



AmericasBarometer Insights: 2009 (No.25)*

Popular Support for a Government without Legislatures¹

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With the recent rise of populist governments that are increasingly executive dominant, one deepening concern in emerging democracies across Latin America is to what extent citizens are willing to support these governments (Hawkins 2003; Seligson 2007; Weyland 2001). This support may result in the undermining of liberal democracy by carrying out undemocratic practices, such as a possible removal of Congress by the executive.

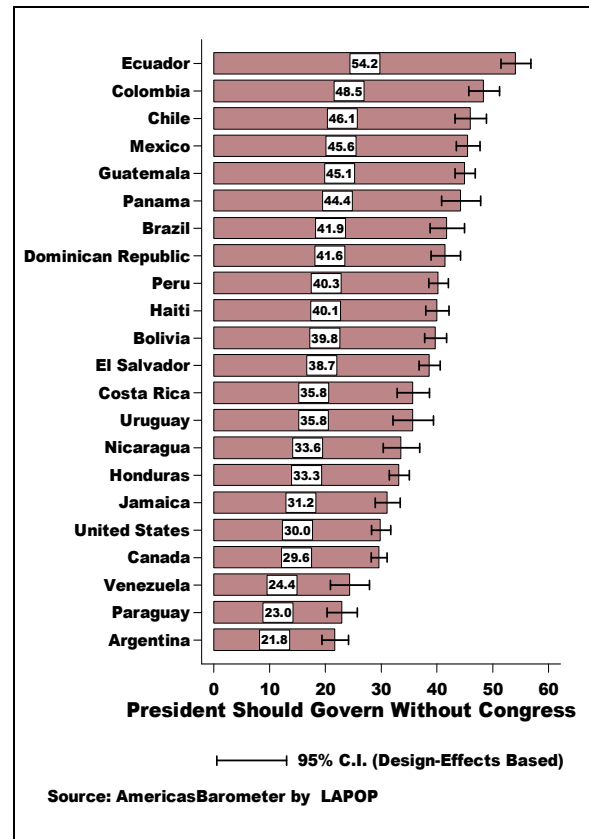
This paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* is the second article to examine citizens' support for the concentration of executive power, focusing on an item regarding support for government without legislatures included in the 2008 round of the Latin American Public

* 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 Insight series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey (others will be examined in future *Insights* studies).²

Figure 1. Average Support for the Executive to Govern Without the Legislature IF the Legislature Hinders the Work of the Government in the Americas, 2008



This survey involved face-to-face interviews conducted in 23 nations in Latin America and the Caribbean and a web survey in the United States (this question was not asked in Canada). Data from 22 of those national surveys are analyzed here.³ A total of 36,501 respondents were asked the following question:

² Funding for the 2008 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

³ Belize data are not available as of this writing.

POP102. When the legislature hinders the work of our government, our president/prime ministers should govern without the legislature, how much do you agree or disagree with that view?

Responses were rated on a 1-7 scale, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 7 means “strongly agree.”⁴

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Strongly disagree			Strongly agree				Doesn't know

Figure 1 exhibits national averages for the 22 countries in the sample.⁵ We first note that in only one country in the Americas, Ecuador, does average support exceed 50 on a 0-100 scale with 54.2 points. These high levels of support for executive concentration of power echo current presidential approvals in Latin America. For example, in Ecuador, President Rafael Correa attained the presidency running under the political platform for social and political *change*, and in September of 2008, more than 60% of Ecuadorians voted for a new constitution that would sharply expand the power of the President (Partlow and Kuffner 2008). Other countries, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Guatemala, also show high levels of support for concentration of power of the executive to govern without Congress, having averages above 45 points in a scale 0-100. At the other extreme, Paraguay and Argentina show the lowest averages in support for neutering the legislature in the Americas with 23 and 22 points, respectively.

It is worth mentioning that in Venezuela, as demonstrated in a previous report of this *Insight Series*, the average of citizen support for the

⁴ In order to make comparisons across questions and survey waves simpler; these responses were recorded on a 0-100 scale, where 0 indicates “strongly disagree” and 100 “strongly agree.”

⁵ Non-response was 8% for the sample as a whole.

executive to govern without a legislature remains fairly low (24) in comparison to the rest of the countries in the sample. Since legislative power in Venezuela has all but disappeared under President Chávez, it is interesting to note that citizens seem to be dissatisfied with this outcome.

Predicting Support for the Executive to Govern Without Legislatures

What explains these sharp differences across countries in the Americas? We focus first on the impact of variation in attitudes toward executive dominance by analyzing the effect of traditional socio-economic and demographic variables, such as levels of education, gender, wealth, and size of the city/town of residence.⁷

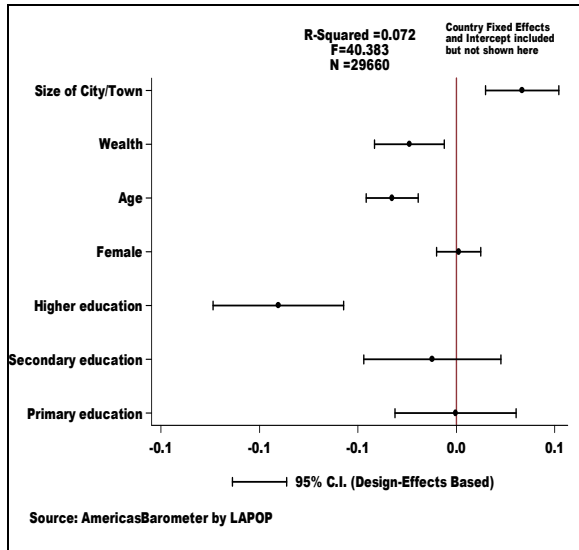
Figure 2 reveals the importance of socio-economic and demographic variables in explaining support for executive government without the legislature. Each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical “0” line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left of the “0” line a negative effect. If the effects are statistically significant, they are shown by confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot that do not overlap the vertical “0” line (at .05 or better). If they overlap the vertical line, the effects are statistically insignificant.

⁶ We examined contextual factors that might explain some of the national-level variation we found. However, multilevel analyses predicting support for the president in governing without the legislature with the conventional national characteristics, such as GDP, economic growth, and level of democracy, did not achieve statistical significance.

⁷ Because the average citizen in the United States and Canada score very high on socio-economic characteristics compared to those in the rest of the countries in the sample, we exclude these cases from the analysis.

Figure 2.

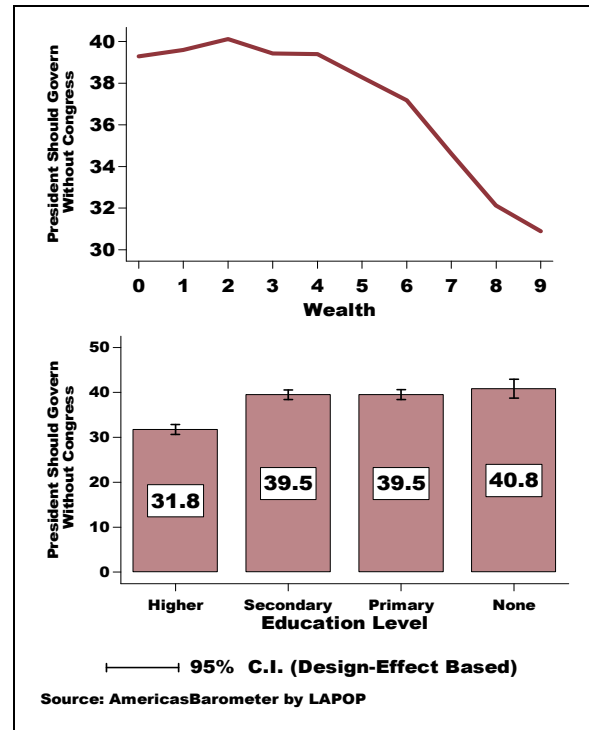
Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Average Support for the Executive to Govern Without the Legislature IF the Legislature Hinders the Work of the Government in Latin America, 2008



What is found in Figure 2 is that citizens living in bigger cities show higher levels of support for the concentration of executive power, after controlling for other individual level characteristics. In contrast, other things being equal, citizens who are more educated, wealthier, and older show significantly lower levels of support for this undemocratic belief. This finding mirrors a previous report in this series which focused on support for presidential limits on the voice and vote of opposition parties; citizens with the same characteristics show lower levels of support for executive concentration of power. Only gender did not reach statistical significance among the key demographic variables. But by far, the most important factor in explaining opposition to this undemocratic expansion of presidential power is education; the higher an individual’s education, the more strongly s/he would resist bypassing this key institution of democracy. The effects of education and wealth are better illustrated in Figure 3, shown by its sample means.

Figure 3.

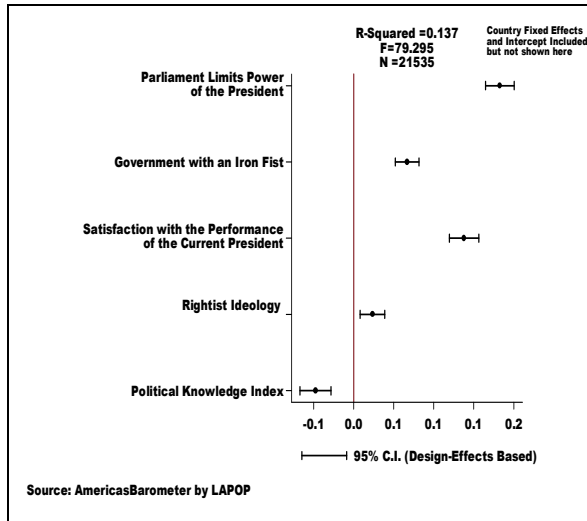
Wealth, Education, and Support for the Executive to Govern Without the Legislature IF the Legislature Hinders the Work of the Government in Latin America, 2008



In order to have a better understanding of the factors that influence support for executive dominance, we also examine the impact of some political attitudes and behaviors that may also play a central role in explaining this support. Figure 4 displays the impact of political attitudes on support for concentration of executive power. For instance, citizens who demonstrate more authoritarian attitudes, as expressed by support for an “iron fisted” government, express higher support for the executive to govern without a legislature. As with the same demographic and socio-economic characteristics, these results also mirror those of a previous report in this series in which citizens with similar characteristics tend to show higher support for the president limiting the voice and vote of opposition parties. By the same token, citizens who are more satisfied with the

performance of the incumbent president show higher support for the concentration of executive power when related to government without a legislature.

Figure 4.
Determinants of Average Support for the Executive to Govern Without Congress in the Americas, 2008



In other words, the more popular the president, the less support there is for the legislature, all other socio-economic and attitudinal variables analyzed thus far being held constant. Another interesting finding is the positive effect of those who believe that the parliament hinders the job of the president.⁸ Specifically, the higher the perception that the parliament is an obstacle to executive power, the higher the support for the president to govern without the legislature.⁹

⁸ This variable was measured by the question: To what extent does the legislature hinder the power of the president?

⁹ Given that the dependent variable asks about the extent to which citizens support government without Congress if the Congress is operating as an obstacle for the president; it is important to note that it is not a *normative* question about the importance of Congress, but about the *effectiveness* of political institutions (i.e. performance of the legislature vs. the executive). Consequently, trust or mistrust in the legislature may not be the best predictor for the dependent variable. For example, a citizen can be a convinced democrat and trust this institution but still think that when the institution's performance presents an obstacle to the president or prime minister, the country would be better off

Figure 4 also indicates the importance of ideology and political knowledge¹⁰ in explaining support for the executive concentration of power. As demonstrated in a previous report in this series (I0809), those who self-identify on the right show higher support for government without a legislature. In contrast, those who score high in the index of political knowledge reveal lower levels of this support. This finding suggests that a deeper understanding of the political world will make citizens more aware of the importance that the balance of power among democratic institutions represents for the persistence of democracy as a form of government. It is worth mentioning that all these variables are statistically significant after controlling for the perception of national and economic well being, political interest, as well as country effects and traditional socio-economic and demographic variables.¹¹

Program and Policy Implications

Because of Latin America's growing number of chief executives who have been trying to limit those who oppose "the people's will" (Seligson 2007), it is important to know the extent to which citizens are willing to support the concentration of executive power and how this support might weaken democracy. In this paper we found that citizens living in larger cities

without this institution. For this reason, the belief that the parliament limits the power of the president is a better predictor of support for the executive concentration of power than trust in the legislature (not shown in Figure 3). This idea is developed in:

Boidi, Maria Fernanda. 2009. Trust in Legislatures in Latin America: Ph.D. Dissertation. Department of Political Science, Vanderbilt University.

¹⁰ The Political Knowledge Index is measured through the following questions: GI1. What is the name of the current president of the (country)? GI2. What is the name of the President of (Congress) in (country)? GI3. How many (provinces) does the (country) have? GI4. How long is the (presidential/prime ministerial) term of office in (country)? GI5. What is the name of the current president of Brazil?

It is worthy of note that the question related to Congress was not asked in Bolivia.

¹¹ Refer to the Appendix for a detailed display of those effects.

show higher levels of support for the concentration of executive power, while wealthier and older citizens express lower levels of support. Most importantly, education shows the strongest negative effect on citizen's support for government without a legislature, highlighting the value of education as a catalyst of tolerant attitudes (Golebiowska 1995; Orcés 2008; Seligson, Cordova, and Moreno 2007). Consequently, it is imperative for democratic programs in Latin America to combine efforts to increase wealth and educational levels which in turn will allow for a stronger democratic political culture.

Similarly, the AmericasBarometer data in this short report suggest that citizens, when satisfied with the incumbent government's performance in general and who believe that the legislature hinders the power of the president, are more willing to support government without a legislature. Thus, another implication of this paper is that elected representatives need to aim at decreasing the negative perception that people have toward their legislature and increase political knowledge so that citizens better understand that a functioning democracy is possible only through a balance of power of all its institutions. For democracy to work and endure, legislatures need to persist as an institution, and for that to happen, they need citizen support.

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Appendix

**Table 1. Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Average Support for the President
To Govern Without Congress in the Americas, 2008**

	Coefficient.	t
Primary education	-0.000	(-0.02)
Secondary education	-0.012	(-0.69)
Higher education	-0.090*	(-5.36)
Female	0.001	(0.21)
Age	-0.033*	(-4.85)
Wealth	-0.024*	(-2.64)
Size of City/Town	0.033*	(3.53)
Mexico	0.060*	(4.76)
Guatemala	0.051*	(4.17)
El Salvador	0.017	(1.39)
Honduras	-0.021	(-1.75)
Nicaragua	-0.019	(-1.32)
Costa Rica	0.002	(0.13)
Panama	0.055*	(3.58)
Colombia	0.076*	(5.66)
Ecuador	0.156*	(8.39)
Bolivia	0.035*	(2.06)
Peru	0.032*	(2.71)
Paraguay	-0.070*	(-5.72)
Chile	0.066*	(4.86)
Brazil	0.033*	(2.32)
Venezuela	-0.067*	(-4.46)
Argentina	-0.082*	(-6.45)
Dominican Republic	0.031*	(2.31)
Haiti	0.018	(1.39)
Jamaica	-0.028*	(-2.23)
Constant	0.004	(0.32)
R-Squared	0.072	
Number of Obs.	29660	
* p<0.05		
Education level of Reference: None		
Country of Reference: Uruguay		

Table 2. Determinants of Average Support for the President to Govern Without Congress in the Americas, 2008

	Coefficient.	t
Political Knowledge Index	-0.048*	(-4.82)
Ideology Scale	0.023*	(2.97)
Satisfaction with the Performance of the Current President	0.138*	(14.71)
Government with an Iron Fist	0.067*	(8.91)
Parliament Limits Power of the President	0.183*	(20.05)
Political Interest	-0.010	(-1.20)
Perception of National Economic Situation	0.013	(1.47)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation	0.001	(0.17)
Wealth	-0.014	(-1.40)
Age	-0.049*	(-6.72)
Female	0.008	(1.12)
Education	-0.059*	(-6.29)
Size of City/Town	0.031*	(3.25)
Mexico	0.054*	(4.32)
Guatemala	0.039*	(3.11)
El Salvador	0.021	(1.74)
Honduras	0.011	(0.88)
Nicaragua	0.004	(0.22)
Costa Rica	-0.010	(-0.69)
Panama	0.072*	(5.16)
Colombia	0.053*	(4.08)
Ecuador	0.138*	(7.70)
Bolivia	0.039*	(2.35)
Peru	0.039*	(3.23)
Paraguay	-0.040*	(-3.16)
Chile	0.054*	(3.97)
Brazil	0.017	(1.16)
Venezuela	-0.043*	(-2.73)
Argentina	-0.068*	(-5.29)
Dominican Republic	0.015	(1.26)
Haiti	0.071*	(5.42)
Jamaica	0.001	(0.04)
Constant	0.036*	(3.25)
R-Squared	0.137	
Number of Obs.	21535	
* p<0.05		
Country of Reference: Uruguay		