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Social Capital in the Americas: Participation in Parents' Associations

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Participation in school-based parents' associations is considered an essential form of social capital. In fact, Robert Putnam believes that the Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA), the distinctive setting for parents' participation in school issues in the United States, is an important formal form of civic engagement because "parental involvement in the educational process represents a particularly productive form of social capital" (1995: 69; see also Putnam, no date). The Office for National Statistics of Great Britain, for example, uses participation of parents in school associations as one of multiple indicators of social capital at the national level (Harper and Kelly 2003).

In this issue of the AmericasBarometer *Insights* series¹, we continue exploring the different

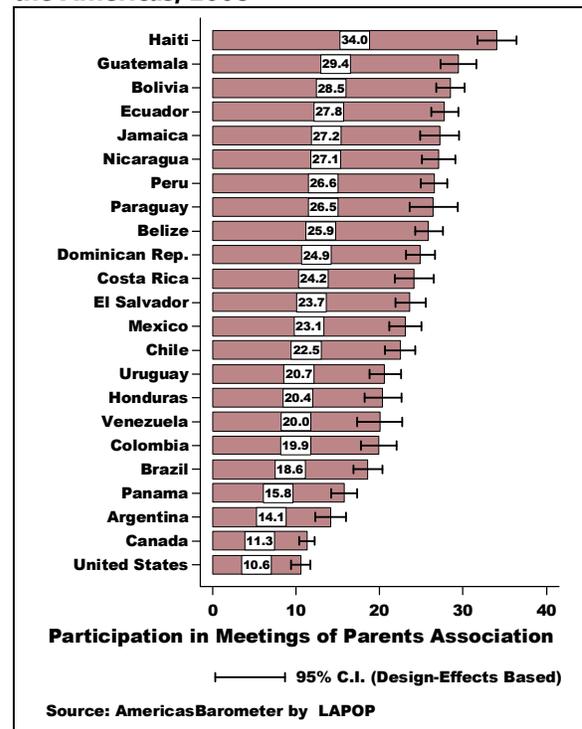
* The *Insights* Series is co-edited by Professors Mitchell A. Seligson and Elizabeth Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found in: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications The data

forms of civic participation that constitute social capital as understood by Putnam (1995). Specifically, we explore the levels of parents' participation in their children's schools in the Americas. This exploration is based in the 2008 AmericasBarometer of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). This survey was carried out in twenty-three countries in the Americas with a total of 38,053 respondents. Among the survey items related to civic participation, parent participation in associations was one of the first organizations about which respondents were prompted with the following question:

CP6. Meetings of a parents association at school? Do you attend them at least once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year, or never?²

Figure 1
Participation of Parents in School Meetings in the Americas, 2008



in which they are based can be found at: www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets

² The non-response rate for this question was 1.5 percent for the sample as a whole

This item measures the frequency with which people attend meetings of parents associations. Figure 1 shows the results based on this question after converting the responses to a 0-to-100 scale in which 100 represents the highest rate of participation (at least once a week) and 0 the lowest (none).³

Although the levels of participation in parents association meetings are rather low in comparison with the levels of religious participation (see previous *Insights*), there are significant variations between countries regarding the involvement of parents in school associations. Haiti is at the top of the list with a score of 34 points (on the 0-to-100 scale). Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, Jamaica, and Nicaragua also have important levels of parent participation. In contrast, more developed countries, such as the United States and Canada are at the bottom of the list.

Indeed, these differences may be influenced by some characteristics of the populations, namely, the number of school-age children in the household where the question is asked, whether people live in rural areas or not, and their level of wealth. However, when we examined the data controlling for age, gender, education, size of city, wealth and number of school-age children, the analysis did not return significantly different results.⁴ The distribution of countries basically remained the same. In other words, basic demographic characteristics are not enough to explain the variations of participation in parents associations across the Americas. Therefore we analyzed the data taking contextual variables into consideration.

³ Much of the funding for the 2008 round came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Significant sources of support were also the IADB, the UNDP, the Center for the Americas, and Vanderbilt University.

⁴ Analyses in this paper were conducted using Stata v10, and have been adjusted to accommodate the effects of complex sample designs.

In fact, Figure 1 suggests that participation in parents associations might be related to the levels of development in each country.

The Determinants of Participation in Parents' Associations

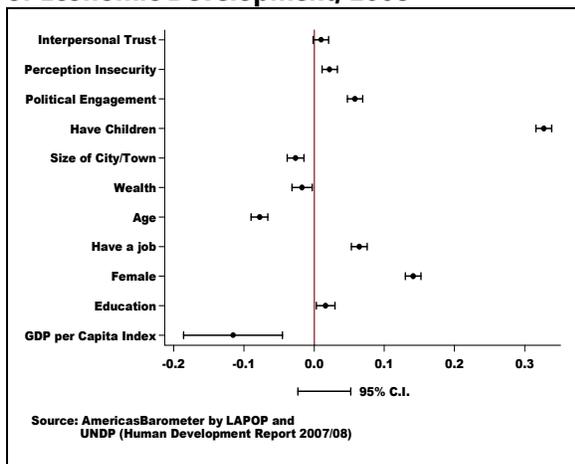
As in every social phenomenon, parent participation is influenced by several factors at different levels. In this report we now explore personal attitudes, such as interpersonal trust. We also examine whether feelings of insecurity and political engagement⁵ lead to increased participation. As can be seen in the literature (Khan 2006), we expect that well-educated parents and women would be more inclined to attend meetings of school-based organizations of parents than non-educated people and men. Regarding their attitudes, we also expect that interpersonal trust as well as political engagement will be conducive to parent participation. In contrast, we anticipate that feelings of insecurity due to crime will depress parental participation based on the assumption that crime keeps people away from public spheres.

But again, personal characteristics might not be sufficient to explain changes in social capital across countries; hence, we also explore whether contextual variables, specifically country wealth and literacy, affect parent participation. This analysis was carried out using a Hierarchical Linear Model, which combines individual and contextual (national) variables in predicting parents' participation in school meetings. We concentrate the analysis on the Latin American and Caribbean countries.

⁵ Political engagement is a composite variable created using two items included in the AmericasBarometer. These items are: **POL1**. How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?, and **POL2**. How often do you discuss politics with other people: Daily; A few times a week; A few times a month; Rarely or Never? The responses were recoded to a 0-to-100 scale, and then averaged. A 100 score represents the highest level of political engagement.

Figure 2 shows that parents' participation in school gatherings is higher among the well-educated, women, the younger population, and the inhabitants of small cities and rural areas. As expected, parent participation increases with the number of children: the more children in the household the higher parent participation (actually, this variable was included as a control), even though, as noted above, it does not change the rank order we observed in Figure 1. Age is also strongly relevant, as older people participate less. We also find that parents' participation is more frequent among those who are more politically engaged, this is, people more interested and who participate more in politics. An interesting finding is that employed people tend to be more responsive to school meetings than those who are not, suggesting that involvement in school activities is not constrained by whether parents are employed or not.

Figure 2
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Parents' Participation in School Meetings in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of Economic Development, 2008

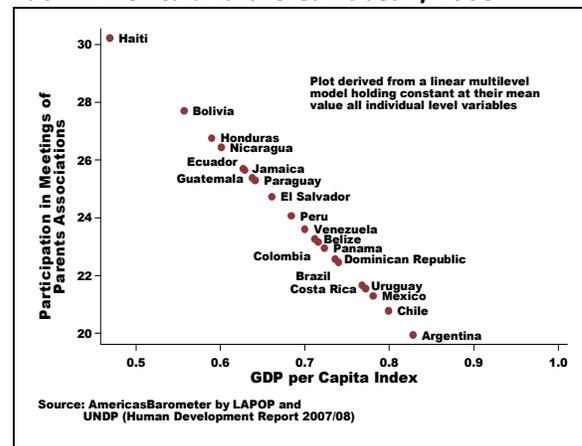


Another interesting finding shows that perceptions of insecurity *increase* parents' participation in school meetings. This result contradicts our expectation that insecurity would deter participation; rather, it reveals that feelings of insecurity produced by a hazardous

environment motivate parents to become more involved in school meetings, no doubt as an expression of their concern for the safety of their children.

As we have seen in previous *Insights* bulletins, an interesting result emerges when examining the effect of national wealth measured through country GDP per capita indexes. According to the results shown in Figure 2, attendance at school meetings is lower in wealthier countries. That is, the richer the country is, the less parents' participate, all other variables being held constant. This is clearly seen in Figure 3. The graph shows the **predicted** scores of parent participation in each country according to GDP per capita. Respondents living in Haiti, Bolivia, Honduras, and Nicaragua, the poorest countries in the region, exhibit the highest scores on the scale of participation in parents' meetings. Conversely, as in the case of religious participation (see previous *Insights*), people living in the richest countries in Latin America--Argentina, Chile, and Mexico--tend to score lowest on participation at school meetings.

Figure 3
The Impact of Economic Development on Parents' Participation in School Meetings in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008

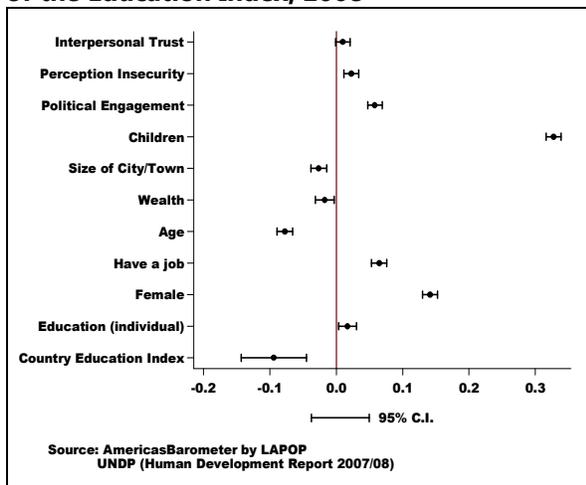


Another way to interpret this graph is that if a citizen from Haiti, for example, with a given set of socioeconomic characteristics were to move to Argentina or Chile, *ceteris paribus*, and none of

her individual characteristics were to change, the probability of this person participating in parents associations would be approximately ten percentage points lower than if this individual were to remain in Haiti.

Parents' participation was also regressed on the national education index with the same individual variables. The results are strikingly similar. As shown in Figures 4 and 5, education, measured using the UNDP country-level index, is negatively related to parents' participation in school meetings: the higher the level of education among the population, the lower the participation of parents in school meetings. To put it differently, countries with high levels of literacy yield low levels of parents' participation in school activities, even after controlling for number of children.

Figure 4
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Parents' Participation in School Meetings in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of the Education Index, 2008



These results suggest that contextual factors matter. High economic and social development, measured as country wealth and literacy, depress parents' participation at their children's schools, whereas low development seems to

increase parents' attendance at school meetings.⁶ The position of Haiti and Guatemala, two countries with very low levels of literacy is telling (see Figure 5). Such findings suggest that people in underdeveloped societies tend to make use of social networks more than those in wealthier societies in an effort to overcome their lack of resources. As we have seen in the case of religious participation (see previous *Insights*), people seek out civic engagement in churches and schools as a way to increase their own social opportunities.

It is interesting to note, however, that this is a particular effect of the development context. The personal economic situation does not seem to boost participation; rather, personal wealth depresses parents' participation at school. On the other hand, only individual level of education seems to improve civic engagement in schools.

While at the national level, education reduces parental participation; at the individual level it boosts it. There are two related issues that should be raised regarding the puzzling result of education. The first issue points to the fact that the sum of individual characteristics does not necessarily produce the same effect as when we consider the individual characteristics alone. A larger number of more literate people, *per se*, does not create an environment of participation. Contextual characteristics differ from individual characteristics, and their effects on social phenomena may vary, even when contextual characteristics and individual characteristics are one and the same.

This issue leads to our second point regarding this result. Problems in interpretation arise when using data that involve different levels of analysis. More specifically, a sort of ecological fallacy is created. When interpreting data of surveys such as the AmericasBarometer, we

⁶ We also tested the effect of the Human Development Index and the other individual variables on parents' participation with similar results.

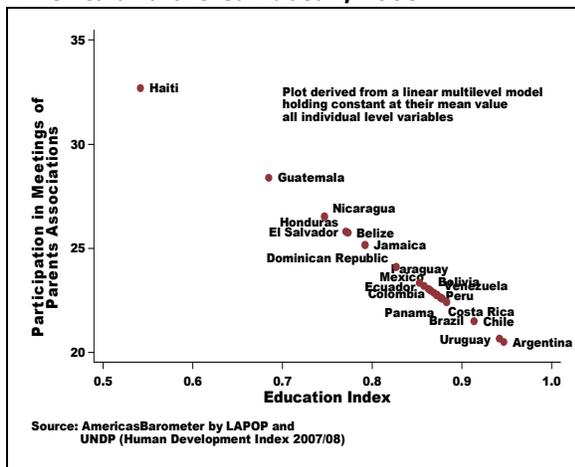
cannot assume that a pattern found from macro-level variables will be the same as the pattern resulting from the aggregation of individual characteristics (see Seligson 2002 for a comprehensive discussion about this). The results shown here have made it clear in this case that there are divergent effects for the same variable at two different levels. Had we analyzed national data using only the average of individual schooling, we may have erroneously concluded that national education increases personal participation. However, since we have incorporated national indexes in our measurements, which belong to a macro-level domain of analysis, we now know that the opposite is true. Our findings, thus, are that national levels of literacy, along with development, actually depress parent involvement in school meetings. In order to understand why low-literacy countries such as Haiti and Guatemala show high levels of parental participation, then, we must distinguish the complex effects of the same type of variable acting at two differing levels and yielding two different sets of conditions.

variety of individual-level characteristics but are also particularly determined by the levels of national development. Parents engage more in their children’s school in poor societies; women, the young, the educated, the employed, and rural parents are more involved in schools meeting than any other demographic group. If these citizens are active in their communities, interested in political issues, but concerned about the levels of public insecurity, their engagement in participation at schools is even greater.

Program and Policy Implications

How do we increase parents’ participation? How do we boost social capital? This report has pointed to different variables related to parents’ participation at their children’s schools. However, only some of them could be incorporated into programs designed to increase social capital. This report has shown that apart from contextual factors, individual level of education, employment, and political engagement can make a difference in parent participation and engagement.

Figure 5
The Impact of Education on Parents’ Participation in School Meetings in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



In sum, the results of the Americas Barometer 2008, carried out in twenty-one countries in the region, show that the degree to which citizens participate in parents’ meetings depends on a

Thus, any program aimed at stimulating civic engagement through the participation of parents at school should consider the importance of education. In other words, it would seem that the best way to motivate parents to attend meetings at their children’s schools and contribute to the networks of social goods is strengthening universal education. Yet, our findings here clearly show that as the citizenry becomes more educated and wealthier, parent participation in schools declines. This is a worrisome finding, but perhaps an inevitable consequence of the complex lives led by those in developed countries. Thus, *within* countries, the better educated participate more, whereas across countries, it is in the less well educated nations that participation is highest. As we have pointed out before, education has a different effect on participation at the national level than at the individual level.

We also found that overall political engagement also plays an important role in bolstering parental involvement at schools. Interest in politics is usually linked to community participation. In fact, community participation programs should also look at the schools as key nodes for expansion of social capital. Schools have always played a substantive role in enhancing human and social capital; they can serve as the launch pad of networks of mutual cooperation and social development.

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