

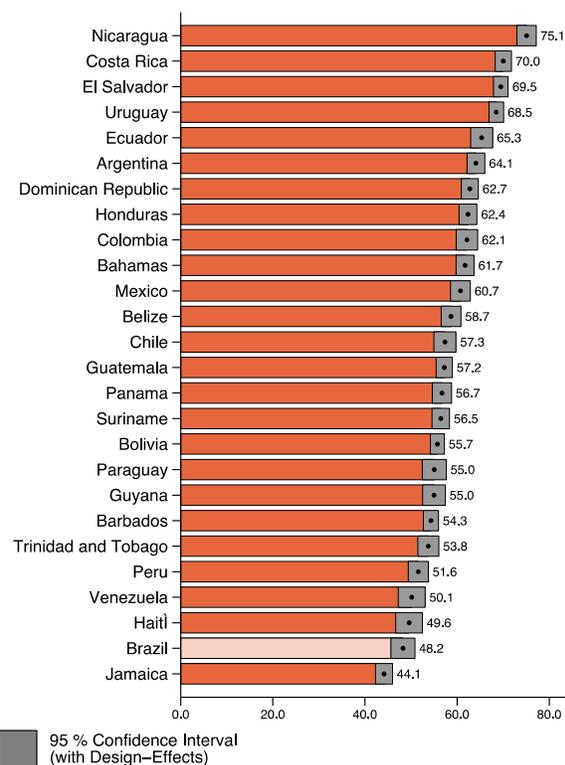
AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – April 1, 2016

Amid Brazil's Crises, Low and Declining Respect for Political Institutions

By Guilherme Russo, Vanderbilt University

The year 2016 will be long remembered in Brazil. Latin America's largest country is battling its worst recession in modern history,¹ the spread of the Zika virus, the collapse of a mining dam that produced a major environmental catastrophe,² and a sweeping political crisis. In this *Topical Brief*,^{3,4} I show that the Brazilian public has exceptionally low respect for its political institutions, and mean levels of respect decreased significantly in recent years. Figure 1 puts Brazil's low score in comparative perspective, via data from the 2014/15 round of the *AmericasBarometer*: even prior to the current political crisis, the Brazilian public registered among the lowest with only 48.2 degrees of respect for the country's political institutions— ahead

Figure 1. Average Degrees of Respect for Political Institutions, 2014/15



¹ Estimates suggest that the Brazilian economy will shrink by roughly 3% this year, which combined with a similar result in 2015 will collectively be the largest recession since 1901, according to data from the national government's Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA). See Biller (2016).

² A mining dam operated by multi-national corporation Samarco collapsed in Mariana, state of Minas Gerais, producing a slow-moving tide of 50 million cubic meters of toxic mud that took over entire municipalities. See Douglas (2015). On Zika, see Romero (2015a).

³ Prior issues of the *Insights Series* are at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

⁴ Funding for the AmericasBarometer project has come from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the Tinker Foundation, 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.

only of Jamaica, and just behind Venezuela and Haiti.⁵

It is within this already skeptical climate that corruption investigations involving the state-controlled oil company Petrobras began in 2014,⁶ with numerous top executives from construction companies and senior politicians placed under investigation. In a recent list disclosed by the Brazilian Supreme Court, 49 top politicians from 6 different parties have faced scrutiny for involvement in the Petrobras corruption scheme. Currently, Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff is facing an impeachment process over allegations of doctoring government fiscal accounts and being negligent while chairwoman of Petrobras (Romero 2015b). Mr. Eduardo Cunha, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, who accepted the petition requesting the impeachment of the president, is also under investigation for allegedly having secret bank accounts in Switzerland, and participating in money laundering schemes (Boadle and Miller 2015).

The overarching political crisis that is sweeping the country seems to be an outcome and affirmation of Barry Ames' claim, in his 2001 book on the Brazilian democracy, that the country's "political institutions simply work badly" (p. 3). Ames (2001) argues that because of

Brazil's political structure, politicians are not accountable to ordinary voters, but instead are incentivized to represent the interests of very narrow groups and distribute goods to political benefactors.

In light of these system failings, how has the Brazilian public evaluated its country's political institutions? Not only did Brazil rank as the second lowest in the comparison across countries, but it is also fair to say that the accumulation of recent corruption scandals involving politicians from multiple parties and the perception that the political class has done nothing to address the root factors of these scandals have led Brazilians to become largely dissatisfied with the country's political institutions.⁷

In fact, one can surmise that respect for political institutions has reached a new nadir today, compared to the past. While we do not yet have a new round of survey data with which to assess that expectation, it is in fact the case that respect for political institutions in Brazil had been declining in the years leading up to the current political crisis. As Figure 2 shows, the Brazilian public expressed a higher level of respect for political institutions in 2010, but then a significantly lower level in 2012, and then even lower respect in 2014.

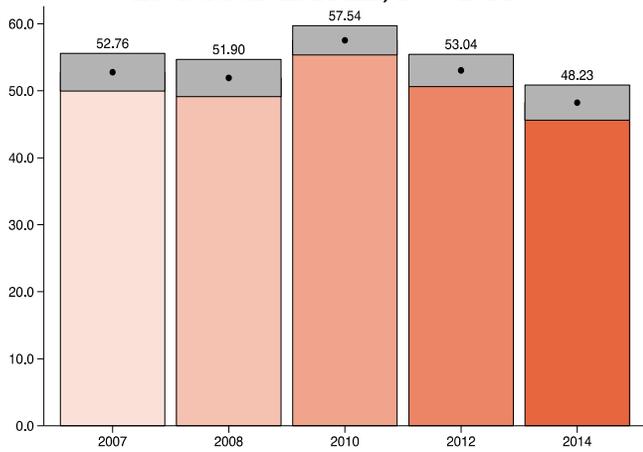
⁵ B2. To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)? Responses were coded on a 1-7 scale, where 7 indicates "a lot"; the variable has been recoded here to run from 0 to 100. The ranking presented in Figure 1 is largely stable to controlling for presidential approval, although

Haiti drops a position when this control is included, making Brazil the third lowest in the comparison across countries.

⁶ For a short summary of the scandal, see Beauchamp (2016).

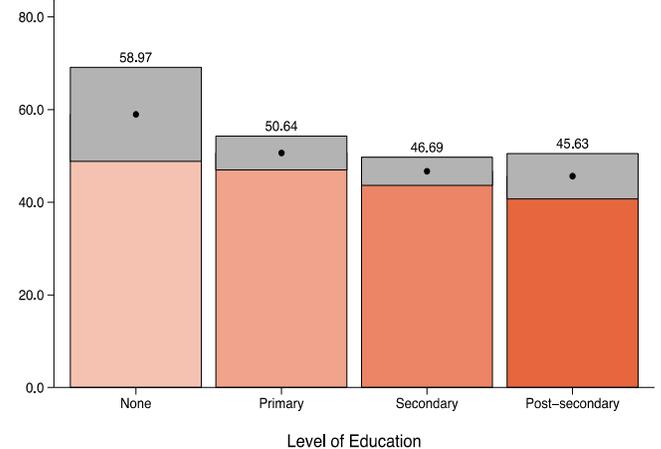
⁷ The Brazil AmericasBarometer national survey was conducted from March 21st to April 27th, 2014.

Figure 2. Average Level of Respect for Political Institutions in Brazil, 2007-2014



Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; Merged Rev3.0_W

Figure 3. Average Level of Respect for Political Institutions by Level of Education in Brazil, 2014



Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; Merged Rev3.0_W

Interestingly, the low level of respect for political institutions in Brazil is especially marked among those with more years of formal education. Although low levels of respect for the institutions seem to be generalized within the country, Figure 3⁸ indicates that those with secondary and post-secondary education have particularly low levels of respect. This difference is statistically significant after controlling for a number of factors including age of respondent, ethnicity, region of the country, support for democracy, and disapproval for President Rousseff (analysis available from author upon request).

The year ahead promises additional challenges larger than just hosting the Summer Olympics for Brazil. As Rousseff's government is confronted

with the task of making the country grow economically again, the President will also have to gather congressional support to avoid the advancement of the impeachment process in spite of the recent news that the Vice-President's party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), has selected to break away from the governing coalition. Additionally, it would not be surprising if the overall discontent with the political establishment and country's institutions engenders more public demonstrations against the current government and the political class, in general.

David Easton's (1975) reasoning from 41 years ago is still relevant today: it will likely take years for Brazilians to re-fill the reservoir of support for the country's political institutions,

⁸ ED. How many years of schooling have you completed?

Responses were given in the total number of years, and then recoded into levels of education.

especially considering that institutional reforms to promote more accountability for politicians are nowhere on the horizon.

References

Ames, Barry. 2001. *The Deadlock of Democracy in Brazil*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Beauchamp, Zack. 2016. "Brazil's Petrobras scandal could bring down its government. Here's why." *Vox*, <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/4/11161792/petrobras-brazil-lula> (Accessed March 23, 2016)

Biller, David. 2016. "Brazil Heads for Worst Recession since 1901, Economists Forecast." *Bloomberg*, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-04/brazil-analysts-ring-in-new-year-with-deeper-recession-forecast> (Accessed January 22, 2016).

Boadle, Anthony, and John Miller. 2015. "Brazil lower house speaker under pressure over Swiss accounts." *Reuters*, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-brazil-corruption-cunha-idUKKCN0RW06520151002> (Accessed January 22, 2016)

Douglas, Bruce. 2015. "Brazil's Slow-Motion Environmental Catastrophe Unfolds." *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/nov/13/brazils-slow-motion-environmental-catastrophe-unfolds> (Accessed January 22, 2016)

Easton, David. 1975. "A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support." *British Journal of Political Science* 5(4): 435-457.

Romero, Simon. 2015a. "Alarm Spreads in Brazil over a Virus and a Surge in Malformed Infants." *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/31/world/americas/alarm-spreads-in-brazil-over-a-virus-and-a-surge-in-malformed-infants.html> (Accessed January 22, 2016)

_____. 2015. "Faced with Many Crises, Brazil Focuses on Dilma Rousseff's Impeachment Case." *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/world/americas/faced-with-many-crises-brazil-focuses-on-dilma-rousseffs-impeachment-case.html?ref=topics&r=0> (Accessed January 22, 2016)

Guilherme Russo is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at Vanderbilt University. He can be reached at guilherme.russo@vanderbilt.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.