Insights Series #142

Who Trusts Mass Media in the Americas?

Hannah Hagan
Vanderbilt University

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Key Findings:

- On average, individuals who report satisfaction with democracy in their country and who voted for the winner of the most recent presidential election trust mass media more.
- Trust in media does not correlate with a country's regime type or level of media freedom.
- Attention paid to the news is positively correlated with trust in media, but interest in politics does not predict trust in media.
- Internet usage is negatively correlated with trust in media.
- Among the included sociodemographic factors, education is the strongest predictor of trust in media; on average, those possessing more education trust the media less.

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Mass media plays a central role in the dissemination of news and information across the Americas. The media's impact on individuals' understanding of political issues, however, is dependent on their willingness to trust and accept this information as accurate.[1] Some scholars have suggested that confidence in the media is related to the health of democracies.[2] In light of low and declining trust in the media in the United States,[3] it is important to examine levels of trust in the media across the Americas.

This *Insights* report assesses responses from the 2016/17 round of the AmericasBarometer survey by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in which 35,055 survey participants were asked the following question:

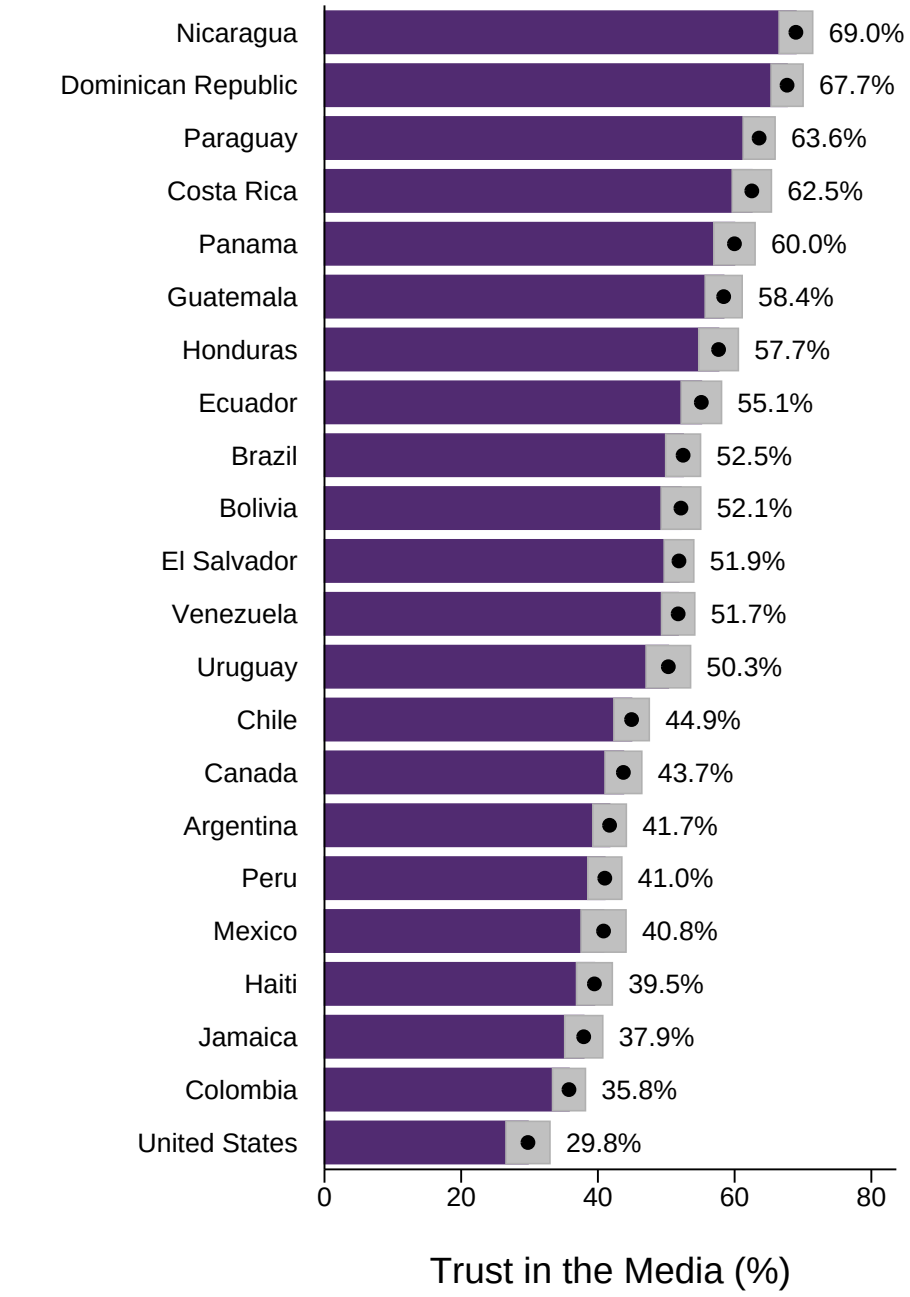
B37: To what extent do you trust the mass media?

Respondents answered on a 1-7 scale, where 1 indicated "not at all," and 7 indicated "a lot."

Figure 1 shows the percentages of respondents in Canada, the United States, and 20 Latin American and Caribbean countries who expressed trust in the mass media by reporting responses of 5, 6, or 7 on the 7-point scale. Unsurprisingly, there is significant variation across countries: the percentages of citizens who trust in the mass media range from a low of 29.8% in the United States to a high of 69% in Nicaragua.

Interestingly, trust in media does not appear to correlate with a country's regime type or how free a country's media is. While a positive relationship between freedom of the press and trust in media may seem intuitive, the findings displayed in Figure 1 do not support this expectation. One possible explanation for this surprisingly murky relationship is that citizens in countries with lower press freedom recognize that mass media is not responsible for the restrictions imposed on the press.[4]

On the other hand, Figure 1 weakly supports the possibility of a relationship between economic development and trust in media. Every OECD member country included in Figure 1 (i.e., Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Chile) appears in the lower half of the figure. Tsfati and Ariely



Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17; v. GM_v.07172017

Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents Reporting Trust in Media

(2014) offer some evidence of a negative relationship between economic development and trust in media, but this relationship did not remain statistically significant once the authors included controls for democracy and postmaterialism. The low level of trust in media in the United States may also stem from country-specific conditions, such as widespread perceptions of liberal bias in the media[5] or low political trust.[6]

Sociodemographic Factors and Trust in Media

To evaluate who trusts the media, I start by assessing the effects of gender, education, and size of place of residence. I expect that women will tend to report greater trust in the media than men because some past research has found that women are, on average, more trusting.[7] These higher levels of trust should apply to reported trust in media. On the other hand, I expect that individuals with higher levels of formal education will be less likely to trust the mass media because they are better equipped to be critical consumers of media.[8]

I expect that individuals who live in larger cities will trust the media less than those who reside in smaller towns because residents of larger cities are, on average, more likely to encounter a greater number of media sources, which may present conflicting information and thereby decrease trust. This expectation is in line with the findings of a past *Insights* report, which analyzed the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer survey.[9] While the public's perception of the media may have undergone some changes during the period from 2010-2016/17, I expect the findings to be overall consistent. I also control for age, skin tone, and level of wealth in the model, as standard demographic/socioeconomic predictors. Figure 2 presents the estimated effects for these six demographic and socioeconomic characteristics on reported trust in media, as predicted by an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model.[10,11]

The dots in Figure 2 represent the estimated coefficients of the independent variables, while the bars that intersect the dots represent the 95%

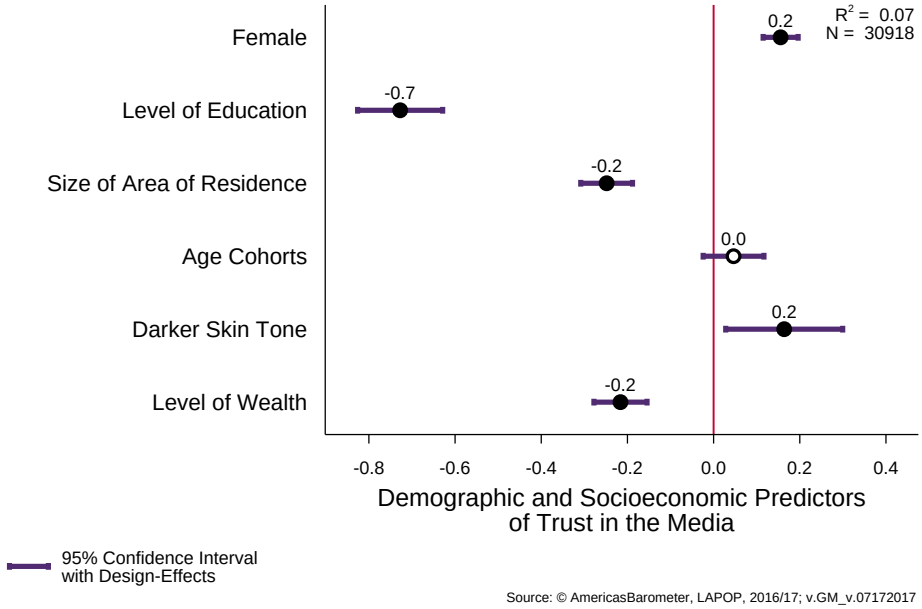


Figure 2: Maximal Effects of Demographic and Socioeconomic Factors on Trust in Media

confidence interval around each estimate. If the bar for a given variable intersects the red line, the coefficient of the variable is not statistically significant. Otherwise, error bars that are completely to the left of the red line indicate significant negative relationships, and error bars completely to the right indicate significant positive relationships. As another way to read the graph: filled in black circles indicate statistically significant relationships, while unfilled white circles indicate relationships that are not statistically significant.

In line with the expectation that women are generally more trusting, on average in this sample, women are found to trust the media more than men with an effect size of 0.2 units on the seven-point scale. However, one's level of education is the strongest sociodemographic predictor of trust in media: a change from the lowest level of education to the highest is associated with a decrease of 0.7 points in trust in media, in line with extant literature. Size of place of residence also predicts lower levels of trust in media: a shift from living in a rural area to living in the national

capital decreases trust in media by 0.2 units.[12]

Age is not a significant predictor of trust in media, which suggests that older individuals are not, on average, significantly more or less likely to trust the media than younger individuals. This finding is in line with a past work which found that age is not significantly associated with trust in media;[13] however, it differs from another report that found evidence of a significant, negative relationship between age and trust in media.[14] In addition, the results show that darker skin tone is a significant predictor of trust in the media. A shift from the lightest skin tone color to the darkest is associated with an increase of 0.2 points in trust in media.

Conversely, higher levels of wealth predict less trust in media: moving from the lowest quintile of wealth to the highest decreases trust in media by 0.2 points. This result supports past findings of the effects of wealth[15] and income[16] on trust in media. One possible explanation for a negative relationship between wealth and trust in media is that wealthier individuals, on average, may feel that they have more to lose which in turn may lead them to consider a greater number of issues to be personally relevant. Some research suggests that individuals are more likely to reject information from the media if they expect to be personally affected by the information than if they do not expect to be affected.[17] Thus, I conjecture that wealthier individuals may reject media content more frequently than less wealthy individuals and accordingly trust the media less.

Additional Explanations of Trust in Media

Scholars have proposed a wide variety of explanations for variation in trust in media at the individual level. In this report, I consider explanations that focus on three types of factors: disposition to trust, consumption of media, and individual political engagement and behavior.

First, I consider the possibility that some individuals are, on average, more trusting than others. If, regardless of the subject in question, some

individuals are more trusting than others, then this characteristic may influence reported amounts of trust in media. As proxy measures of an individual's dispositional inclination to trust, I include interpersonal trust and church attendance. Interpersonal trust refers to the extent to which an individual reports that people, in general, can be trusted. Additionally, researchers have found that church attendance is related to more trusting dispositions.[18] In line with past research, I expect that greater interpersonal trust and reported attendance of religious services will predict greater trust in media.

Second, I consider how an individual's trust in the media may be related to their levels of media consumption. Given that an individual's relationship with the mass media is generally defined by their consumption of media, the frequency and medium of their media consumption are likely to influence their opinion of the trustworthiness of mass media and their thoughts while responding to a survey item about media. Recently, the possibility of a relationship between news consumption and trust in media has received considerable attention.[19] Due to the expectation that individuals who do not trust the media will prefer to consume alternative sources of information,[20] more news consumption is expected to predict greater trust in media.

Furthermore, some scholars report findings that suggest that the relationship between trust in media and news consumption differs according to the medium of consumed news.[21] In particular, recent scholarship has raised questions about the possibility of a unique relationship between trust in media and the consumption of online news.[22] Scholars have consistently found evidence of a positive relationship between trust in media and the consumption of news through television and print.[23] The association between online news consumption and trust in media, however, remains unclear as scholars have found contradictory results.[24] As an indirect investigation of the possible effects of online news consumption on trust in media, I include reported frequency of internet usage as an independent variable. While this measure is a proxy for internet consumption of media, I expect that individuals who use the internet more often are more likely to be exposed to online news.

Third, I consider how an individual's orientation toward and engagement with politics might be connected to their trust in mass media. Although political engagement can take many forms, I focus on individuals' interest in politics, identification with a political party, evaluation of how democracy is working, and reported vote choice in the most recent presidential election as factors that may influence their trust in media.

I expect that individuals who are more interested in politics will, on average, trust the mass media less than individuals who are not as interested in politics.[25] Individuals who are more interested in politics may possess more political opinions than less interested individuals, which means they are more likely to encounter media content that challenges or disconfirms their beliefs. Additionally, individuals who are more interested in politics may consider more issues to be consequential, leading them to more frequently reject information from the media.[26]

Comparably, I expect that individuals who identify with a political party will, on average, trust the media less than individuals who do not identify with a political party. Political party membership[27] and party identification[28] have been found to predict greater perceptions of media bias against the individual's political party. On average, party members may also consider a higher number of issues to be personally relevant than independents, and individuals are more likely to reject information related to issues that they expect to affect them.[29]

I also consider how an individual's opinion of their country's political system might affect their trust in media. Past scholarship has found a positive relationship between political trust and trust in media.[30] In particular, scholars suggest that political trust may correlate with trust in media because both are affected by the level of public trust in social institutions.[31] To account for political trust, I include individual satisfaction with the way that democracy works in their country. In line with past findings, I expect that individuals who report greater satisfaction with the current democracy in their country will also report greater trust in mass media.

Lastly, I examine how vote choice in the most recent presidential election may be related to reported trust in media. While there is mixed evidence of how greater political involvement may influence trust in media,[32] I expect that recent political "winners," or individuals who voted for the most recent winner of their country's presidential election, will trust the media more than recent political "losers." Given that recent "winners" tend to exhibit greater trust in government and political institutions than "losers",[33] this expectation represents a natural extension of the positive relationship between political trust and trust in media.[34]

Figure 3 incorporates interpersonal trust, attendance of religious services, attention paid to news, internet usage, interest in politics, identification with a political party, satisfaction with democracy, and vote choice in the most recent presidential election into the model. Similar to Figure 2, the estimated effects shown in Figure 3 are predicted by an OLS regression model.[35]

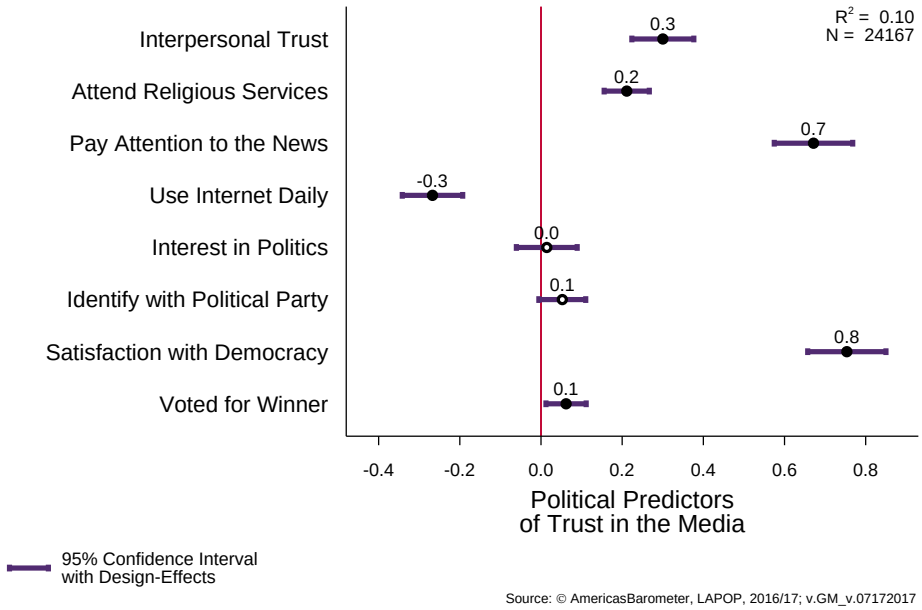


Figure 3: Disposition to Trust, Media Consumption, and Political Engagement and Behavior

Both interpersonal trust and attendance of religious services are signif-

icant predictors of greater trust in media.[36] A shift from the response that people in the respondent's community are "untrustworthy" to the response that they are "very trustworthy" is associated with a 0.3-point increase in trust in media (on the seven-point scale). A change from attending religious services "never or almost never" to attending services at least as frequently as "once or twice a year" is predicted to increase trust by 0.2 points.[37] These two findings support the expectation that some individuals are generally more trusting than others and that these differences in individuals' general inclinations to trust help explain variation in individual-level trust in media.

In line with the expectation that individuals who do not trust the media are less likely to consume it,[38] individuals who pay more attention to the news are more trusting of the media than individuals who pay less attention on average.[39] A shift from "never" paying attention to the news to "daily" is associated with a 0.7-point increase in reported trust in media.

Conversely, internet usage is found to predict lower levels of trust in media.[40] A shift from "never" using the internet to using it "daily" is associated with a decrease of 0.3 points in reported trust in media. While personal internet usage does not map precisely onto online news consumption, a negative relationship between internet usage and trust in media is suggestive of a negative association between online news consumption and trust in media.

Contrary to the expectation that individuals who are personally invested in a larger number of political issues may trust the media less, neither interest in politics nor identification with a political party is found to be a significant predictor of trust in media.[41] The finding that interest in politics does not significantly predict trust in media supports past scholarship.[42] The finding that party identification is not significantly associated with trust in media does not support past conclusions regarding a significant positive relationship between party identification and perception of media bias;[43] however, evidence of this relationship comes from works that only analyze survey data from the United States. Thus,

it is possible that the expected relationship does not consistently occur outside the United States. It is also possible that perceptions of media bias against a given political party increase with membership to that party in countries other than the United States, but that this increase is not substantial enough to significantly influence overall trust in media.

Individuals who report greater satisfaction with democracy in their country report greater trust in media than individuals who are less satisfied.[44] A shift from being "very dissatisfied" with how democracy is working to being "very satisfied" is associated with a 0.8-point increase in trust in media. This finding supports the possibility of a positive relationship between political trust and trust in media.[45]

Lastly, on average, individuals who report voting for the most recent successful presidential candidate also report greater trust in the media than individuals who did not vote for the winning candidate.[46] Voting for the most recent "winner" is associated with a 0.1-point increase in trust in media. While small in nature, this finding represents modest support for the expectation that presidential vote choice "winners" generally trust the media more than "losers."

Discussion

This *Insights* report examines characteristics that predict individual-level trust in the mass media. While average levels of trust in the media vary significantly by country, there is also significant variation in the amount of trust in media reported by individuals that is independent of country-level effects. In particular, this report argues that trust in the media is associated with one's disposition to trust, media consumption, and political trust.

On average, individuals who consider people in their community trustworthy, attend religious services, and are female trust the media more. Additionally, citizens who pay attention to the news generally trust the media more. This relationship, however, may not hold for all mediums of

media, as individuals who use the internet daily are less trusting of the media. Additionally, given that individuals who reside in the national capital tend to trust the media less, this relationship may be attenuated by the number or variety of media sources to which individuals are exposed.

Evidence is mixed on whether individuals who consider a larger number of issues personally relevant trust the media less.[47] However, individuals who are more educated tend to trust the media less. Wealth also predicts decreased trust in media. However, neither identification with a political party nor interest in politics are significantly associated with trust in media.

At the same time, the findings support the expectation of a positive relationship between political trust and trust in media.[48] Both individuals who report satisfaction with democracy in their country and individuals who voted for the winner of the most recent presidential election tend to trust the media more.

Trust in the media is beneficial to democratic governance and efficient decision-making. Without shared, trusted sources of information, people are more likely to experience difficulty making rational decisions in line with their preferences and engaging in productive dialogue about points of disagreement.[49] Today, trust in media is a topic of particular interest due to the concerns about the undetermined effects of online news consumption[50] and the recent decline of trust in media in the United States.[51] Given the positive relationship between trust in political institutions and trust in media,[52] both policymakers and citizens have incentives to encourage citizens to trust the media.

Notes

1. Boudreau (2009); Miller and Krosnick (2000).

2. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018).

3. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018).

4. Rodríguez and Zechmeister (2018).

5. Jones (2004).

6. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018); Jones (2004).

7. Layton (2012); Lee (2010). The positive effect of female gender is not significant in all cases of past scholarship (Lee 2010).

8. Layton (2012); Tsfati and Ariely (2014).

9. Layton (2012).

10. Country-level effects are also estimated as independent variables in the model for Figure 2, but not shown.

11. Gender is measured with the following variable: **Q1.** Sex [Record but DO NOT ask]: (1) Male (2) Female. Education is measured with the variable **edr**, which is created from responses to the survey item: **ED.** How many years of schooling have you completed? Responses are then sorted into the following four categories: none, primary, secondary, post-secondary. Size of place of residence is measured with the following variable: **TAMANO.** Size of place: (1) National Capital (Metropolitan area) (2) Large City (3) Medium City (4) Small City (5) Rural Area. Age is measured with the variable **edad**, which is created from responses to the survey item: **Q2Y.** In what year were you born? Responses are then sorted into the following age cohorts: 16 (or voting age in the respondent's country)-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, and 65+. Skin tone is measured by using responses given by interviewers on the skin tone of each respondent along an 11-point scale. Interviewers are equipped with a color palette that displays eleven skin tone categories and receive the following instructions: **COLORR.** [When the interview is complete, WITHOUT asking, please use the color chart and circle the number that most closely corresponds to the color of the face of the respondent]. The color palette was designed by Princeton's Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) and has been used by LAPOP since 2010. Level of wealth is measured with the variable **quintall**. Quintall divides respondents into five categories, using questions about possessions present in the respondent's household (see: Córdova (2009)). Respondents are asked whether their households own the following types of items: refrigerator, washing machine, microwave oven, landline telephone, cell phone, cars, motorcycle, potable water, connection to the sewage system,

indoor bathroom, computer, internet, TV, and flat panel TV.

Given that existing scholarship on individual-level trust in media does not emphasize precise measurement of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, categorical variables of education and age cohort are included in the model rather than years of schooling or birth year. The sign and statistical significance of each characteristic does not change when the more precise variable is rescaled and substituted into the model.

With the exceptions of gender, skin tone, and size of area of residence, all independent variables in the model for Figure 2 are recoded to a 0-1 scale, where "0" represents the lowest value and "1" represents the highest. Gender is coded so that "0" represents "Male" and "1" represents "Female." Skin tone is coded to range from 0 to 1, with "0" representing the darkest skin tone category and "1" representing the lightest skin tone category. Size of area of residence is coded to range from 0 to 1 with "0" representing a rural area and "1" representing the national capital.

12. When size of place of residence is measured using the **UR** variable in lieu of the **TAMANO** variable, the effect of a larger place of residence remains statistically significant and negative. The original **UR** variable reads as follows: **UR.** (1) Urban (2) Rural. To test the robustness of the model for Figure 2, **UR** is recoded so that "0" represents "Rural" and "1" represents "Urban."

13. Lee (2010).

14. Layton (2012).

15. Layton (2012).

16. Lee (2010).

17. Gunther and Lasorsa (1986).

18. Layton (2012). In the context of American politics, the relationship between religiosity or observance of religion and a general inclination to trust is not clear and may vary by religious denomination (Daniels and Ruhr 2010). There is also evidence that the relationship between religiosity and trust in media may vary by medium in the United States (Golan and Day 2010). In Latin American countries, however, there is some evidence of a more consistently positive relationship between religious observance and trust (Brañas-Garza, Rossi, and Zaclicever 2009).

19. Layton (2012); Tsfati (2010); Tsfati and Ariely (2014); Williams (2012).

20. Tsfati (2010); Tsfati and Cappella (2003); Williams (2012).

21. Tsfati (2010); Tsfati and Ariely (2014); Williams (2012).

22. Tsfati (2010); Tsfati and Ariely (2014); Williams (2012).

23. Tsfati and Ariely (2014); Williams (2012).

24. There is scholarship that suggests a positive relationship between trust in media and online news consumption (Tsfati 2010) as well as a negative relationship (Tsfati and Ariely 2014). The relationship between trust in media and amount of attention paid to online news has also been found not to be statistically significant (Williams 2012).

25. Contrary to this expectation, Tsfati and Ariely (2014) suggest that there is a positive relationship between trust in media and interest in politics due to a correlation between distrust in media and apathy toward politics.

26. Gunther and Lasorsa (1986).

27. Gunther (1992).

28. Eveland and Shah (2003).

29. Gunther and Lasorsa (1986).

30. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018); Jones (2004); Lee (2010).

31. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018).

32. Eveland and Shah (2003); Layton (2012).

33. Anderson and Tverdova (2001); Anderson and Lotempio (2002).

34. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018); Jones (2004); Lee (2010).

35. Country dummy variables and the six sociodemographic variables that are included in the model for Figure 2 are also included as independent variables in the model for Figure 3.

36. Interpersonal trust is measured using the following variable: **IT1.** And speaking of the people from around here, would you say that people in this community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy, or untrustworthy...? (1) Very trustworthy (2) Somewhat trustworthy (3) Not very trustworthy (4) Untrustworthy. The variable is recoded to a 0-1 scale, where "0" represents "Untrustworthy" and "1" represents "Very trustworthy." Church attendance is measured using the following variable: **Q5A.** How often do you attend religious services? [Read alternatives] (1) More than once per week (2) Once per week (3) Once a month (4) Once or twice a year (5) Never or almost never. The variable is recoded to a dichotomous variable, where "0" represents "Never or almost never" and "1" represents the responses of frequencies ranging from "Once or twice a year" to "More than once per week."

37. Although there is strong evidence of systematic over-reporting of church attendance in the United States (Presser and Stinson 1998; Brenner 2011), this phenomenon does not appear to occur as consistently in other countries (Brenner 2011). Therefore, it is unlikely that over-reporting of church attendance significantly affects the predicted effect of church attendance on trust in media. If the survey data does include significant over-reporting of church attendance, however, this over-reporting would likely dilute the predicted effect of church attendance on trust in media. Thus, the predicted effect of church attendance on trust in media is not undermined by the possibility of over-reporting of church attendance.

38. Tsfati (2010); Tsfati and Cappella (2003); Williams (2012).

39. Attention paid to the news is measured by the following variable: **GI0.** About how often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers or the internet? [Read alternatives]: (1) Daily (2) A few times a week (3) A few times a month (4) Rarely (5) Never. The variable is recoded to a 0-1 scale, where "0" represents "Never" and "1" represents "Daily."

40. Internet usage is measured by the following variable: **WWW1.** Talking about other things, how often do you use the internet? (1) Daily (2) A few times a week (3) A few times a month (4) Rarely (5) Never. The variable is recoded to a 0-1 scale, where "0" represents "Never" and "1" represents "Daily."

41. Interest in politics and identification with a political party are measured using the

following variables: **POL1.** How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none? (1) A lot (2) Some (3) Little (4) None. This measure is recoded to a 0-1 scale, where "0" represents "None" and "1" represents "A lot." **VB10.** Do you currently identify with a political party? Which political party do you identify with? Yes (1) / No (0).

42. Layton (2012).

43. Eveland and Shah (2003); Gunther (1992).

44. Satisfaction with democracy is measured using the following variable: **PN4.** In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in (country)? (1) Very satisfied (2) Satisfied (3) Dissatisfied (4) Very dissatisfied. The variable is recoded to a 0-1 scale, where "0" represents "Very dissatisfied" and "1" represent "Very satisfied."

45. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018); Jones (2004); Lee (2010).

46. Vote choice in the most recent presidential election is measured using responses to the following two survey items: **VB2.** Did you vote in the last presidential elections of (year of presidential elections)? Yes / No (In countries with two rounds, asked about the first). **VB3N.** Who did you vote for in the last presidential election of 2008? (Open-ended question, coded in the field; in countries with two rounds, asked about the first).

    Based on these questions, a dichotomous variable of presidential vote choice "winners" and "losers" was created. Respondents who reported voting for the winner of the most recent presidential election through **VB3N** were coded as "winners," which was represented as "1." Regardless of their specific answer, respondents who did not report voting for the election winner in **VB3N** were coded as "losers," which was represented as "0." Because respondents who gave responses other than "Voted" to **VB2** were never asked **VB3N**, respondents who answered "Did not vote" to **VB2** were also coded as "losers" or "0."

47. Gunther and Lasorsa (1986).

48. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018); Jones (2004); Lee (2010).

49. Boudreau (2009).

50. Tsfati (2010); Williams (2012).

51. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018).

52. Hanitzch, Van Dalen, and Steindl (2018).

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Hannah Hagan (hannah.j.hagan@vanderbilt.edu) wrote this as a fourth-year undergraduate student at Vanderbilt University. She graduated in May of 2019 with a double major in Mathematics and Political Science and is pursuing employment in the area of applied social science research.

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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.

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vanderbilt.edu/lapop
@lapop_barometro
@LatinAmericanPublicOpinionProject
lapop@vanderbilt.edu
+1-615-322-4033
230 Appleton Place, PMB 505, Suite 304, Nashville, TN 37203, USA