



*AmericasBarometer Insights: 2008 (No.2)*  
**(Mis)Trust in Political Parties in Latin America**

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One of the main concerns about democratization is the apparently growing dissatisfaction with political parties. These institutions are essential to any stable liberal democracy since they perform critical functions such as aggregating and channeling citizens' interests and demands, and organizing competition for public office (Mainwaring and Scully 1995). However, in some contexts like Latin America, these mediating structures are failing to fulfill their main roles (UNDP 2004), which may help to explain the lack of trust in them.

This new paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* analyzes the extent to which people in the Americas trust political parties and what are the main determinants of these levels of trust. To answer these questions we query the 2008 database provided by the AmericasBarometer survey carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 22 nations in the Western hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> In this survey 36,501 respondents were asked the following question:

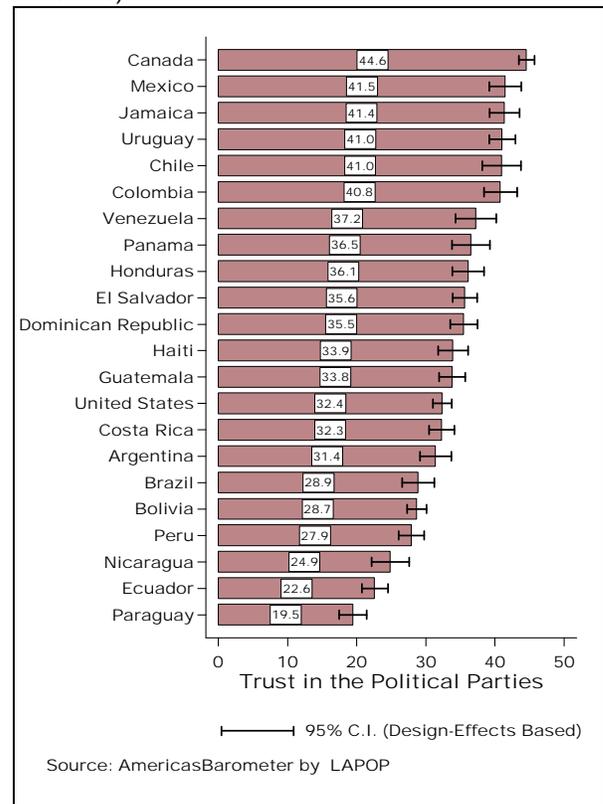
**B21.** To what extent do you trust the political parties?

Respondents placed their trust on a 1-7 scale, where 1 meant 'not at all' and 7 meant 'a lot'.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Not at all			A lot				Doesn't know

To make comparisons across questions and survey waves easier, these responses were recoded on a 0-100 scale.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 shows national averages for the 22 countries in the sample.

**Figure 1.**  
 Average Trust in the Political Parties in the Americas, 2008



<sup>1</sup> 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.  
<sup>2</sup> Non-response was 2.8% for the whole sample.

It is striking to note, first, that the average level of trust in political parties falls in the lower end of 0-100 in *every* country. Second, in this context of low confidence, significant variations among countries are evident. Citizens of Canada, Mexico, Jamaica, Uruguay, Chile, and Colombia express the highest averages, between 40.8 and 44.6 points, while at the other extreme, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Paraguay display dramatically lower scores; in none of these countries does average trust in parties exceed 25 points out of 100.

## Predicting Trust in Political Parties

What explains variation in trust in parties? We believe that long-term historical/contextual factors probably best explain national-level variation, which goes beyond the scope of this short paper, so we concentrate here on individual level factors and we first consider the following socio-economic and demographic characteristics: education, gender, age, wealth, and city/town size.<sup>3</sup> To assess their influence on trust in parties, we employ a linear regression model.<sup>4</sup> Since citizens in Canada and the United States hold sharply higher levels on these characteristics, we exclude these cases from the analysis.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Despite the cross-national variation displayed in Figure 1, multilevel analyses predicting trust in parties with the “usual suspects,” such as GDP, economic growth, and level of democracy, did not yield significant results. It is possible that other national-level data might explain the cross-national variation LAPOP has uncovered, but we leave that for future analyses.

<sup>4</sup> All statistical analyses in this paper were conducted using STATA v10 and results were adjusted for the complex sample designs employed.

<sup>5</sup> Given that levels of trust in political parties vary across countries, dummy variables for each country were also included in the model, using Uruguay as the base or reference country.

**Figure 2.**  
Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Average Trust in the Political Parties in Latin America, 2008

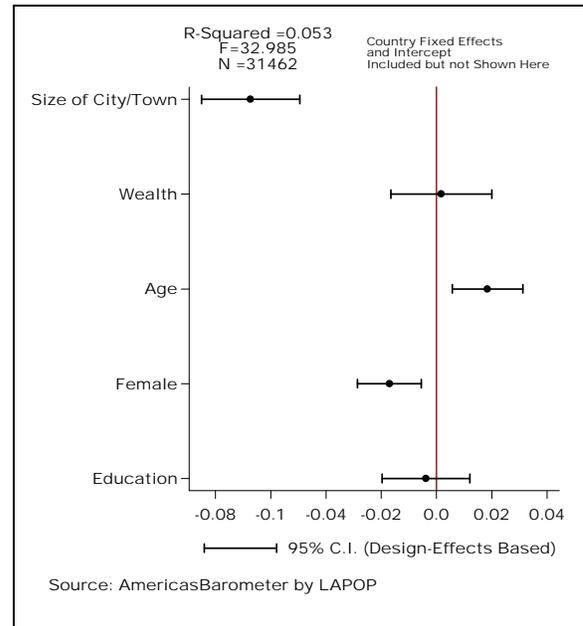
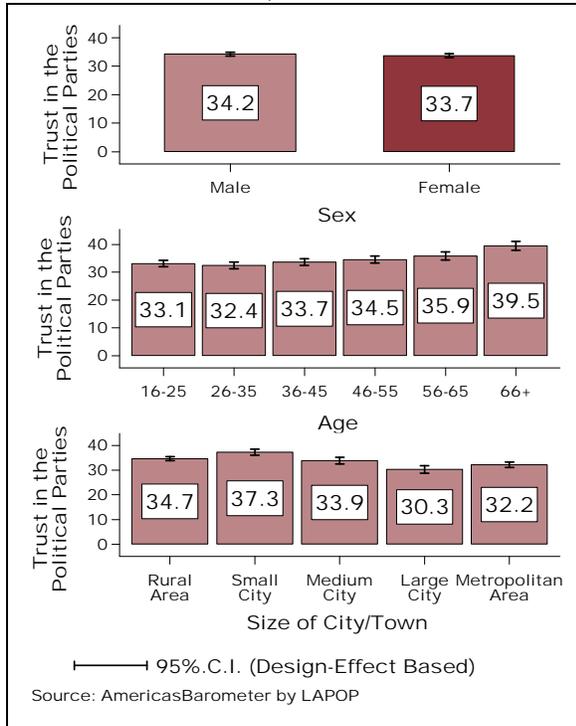


Figure 2 shows how individual-level socio-economic and demographic characteristics are related to trust in Latin America; that is, Figure 2 shows the influence of these variables on trust in political parties. It can be observed that three out of the five variables displayed in Figure 2 are statistically significant. This significance is graphically represented by a confidence interval that does not overlap the vertical “0” line (at .05 or better). When the dot, which represents the predicted impact of that variable, falls to the right of the vertical “0” line it implies a positive relationship whereas when it falls to the left it indicates a negative contribution. In this model, area size, age, and gender are statistically significant contributors. Holding constant the rest of variables, males in Latin America show higher levels of trust in political parties than women. We also see that older people trust more in parties than those who are younger. Finally, people living in rural areas or small towns tend to trust more in political parties than people living in large cities, *ceteris paribus*. It should be noted that the size of the effects of

these socioeconomic and demographic variables is relatively small.

The general relationship among these three variables and confidence in parties is shown in Figure 3, which depicts mean levels of trust by categories of these independent variables.

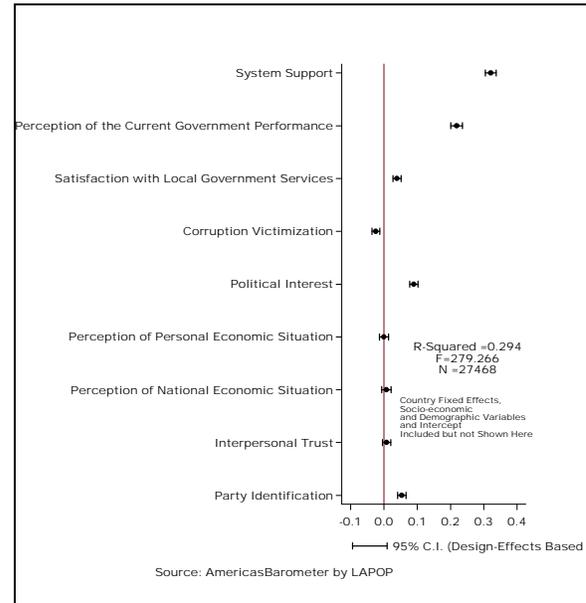
**Figure 3.**  
Gender, Age, Area Size, and Trust in the Political Parties in Latin America, 2008



The influence of socio-economic and demographic characteristics, in short, while statistically significant is fairly inconsequential in substantive terms, but we would be amiss in concluding that these are the only individual-level variables that matter. Rather, one would suspect that political attitudes, behaviors and evaluations also play an important role in trust in parties. As we indicated at the outset of this analysis, existing research suggests that citizens of Latin America may perceive that traditional political institutions, such as parties, fall short of meeting their needs. Figure 4 displays the results of an analysis using selected political

variables to help explain the low levels of confidence in parties in Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 4.**  
An Analysis of the Determinants of Average Trust in the Political Parties in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



The results indicate that one factor that has a relatively high impact on trust in political parties is the general phenomenon of “system support,” or a belief in the legitimacy of the system of government.<sup>7</sup> Although the casual arrow may go in both directions, it can still be said that the belief in the legitimacy of the political system as a whole is strongly related to trust in political parties.

<sup>6</sup> This analysis was carried out using a linear regression that also included the socioeconomic and demographic variables and the country dummies employed earlier. Figure 4 displays only the political variables. All the regressions performed can be found in Table 1 in the appendix. It is worth noting that age and gender lose significance once attitudes are included, suggesting that the effects of these socio-demographic variables is indirect.

<sup>7</sup> System Support Index is measured through the following questions: B1. To what extent do you believe the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial? B.2 To what extent do you respect the political institutions in (country)? B3. To what degree do you believe that the citizen’s basic rights are safeguarded by the political system in (country)? B4. To what degree do you feel proud of living in the political system in (country)? B6. To what degree do you think the political system in (country) should be supported)?

As some other studies of Latin American politics have pointed out (Hagopian 2005), perceptions of government *performance* are also important in explaining citizen's political confidence. In fact, this is precisely what we find: the higher the levels of satisfaction with government performance<sup>8</sup>, the higher the trust in political parties.

The effects of system support and perception of performance are particularly notable when contrasted with those explored earlier for socio-economic and demographic variables. In both cases, the effects of the attitudinal variables are substantively much greater than those we found for gender, age, and city/town size.

Not only is performance at the national level important. The analysis finds that performance at the local level is also relevant. Satisfaction with the services provided by local governments is a statistically significant factor explaining trust in political parties. Holding constant the other variables, the higher the satisfaction with local services, the higher the confidence in parties.

Apart from political perceptions and evaluations, personal experiences with some of the problems Latin America is facing have significant effects on trust in political parties as well<sup>9</sup>. Citizens who have been victims of corruption are likely to trust less in political parties, and the more times they have been victims the lower is their trust.

Political interest is also statistically significant. People interested in politics tend to trust parties more, and the same goes for those citizens who identified with any political party. Although this latter relationship could seem redundant, it is noteworthy, especially in a context like this

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<sup>8</sup> The Perception of the Government Performance Index was constructed from five items that asked to what extent people thought the current administration fights poverty, combats government corruption, promotes and protects democratic principles, improves the security of citizens, and combats unemployment

<sup>9</sup> We also considered that having been a victim of crime could affect trust in political parties. However, the inclusion of this variable in the regression analysis did not yield significant results.

where levels of party identification are so low. The percentage of people in the region as a whole who report having a party identification is only 33.9%.

Finally, although one might speculate that economic perceptions matter in determining trust in parties, once we include this overall measure of government efficacy in the equation, these variables become statistically insignificant.

## Policy Implications

Given the widespread agreement among scholars and practitioners on the importance of political parties for democracy, and the low levels of confidence that they arouse among Latin America citizens, it is reasonable to ask how trust in parties could be improved.

The AmericasBarometer data suggest that citizens are holding, not just particular politicians or administrations, but rather political parties responsible for what they deliver. This finding is captured by the strong relationship we find between the system support and performance variables, on the one hand, and trust in parties on the other. Therefore, in order to increase trust in political parties it would seem imperative to increase the belief among citizens that both the democratic system in general and specific incumbent regimes accomplish their objectives and satisfy people's demands at the national level (in terms of general performance), at the local level (in terms of service), and at the personal level (in terms of corruption victimization). That performance matters, after all, is what the eminent sociologist and political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset told us many decades ago (Lipset 1961). In this sense, we see as fruitful any efforts made on enhancing the rule of law; on delivering services; on fighting corruption, crime, and poverty; and, on promoting and protecting basic rights.

The analyses also suggest it could be helpful to work on achieving higher levels of political interest among citizens and stronger ties with parties.

In conclusion much of the confidence in political parties in the Americas we find is driven by political attitudes and evaluations that are related to issues of system effectiveness, at both national and local levels. The hard, often slow work of improving performance may be the most consequential way to improve trust in parties.

#### References

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Appendix: Determinants of Trust in Political Parties				
	Regression I		Regression II	
	Coef.	Err. est.	Coef.	Err. est.
Education	-0.003	(0.008)	-0.023*	(0.007)
Female	-0.017*	(0.005)	0.002	(0.005)
Age	0.018*	(0.006)	-0.003	(0.006)
Wealth	0.001	(0.009)	-0.004	(0.008)
Size of City/ Town	-0.067*	(0.009)	-0.024*	(0.007)
System Support			0.321*	(0.008)
Political Interest			0.089*	(0.006)
Perception of National Economic Situation			0.007	(0.007)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation			0.0001	(0.006)
Interpersonal Trust			0.008	(0.006)
Efficacy of the Current Government			0.218*	(0.008)
Party Identification			0.053*	(0.006)
Corruption Victimization			-0.024*	(0.006)
Satisfaction with local government services			0.039*	(0.006)
Mexico	-0.001	(0.011)	0.033*	(0.008)
Guatemala	-0.062*	(0.010)	0.004	(0.008)
El Salvador	-0.044*	(0.009)	0.017*	(0.008)
Honduras	-0.047*	(0.009)	0.055*	(0.008)
Nicaragua	-0.126*	(0.012)	-0.031*	(0.009)
Costa Rica	-0.071*	(0.009)	-0.056*	(0.008)
Panama	-0.037*	(0.012)	0.049*	(0.009)
Colombia	-0.005	(0.010)	0.004	(0.008)
Ecuador	-0.186*	(0.013)	-0.073*	(0.011)
Bolivia	-0.127*	(0.012)	-0.055*	(0.011)
Peru	-0.096*	(0.009)	0.011	(0.007)
Paraguay	-0.145*	(0.009)	0.003	(0.007)
Chile	0.0008	(0.012)	0.050*	(0.010)
Brazil	-0.089*	(0.010)	-0.008	(0.008)
Venezuela	-0.027*	(0.013)	0.046*	(0.009)
Argentina	-0.067*	(0.010)	0.015	(0.009)
Dominican Republic	-0.043*	(0.009)	-0.034*	(0.008)
Haiti	-0.064*	(0.011)	0.058*	(0.010)
Jamaica	-0.011	(0.010)	0.036*	(0.008)
Constant	-0.005	(0.008)	-0.0001	(0.007)
R-squared	0.053		0.294	
N.	31,462		27,468	
* p<0.05				