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What is This?
Attitude Variability Among Latin American Publics: How Party System Structuration Affects Left/Right Ideology

Imke Harbers¹, Catherine E. de Vries², and Marco R. Steenbergen³

Abstract

Political scientists often describe party competition, political behavior or public preferences in left/right terms. Nevertheless, the usefulness of the concepts “left” or “right” is rarely explored. This study assesses whether the left/right continuum resonates with publics in developing Latin American democracies. Using data from the 2008 wave of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the authors measure variability in left/right self-placement in three Latin American countries, namely, Ecuador, Mexico, and Chile. Building on the approach developed by Alvarez and Brehm for public opinion in the United States, the authors explore (a) the extent to which voters in Ecuador, Mexico, and Chile possess predictable left/right positions and (b) whether predictability can be attributed to individual- and country-level characteristics. At the individual level, the authors show that variability decreases with political sophistication. At the country level, they find that a lower degree of programmatic party system structuration leads to higher levels of response variation. Mapping the variability in left/right preferences

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provides important insights into the structure of public opinion and contours of political behavior in Latin America and how they differ from those of other regions such as North America. In addition, this study brings to bear important new individual-level insights into recent political developments in the Latin American region, especially the so-called left turn in Latin American politics.

Keywords
Latin America, left/right ideology, public opinion, response variation, party system structuration

Political positions and preferences are often expressed in left/right terms. Although left/right semantics have been found to provide significant leverage in the study of politics in Western Europe, the usefulness of these concepts in the developing democracies of Latin America remains highly contentious. Many observers have pointed out that one key characteristic of democracies in Latin America is the relative weakness of the left/right dimension as a functional homogenizing cleavage (e.g., Dix, 1989; Roberts, 2002), whereas other mechanisms—such as clientelism, patronage, and personalized politics—play a much more important role in linking voters to parties (e.g., Levitsky, 2003). Yet despite the widespread skepticism about the usefulness of left/right labels in the region, the terms continue to be used frequently not only by academics but also by commentators and political elites. This paradox has recently become evident in the debate about Latin America’s “left turn,” which has brought to power a series of governments, whose policy preferences are considered to be leftist. The election of these governments has led to a discussion about the underlying causes of this regionwide trend. Have electorates shifted massively to the left? How stable and durable will this shift be? We aim to contribute to the discussion through an analysis of the strength of attitudes underlying left/right self-placement in the electorate.

Building on the approach developed by Alvarez and Brehm (1995, 1998, 2002) for public opinion in the United States, this study seeks to make two contributions. First, we explore whether the left/right dimension resonates with Latin American citizens. More specifically, we analyze the extent to which voters in Ecuador, Mexico, and Chile possess predictable left/right positions. Discussions about shifts to the left of mass publics are useful only to the degree that survey responses reflect stable dispositions. This is captured by our notion of response variability. Second, we examine how personal predispositions and characteristics of the political environment influence variability in left/right