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Corruption Victimization by Public Employees[1]

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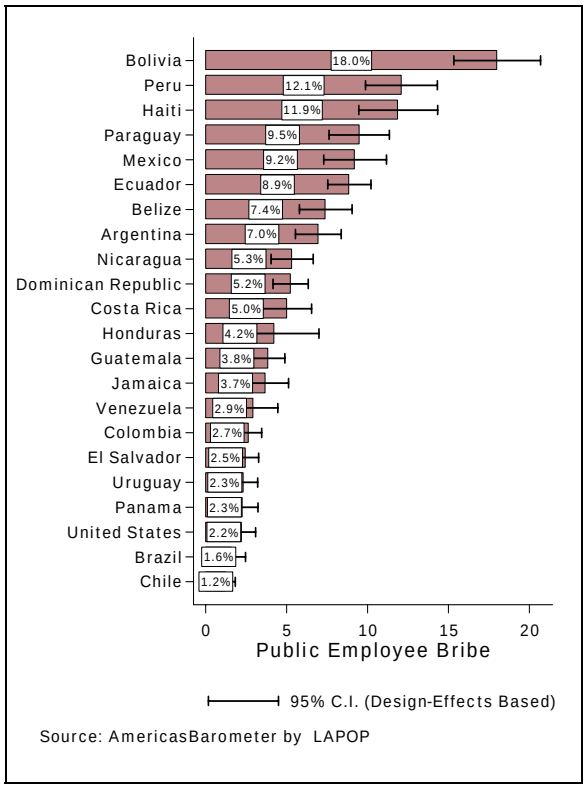
Corruption has become one of the major policy issues in emerging democracies around the world because of its demonstrated significant negative effects on the economy (Elliot 1997; Seyf 2001). That in turn, erodes the belief in the legitimacy of the political system (Seligson 2002), while weakening democracy more generally (Warren 2004) thus, making the consolidation of emerging democracies even more difficult. For example, one recent study argues that "when people lose confidence that public decisions are taken for reasons that are publicly available and justifiable, they often become cynical about public speech and deliberation" (Warren 2004: 328), two fundamental determinants of democracy. This paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insights Series* is the second one to examine the impact of corruption, concentrating on another question on corruption victimization included in the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project Survey (additional questions in this series will be examined in future *Insights* studies).[2] This survey involved face-to-face interviews conducted in most of Latin America and the Caribbean, and a web survey in the United States, involving national probability samples of 22 nations (this question was not asked in Canada).

Figure 1.
Percentage of the Population Victimized by Corruption by a Public Employee at least once in the past year in the Americas, 2008



LAPOP studies have usually employed the corruption victimization index.[3] However, in this study, we focus on the analysis of one of the components of that index, more specifically corruption victimization by a public official. A total of 34,469 respondents were asked the following question:

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

[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.

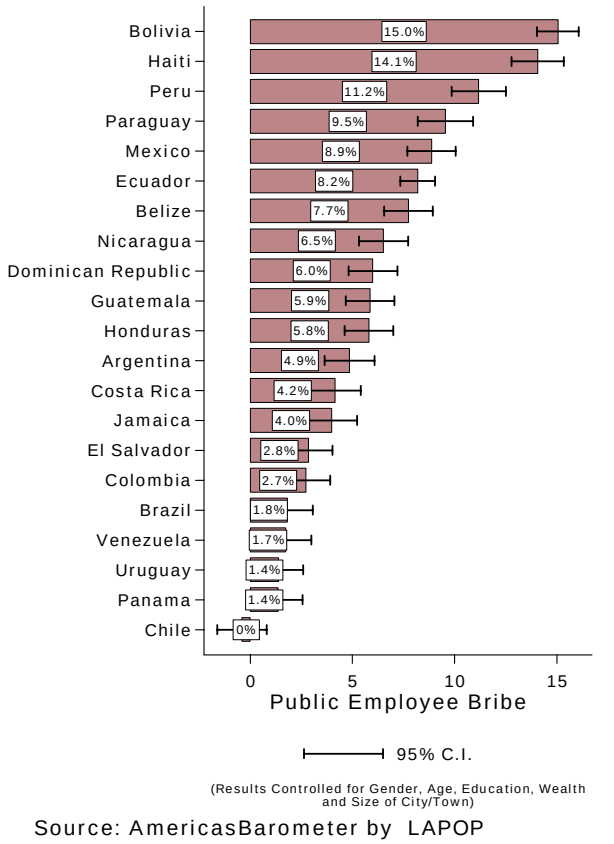
[3] This index has been constantly improved since its first administration in 1996. For a more detailed discussion of this index see Seligson (2006).

EXC6. During the past year did any government employee ask you for a bribe?

Figure 1, which displays percentages of the population that were asked a bribe by a public employee, indicates a wide range of corruption victimization across countries. [4] Bolivia emerges as the country with a significantly higher percentage (18%) of its population being victimized by corruption by public employees. These results are consistent with those demonstrated in the earlier report in this series (I0803) where more than a quarter of the Bolivian population (27.9%) was asked to pay a bribe by the police, rendering further evidence of the high levels of corruption victimization in that country. Similarly, over 10 percent of the population in Haiti and Peru were asked to pay a bribe to a public employee. At the other extreme, Chile has the lowest percentage in the sample victimized by corruption (1.2%).

How much of the variation of corruption victimization by a public employee across countries is explained by the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the populations of these countries?[5] Results shown in Figure 2 remain similar to Figure 1 after controlling for gender, age, education, wealth, and size of city/town; with variation of only a few percentages higher or lower from the uncontrolled results. Countries such as Bolivia, Haiti, and Peru continue to demonstrate the highest percentages of corruption victimization by a public employee with 15, 14, and 11 percent respectively.

Figure 2.
Percentage of the Population Victimized by Corruption by a Public Employee at least once in the past year after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in the Americas, 2008



Do Contextual Factors Matter?

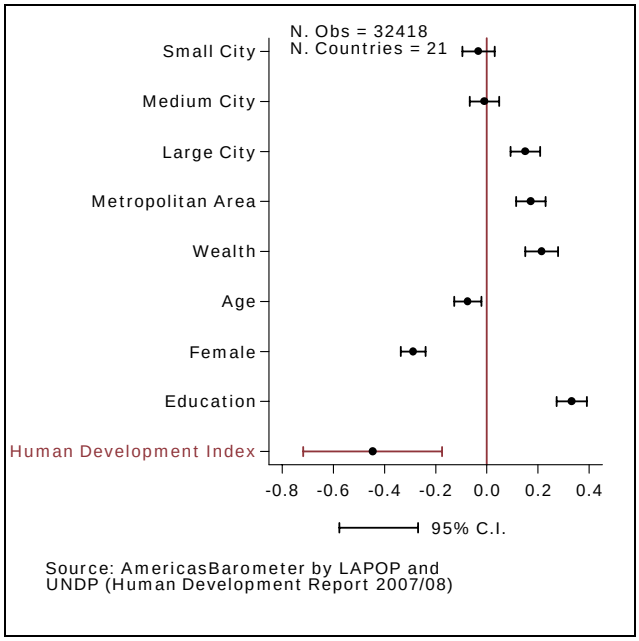
We find that not only do individual-level characteristics matter for corruption, but more developed nations in the Americas are better able to control corruption. Figure 3 shows the effects of both individual-level characteristics and national-level socio-economic development, measured by the human development index,[6] on the probability of being asked a bribe by a public employee.

[4] Non-response was 8% for the sample as a whole.

[5] To simplify the answer to this question, the United States was removed from the sample in order to avoid any statistical biases given that this case has an extremely high level of socio-economic development compared to the other countries, possibly driving the results of the analysis.

[6] The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite measure of the level of socioeconomic development of a nation. It includes three measures of socioeconomic well-being: an index of education, a health indicator measured by life expectancy at birth, and economic resources (GDP per capita—purchasing power

Figure 3.
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Corruption Victimization by a Public Employee in the Americas: The Impact of Human Development Index, 2008



Each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables on experience with corruption victimization by a public employee 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. The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients.

Figure 3 shows that several individual characteristics as well as socio-economic development matter in determining the likelihood of citizens being victimized by public employee corruption. Individuals who are wealthier, more highly educated, and living in larger cities, are more likely to be asked bribes by a public employee. These findings make sense, as there is a greater density of public officials in urban areas than in rural, and those with higher incomes and education have many more occasions to be in contact with public officials than do the poor. Moreover, the wealthier segments of the population are perceived as having "deeper pockets" and hence are more attractive targets of venal public officials. On the other hand, females are less likely to be victims of corruption, a finding that is not surprising because on average, females are less likely than males to play a role in the workplace and in public life in the Americas, and thus less likely to be exposed to corruption. When comparing these results to those of a prior report (I0803) related to corruption victimization by the police, citizens with similar characteristics have similar levels of corruption victimization.

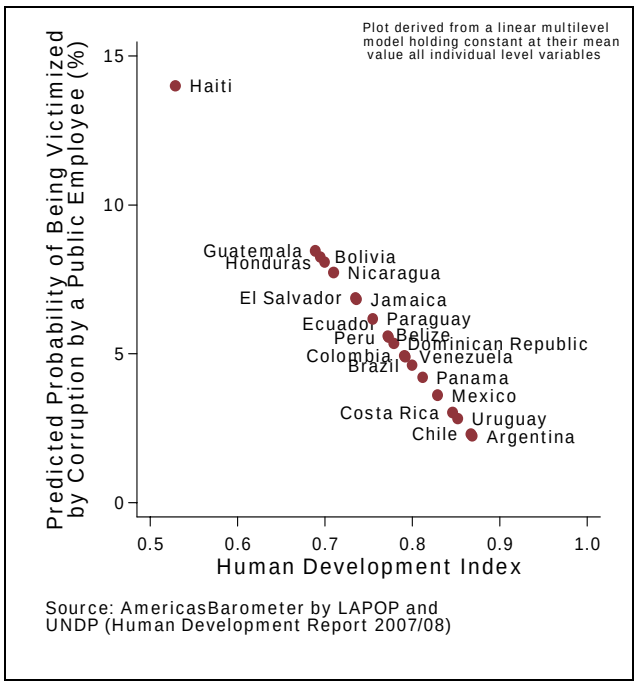
Socio-economic development, measured by the Human Development Index, plays a central role as a mitigating factor of corruption victimization. More specifically, individuals who live in more developed countries are far less likely to be victimized by corruption compared to those who live in less developed countries, after controlling for all of the above individual characteristics. The significance of the national context is highlighted in more detail in Figure 4; the higher the socio-economic development, the less likely the average citizen is to become a victim of corruption. For instance, Haiti is the country that shows the highest probability of corruption victimization by a public employee and is the country with by far the lowest socio-economic development.[7] At the other extreme, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina experience the lowest probability of corruption victimization by a public employee and the highest level of socio-economic development. Taking all these results together, if a citizen from Haiti with a given set of socio-economic characteristics were to move to Uruguay, Chile or Argentina, *ceteris paribus*, and none of his/her individual characteristics were to change, the probability of this person being asked a bribe by a

parity). This index goes from zero to one, with higher values indicating a higher level of development.

[7] Haiti has a Human Development Index of .529 in scale from 0 to 1, the lowest level in the sample.

public employee would be at about 14 percentage points lower than if this individual were to remain in Haiti.

Figure 4.
The Impact of Human Development on Corruption Victimization by a Public Employee in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008[8]



Other countries that show a high probability of being victimized by corruption by a public employee are Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, not surprisingly, countries with low levels of socio-economic development. For example, when examining one of the indicators of the Human Development Index, life expectancy at birth, in none of these countries does life expectancy surpasses 70 years, compared to Uruguay, Chile or Argentina in which life expectancy is 75 years or higher, according to the World Bank (2006).[9]

[8] The point estimate differences between countries in Figure 2 and 4 are explained partly by the fact that Figure 2 controls for individual level characteristics while Figure 4 takes into account the Human Development Index, a national level characteristic.

[9] http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/lac_wdi.pdf

Program and Policy Implications

Corruption is one of the most rampant problems in emerging democracies, making it difficult for these democracies to achieve consolidation. As mentioned at the beginning of this short report, corruption not only erodes the belief in the legitimacy of the political system (Seligson 2002; Seligson 2006), but also weakens democracy, turning people more cynical toward its virtues (Warren 2004). Consequently, it is essential to know who are those most likely to be victims of corruption. This paper has found that some individual level characteristics and at least one national level characteristic are important in explaining corruption victimization by a public employee. The results demonstrate that individuals living in more socio-economically developed countries are less likely to be victims of corruption, whereas the probability is notably higher for the average citizen in less developed countries. For instance, when examining carefully each of the indicators of the Human Development Index: education, health, and wealth, more developed countries score consistently higher on these indicators compared to less developed countries, as illustrated by the cases of Haiti and Bolivia at the lower end, and Argentina and Chile at the upper end.

Our results corroborate other scholarship in which higher levels of socioeconomic development are essential for the mitigation of corruption practices. Absent the ability to rapidly increase those levels, we conclude, therefore, that one way that corruption can be reduced in poorer countries in the region such as Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, and Bolivia could be the diffusion of anti-corruption campaigns, so that citizens in these countries will gain a better understanding of the sources of corruption as well as the detrimental effects that corruption has on their societies, making even more difficult the consolidation of these democracies.

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