

Insights Series #133

# Why Do People Contact Their Local Officials?

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## Key Findings:

- Trust in local government is a positive and significant predictor of contact with local government.
- Satisfaction with local services is negatively correlated with contacting a local government official.
- External efficacy does not predict contact with local officials, but as others have found, crime victimization and internal efficacy do predict reaching out to an official at the local level.



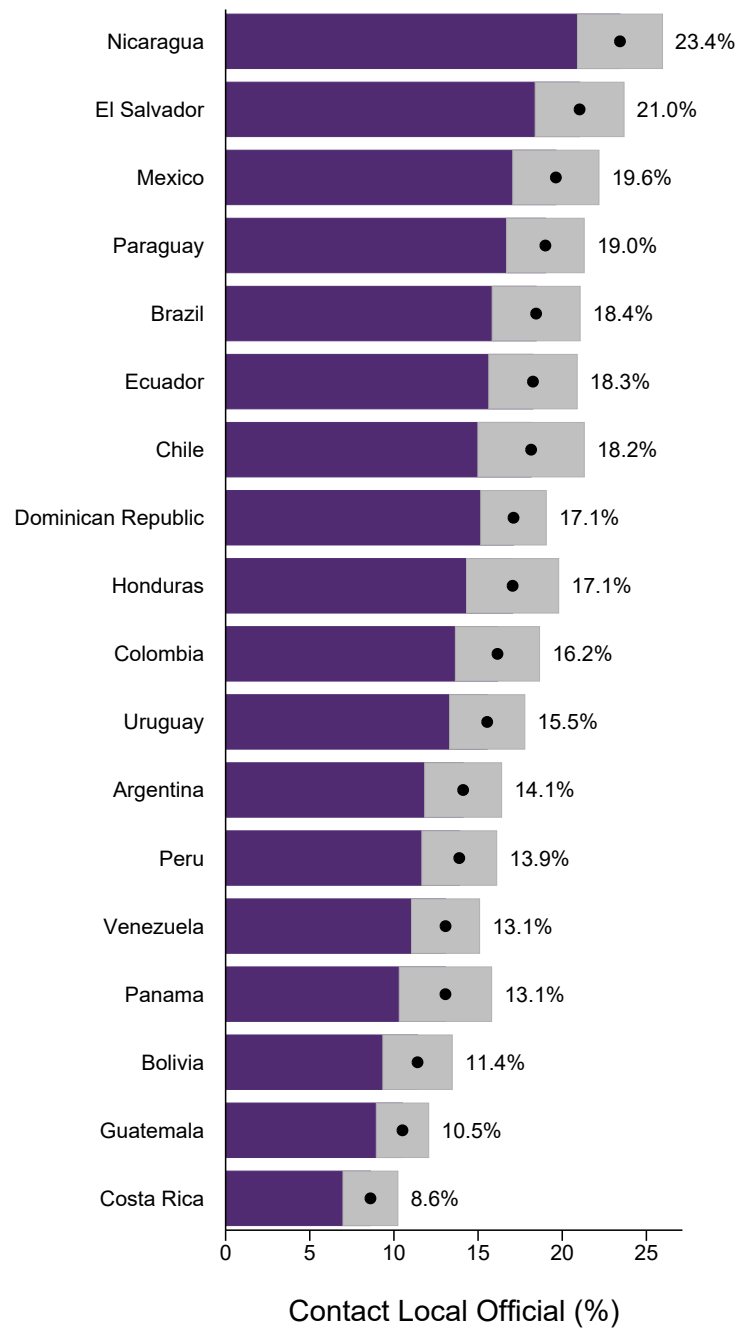
A minority of citizens in Latin America express trust in their executive or their national legislature (Carlin, Love, and Singer 2016). These trends might lead to concern for democratic functioning in the region, but people rarely interact with their national representatives. Instead, they look to local officials for help or to voice concern because local government is “closer” to them (e.g., Montalvo 2009).

This *Insights* report examines who is more likely to contact local government officials in Latin America. In previous reports, others have shown that crime victims, those with higher internal efficacy, and the politically engaged are more likely to contact officials (Lynch, Render, and Twomey 2012). This report extends this research and tests three additional factors—trust in local government, dissatisfaction with local government services, and external efficacy (i.e., public officials are seen as being attentive to citizen needs)—and their effect on the likelihood of contacting local government officials.

The 2014 AmericasBarometer was the latest round to include the following question, which was asked to over 28,000 respondents from 18 Latin American countries:<sup>1</sup>

**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?<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents in each country in 2014 that reported contacting a local official. Contacting a local official is not a common behavior. In every country, less than a quarter of respondents say they have ever reached out to a local official for help. Contact with a local government official was highest in Nicaragua, where 23.4% of respondents said they contacted their local government, while Costa Ricans contact their officials the least (8.6%).<sup>3</sup>



95 % Confidence Interval  
(with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; v.07132017

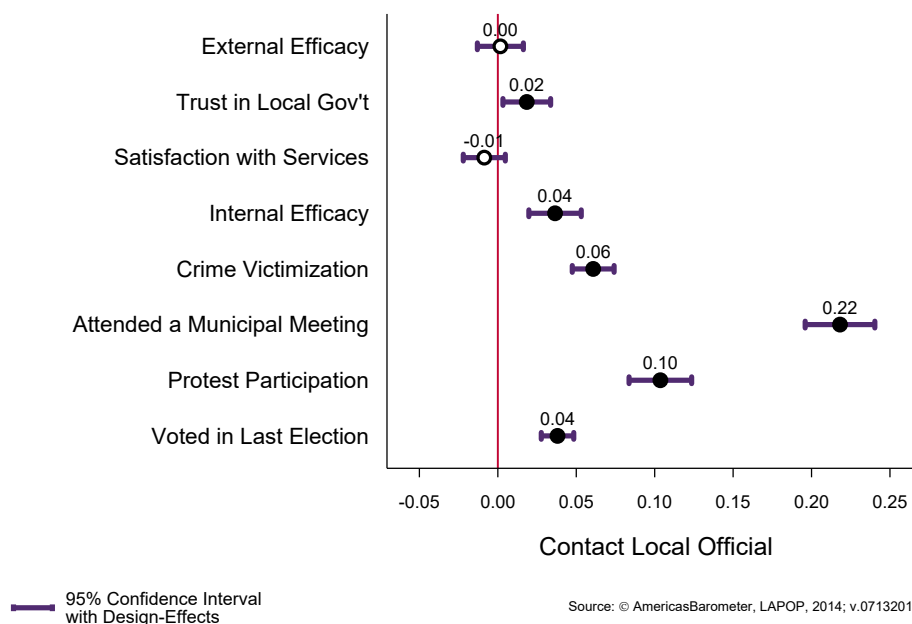
**Figure 1: Average Contact with a Local Official, 2014**

## Trust and Satisfaction Fuel Government Contact

Many Latin American countries have decentralized their governments in recent years, granting local officials substantial power within their constituencies (Nickson 2011; Montalvo 2009). Local governments can claim credit for policy when it works well, and citizens may communicate their discontent with local government when they believe performance is lacking. Indeed, scholars have shown that people who are dissatisfied with a local government's performance on local issues (e.g., permits and the quality of local roads) are more likely to contact a local official (Moon, Serra, and West 1993). People who are satisfied with the services should thus be less likely to contact local representatives.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, the decision to contact a local government official may depend on the level of trust a citizen has in the institution that the official represents. Thus, a second factor that could affect an individual's decision to contact local officials for help is whether he or she trusts his or her local government. Some scholars have found that requesting help from a municipal office does have a positive effect on an individual's trust in local government (Carlin, Love, and Singer 2016). At the same time, local governments that appear fair, efficient, and prompt in the eyes of citizens are more likely to receive citizen feedback (Serra 1995). Those who trust local governments should thus be more willing to reach out to local officials.

Finally, external efficacy likely plays a role in contacting officials. In relation to politics, external efficacy is defined as a citizen's belief that "the State listens to his or her opinions" (Sharoni 2012, 119). Along these lines, Kahne and Westheimer (2006) find that citizens with low levels of external efficacy are less likely to contact their government because they believe contact with the government will not alter outcomes. I use a measure of external efficacy to test the expectation that citizens who believe leaders listen to people like them will be more likely to contact local officials.



**Figure 2: An Extended Model of Predicting Local Government Contact**

Figure 2 tests these expectations.<sup>5</sup> I predict local government contact with measures of trust in local government,<sup>6</sup> satisfaction with local government service, and external efficacy. Satisfaction with local services is measured with an index of variables that measure satisfaction with roads, health services, and schools.<sup>7</sup> External efficacy measures the degree to which individuals believe that leaders are interested in what people like them think.<sup>8</sup> I also control for measures of political engagement, internal efficacy, and crime victimization, which Lynch, Render, and Twomey (2012) find all increase the probability of contacting local officials.

As Figure 2 illustrates, trust in local government predicts the likelihood of contacting a local government official. Trust in local government is positively associated with contacting a local official, with the most trusting people being 2 percentage points more likely to contact their officials than those with the lowest levels of trust.

External efficacy and satisfaction with services do not help explain which

individuals are more likely to contact their elected officials. Believing that officials are interested in what one thinks does not factor into one's decision to contact a local official. I expected to find that satisfaction with services would decrease the likelihood of contacting an official because these respondents do not have a complaint to voice. However, this relationship is not supported.

Internal efficacy, political engagement, and crime victimization remain significant predictors of contact with officials (Lynch, Render, and Twomey 2012), with each associated with an increase in the likelihood of contacting of at least 4 percentage points.

## Conclusion

This work corroborates others' findings that those who are victims of crime and those who are more politically engaged are more likely to contact local officials (Lynch, Render, and Twomey 2012). In addition to these factors, I have also shown that trust in local government increases the likelihood of contacting an official.

Contrary to expectations, satisfaction with services and belief that the government listens to people like the respondent (external efficacy) do not affect the likelihood of reaching out for help from a local official. The lack of a significant result for external efficacy could be in part due to the nature of the measure. The external question (**EFF1**) asks about those who govern the country, rather than the local government. Perhaps if the measure had been framed in a local way, the relationship would be more clear. Future research should consider this possibility.

## Notes

1. This question was asked in other countries in the 2014 round of the AmericasBarometer, but this report focuses specifically on responses to the question in Latin America.

2. Response categories to **CP4A** included: “Yes,” “No,” “Doesn’t know,” and “Doesn’t Answer.” Respondents who did not know or did not answer are excluded from analyses.
3. The rate of contact in Nicaragua rose considerably from 13.4% in the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer.
4. This report does not distinguish between the types of feedback being given when individuals contact their officials.
5. Figure 2 uses a logistic regression for analysis. In the figure, the dots represent the change in predicted probability associated with each variable, and the bars represent the 95% confidence interval around that estimate. Coefficients represent maximal effects; the coefficient for external efficacy, for example, indicates the change in probability of contacting between the least efficacious and most efficacious individuals. Dots to the right of the red line signify positive relationships, and dots to the left of the line indicate a negative association. When the bar for an independent variable does not intersect the red vertical line, that variable is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

This analysis controls for wealth, age, education, urban versus rural, and gender. These coefficients and the country fixed effects are excluded from the figure, but the results can be found in Appendix Table 1.

6. Trust in local government is measured using the responses to **B32**, which asks, “To what extent do you trust the local or municipal government?” The responses range from 1 which signifies “Not at all” to 7 which means “A lot.”
7. Satisfaction with services is measured using questions about satisfaction with roads (**SD2NEW**), schools (**SD3NEW**), and public medical and health services (**SD6NEW**). For each of these questions, individuals were asked whether they were “Very Satisfied,” “Satisfied,” “Dissatisfied,” or “Very Dissatisfied.” Those who reported “Satisfied” and “Very Satisfied” were collapsed into one category denoted by a 1, while those who were “Dissatisfied” or “Very Dissatisfied” represent the other category denoted by a 0. I then constructed an additive index, where satisfied responses on all three questions would represent the highest level of satisfaction with services. Responses of 0 on all three questions are the least satisfied. Combinations of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are represented by middle categories.
8. **EFF1** asks individuals “Those who govern this country are interested in what people like you think. How much do you agree or disagree with this statement?” Respondents can give an answer on a 1 “Strongly Disagree” to a 7 “Strongly Agree” scale.

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**Appendix Table 1**

Variables	Contact Local Official
Turnout in Last Election	0.33* (0.05)
Participated in Protest	0.69* (0.06)
Attendance at Municipal Meeting	1.27* (0.05)
Victim of Crime	0.45* (0.05)
Internal Efficacy	0.29* (0.07)
Satisfaction w/ Services	-0.07 (0.06)
Trust in Local Government	1.15* (0.06)
External Efficacy	0.01 (0.06)
Age, in Years	0.69* (0.10)
Education	-0.02 (0.09)
Wealth Quintiles	-0.36* (0.06)

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**Appendix Table 1 – continued from previous page**

Variables	Contact Local Official
Urban	-0.49* (0.05)
Female	0.14* (0.04)
Argentina	-0.36* (0.13)
Bolivia	-0.79* (0.13)
Brazil	0.02 (0.12)
Chile	0.05 (0.14)
Colombia	-0.19 (0.13)
Costa Rica	-0.97* (0.14)
Dominican Republic	-0.29* (0.11)
Ecuador	-0.25* (0.13)
El Salvador	0.09 (0.12)
Guatemala	-0.77* (0.13)
Honduras	-0.27*

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**Appendix Table 1 – concluded from previous page**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Contact Local Official</b>
	(0.13)
Nicaragua	0.15 (0.12)
Panama	-0.43* (0.16)
Paraguay	-0.16 (0.12)
Peru	-0.51* (0.13)
Uruguay	-0.30* (0.13)
Venezuela	-0.61* (0.13)
Constant	-1.89* (0.12)
Observations	26,369

\* indicates  $p \leq .05$ . Standard errors in parentheses.



Morgan Marquez is a rising senior at Vanderbilt University, where she is completing a double major in Economics and Latin American Studies as part of the Center for Latin American Studies' (CLAS) Honors Program. She is currently studying abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Morgan developed this report while participating in LAPOP's Undergraduate Research Fellow program.

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As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at [vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys](http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys).

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