-0.73*	(-27.74)
Wealth Quintiles	0.56*	(13.86)
Rural	-0.23*	(-6.72)
Guatemala	-0.02	(-0.23)
El Salvador	0.08	(0.85)
Honduras	-0.07	(-0.77)
Nicaragua	-0.49*	(-5.47)
Costa Rica	0.06	(0.59)
Panama	-0.64*	(-6.55)
Colombia	-0.42*	(-4.42)
Ecuador	-0.65*	(-6.45)
Bolivia	-0.00	(-0.02)
Paraguay	-0.78*	(-8.03)
Chile	-0.31*	(-2.96)
Uruguay	0.04	(0.45)
Brazil	-0.20*	(-2.21)
Venezuela	-0.53*	(-5.32)
Argentina	-0.41*	(-4.16)
Dominican Republic	-0.66*	(-7.07)
Haiti	0.15	(1.36)
Jamaica	-0.84*	(-8.76)
Constant	-0.12	(-1.35)
F	104.15	
Number of cases	29,084	

* indicates $p \leq .05$.

Table 2: (Figure 3)

	Coefficients	(t)
Partisan	0.14*	(3.94)
Political Interest	0.94*	(20.53)
Political Knowledge	1.17*	(18.18)
Guatemala	-0.08	(-0.81)
El Salvador	-0.12	(-1.34)
Honduras	-0.21	(-2.28)
Nicaragua	-0.62*	(-6.75)
Costa Rica	-0.12	(-1.16)
Panama	-0.78*	(-7.06)
Colombia	-0.44*	(-4.58)
Ecuador	-0.64*	(-6.35)
Bolivia	-0.11	(-0.98)
Paraguay	-1.03*	(-10.04)
Chile	-0.27*	(-2.57)
Uruguay	-0.21*	(-2.11)
Brazil	-0.23*	(-2.43)
Venezuela	-0.70*	(-6.89)
Argentina	-0.50*	(-4.90)
Dominican Republic	-0.90*	(-9.22)
Haiti	0.20*	(1.73)
Jamaica	-1.03*	(-10.35)
Constant	-0.62*	(6.55)
F	118.27	
Number of cases	28,445	

* indicates $p \leq .05$.



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