

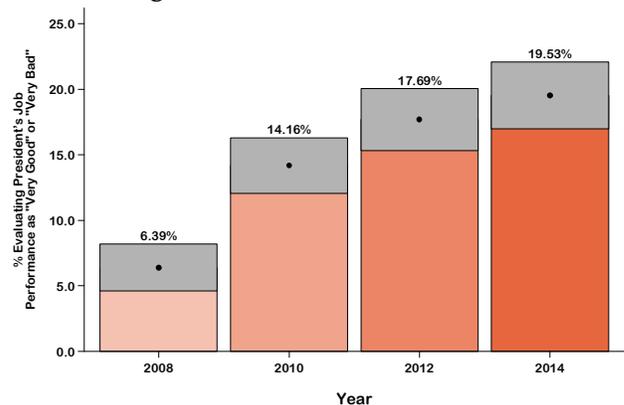
AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – February 16, 2015

Response to Argentine Prosecutor's Death Highlights Polarization and Mistrust of Institutions

By Mason Moseley, University of Pennsylvania

On January 18, 2015, only hours before presenting his case against current Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in a special parliamentary hearing, federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman was found dead in his Puerto Madero apartment from a single gunshot wound to the head. Nisman had been investigating the devastating 1994 terrorist attack on a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires (the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina - AMIA*) for ten years, and alleged that the current government had attempted to cover up Iran's involvement in the attack in exchange for improved terms of trade. It was even revealed that he had sought arrest warrants for President Kirchner and her Minister of Foreign Affairs, Héctor Timerman, in the days before coming forth with his charges.¹ While investigators have yet

Figure 1. Increased Polarization in Approval of Argentina's President, 2008-2014



Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; Draft0912

to make a definitive determination regarding the nature of Nisman's death, a poll reported by *The Economist* showed that over seventy percent of *porteños* (residents of Buenos Aires) believe Nisman was murdered (*The Economist* 2015).

¹ For more details on the Nisman case, see *La Nación* for local coverage in Spanish (www.lanacion.com.ar/la-muerte-de-alberto-nisman-

t53089) or the *New York Times* for coverage in English (www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/world/whodunit-in-obsessed-nation-question-becomes-who-didnt.html).

Argentines have responded to Nisman's death with incredulity, anger, and resignation, as many believe it signals another blow to the democratic institutions of a country long stricken by institutional weakness and high levels of corruption (Levitsky and Murillo 2005). Setting aside the considerable personal tragedy of the situation, the country's response highlights two important trends in Argentine public opinion: 1) the deepening of political polarization between pro- and anti-*Kirchneristas* and 2) widespread mistrust of formal political institutions, and belief that the political system is fundamentally corrupt. In this *Topical Brief*, I assess public opinion on these two dimensions using data from the AmericasBarometer.^{2,3}

Since her election in 2007, President Kirchner has increasingly become a lightning rod for Argentine public opinion. More brash in her public persona than her husband and predecessor, Néstor Kirchner, and more uncompromising in her pursuit of political goals, Cristina Kirchner has won many devout followers and

detractors alike. Figure 1 illustrates the extent to which these divisions have grown between 2008 and 2014.⁴ In this six-year period, the percentage of respondents who answered that the president was doing either a "Very bad" or "Very good" job more than tripled, and the portion of individuals who maintained neutral views of Kirchner fell from nearly fifty percent to less than one in three. Put simply, Argentines' views of the president have moved towards the poles since her tenure began.

When newspapers began reporting Nisman's death, both Argentina's fragmented opposition and the government moved swiftly to shape the narrative surrounding the tragedy. Kirchner's opponents, including the country's largest media conglomerate and newspaper, *Clarín*, sought to implicate the government in the death of a responsible civil servant who possessed damning evidence that could destroy Kirchner. Conversely, the President herself first lamented Nisman's apparent "suicide," and then only days later pivoted and suggested Nisman was merely a pawn in a larger conspiracy to discredit her government. Many in Argentina have interpreted the news through these

² Prior issues of the *Insights Series* can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which this report is based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>.

³ Funding for the 2014 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Vanderbilt University. This *Brief* is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of USAID or any other supporting agency.

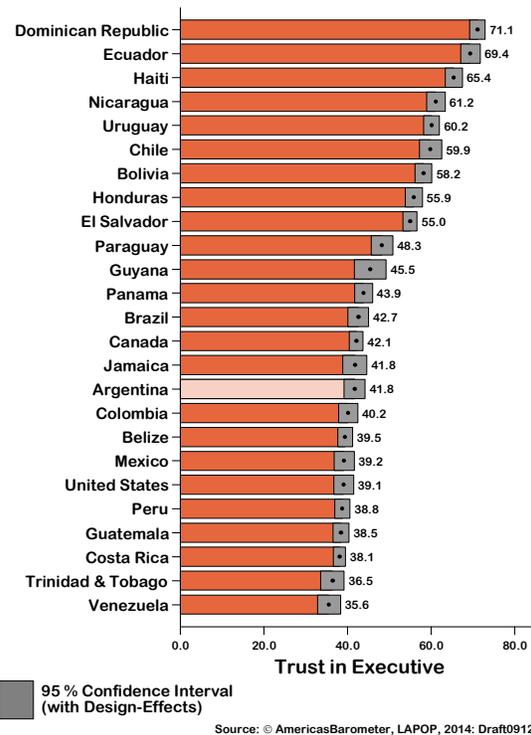
⁴ Figure 1 is drawn from the following question: **M1.** Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner? (1) Very good (2) Good (3) Neither good nor bad (fair) (4) Bad (5) Very bad. Figure 1 displays the percentage of respondents who responded either "Very good" or "Very bad" from 2008 to 2014.

partisan lenses, further underlining the growing reality that the country is deeply polarized.

The second important trend highlighted by the response to Nisman’s death is Argentines’ lack of faith in the country’s formal political institutions and processes. Argentina has typically ranked low even by Latin American standards in terms of system support (LAPOP 2008-2014), and this crisis has highlighted citizens’ distrust of many of the key institutional actors involved in the AMIA case, and now in the investigation of Nisman’s death. Trust in the judicial system, executive, national legislature, and political parties fell between 2012 and 2014, and will likely continue to plummet with the current scandal (though LAPOP’s time series does not extend to this point). Trust in the executive in particular experienced a precipitous fall between 2012 and 2014, dropping by nearly twenty points on a 100-point scale to a score of 41.8, which places Argentina in the bottom half of this category regionally (Figure 2).⁵ In general, Argentines seem reluctant to place their faith in any institutional actor, making it all the more difficult for many to interpret the events of recent weeks and believe justice for the victims is imminent.

⁵ Trust in the executive is measured with the following question: **B21A**. To what extent do you trust the President/Prime Minister? Respondents answered using a 1-7 scale, which was then rescaled from 0 to 100.

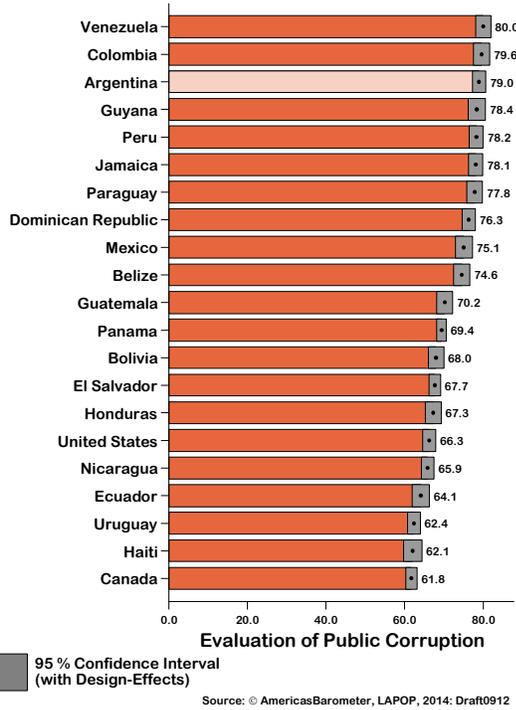
Figure 2. Trust in the Executive in the Americas, 2014



By regional standards, Argentina ranks close to the top in public perceptions of corruption (LAPOP 2014; Figure 3).⁶ The absence of a commonly held trusted authority that individuals believe could objectively investigate both Nisman’s allegations against the government and the circumstances surrounding his death has likely left many Argentines doubting they will ever know the truth of the events surrounding Nisman’s death.

⁶ Figure 3 plots perceptions of corruption according to responses to the following question: **EXC7**. Taking into account your own experience or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is: (1) Very common (2) Common (3) Uncommon or (4) Very uncommon? For this report, this variable has been rescaled from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating a belief that corruption is more common.

Figure 3. Perceptions of Corruption in the Americas, 2014



Thousands plan to attend a mass demonstration on February 18 (dubbed #18F on Twitter) organized by federal prosecutors in Nisman’s memory, reinforcing the country’s continued reliance on protest demonstrations as a form of democratic representation in the absence of trusted formal institutions (Moseley 2014).

As others have noted, much remains to be determined in both the investigation of Nisman’s death and his allegations against the government (e.g. Zraick 2015), but the consequences appear serious regardless. If prosecutors find that Nisman committed suicide, it represents yet another setback in the investigation of the deadliest terrorist

attack in Argentine history, which has gone unsolved for more than twenty years. The public’s response to his death also further underscores the depth of political divisions in Argentina, and the profound mistrust of democratic institutions that have yet to show marked improvement – and have from some perspectives, deteriorated – in more than thirty years of democratic governance.

If Nisman was murdered, the implications are clearly worse, revealing either the complicity of domestic actors in the killing of a public servant, or the state’s inability to protect a man whom many suspected, including the prosecutor himself, was in danger (*La Nación* 2015). Not to mention that if Nisman’s allegations against the government are corroborated, it would reveal unprecedented corruption at the very highest levels of Argentine democracy, and a government willing to barter justice for the families of the eighty-five AMIA victims in exchange for political and economic gain. Prosecutor Gerardo Pollicita issued formal charges against the president on February 13, and an investigation into Nisman’s claims is pending.

With the presidential election approaching in October, and Kirchner constitutionally prohibited from seeking a third term, 2015 promises to be a pivotal year in determining the future of Argentina’s democracy.

References

Levitsky, Steven and M. Victoria Murillo. 2005. *Argentine Democracy: The Politics of Institutional Weakness*. Pennsylvania State University Press.

Moseley, Mason. 2014. *From Ballots to Blockades: The Normalization of Protest in Latin American Democracies*. Doctoral dissertation: Vanderbilt University.

Zraick, Karen. Feb. 7, 2015. "The Mysterious Death of Alberto Nisman." *The New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/02/07/world/americas/08nisman.html>

The Economist. Feb. 6, 2015. "Whoddunit? Argentina's Scandal-Struck President." <http://espresso.economist.com/2dda6cb791405d0a19da2904062a6924?fsrc=scn%2Fesp%2Ffb>

La Nación. Jan. 19, 2015. "Nisman: Yo puedo salir muerto de esto." <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1761275-alberto-nisman-yo-puedo-salir-muerto-de-esto>

Mason Moseley is a postdoctoral fellow at the Penn Program on Democracy, Citizenship and Constitutionalism (DCC) at the University of Pennsylvania. He can be reached at Moseley@sas.upenn.edu.

Full results of the 2014 AmericasBarometer and previous rounds can be consulted on-line at www.LapopSurveys.org. The full data set is available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.