

AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – March 25, 2013

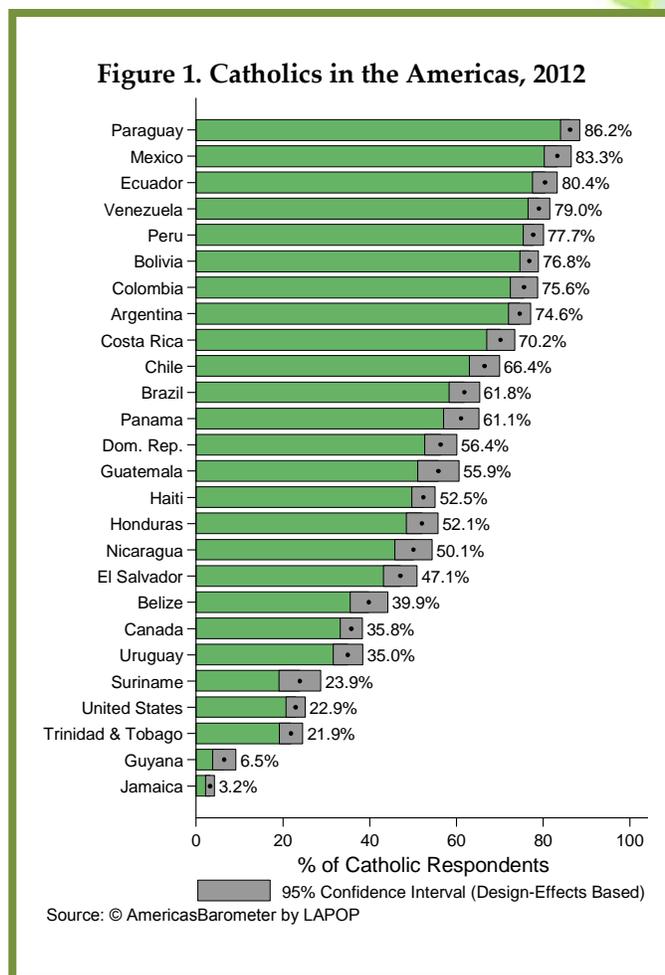
The New Pope is from the Americas: How Catholic are Americans?

By Alejandro Díaz-Domínguez, ITAM and Mitchell Seligson, Vanderbilt University

For the first time in history, a Pope has emerged from the Americas. The election results came as a surprise to many because even though half of the world's Catholics live in the Americas, only 29 percent of cardinal electors in the 2013 conclave were from that region. Yet, the new Pope comes from a Latin American country: Argentina.

In the months to come, debates will revolve around a myriad of expectations regarding the possible impact that the new Pope, Francisco, might have on the Catholic Church around the world. An especially relevant piece of information in which these debates are embedded is the social base of any religion: the size and composition of the faithful. Thus it is important to know how many they are, how they behave, and how much they care about religion.

According to the most recent AmericasBarometer surveys carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) during the first half of 2012¹, in which nationally representative samples of voting



aged adults were conducted in 26 countries of the Americas, respondents were asked about their religion. The results regarding the percent of Catholic respondents are shown in Figure 1.²

² The question wording (q3c) reads: "What is your religion, if any?" Response categories include a vast classification of religions in the Americas, in which Catholics are coded (1).

¹ Funding for the 2010 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), and Vanderbilt University. Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>.

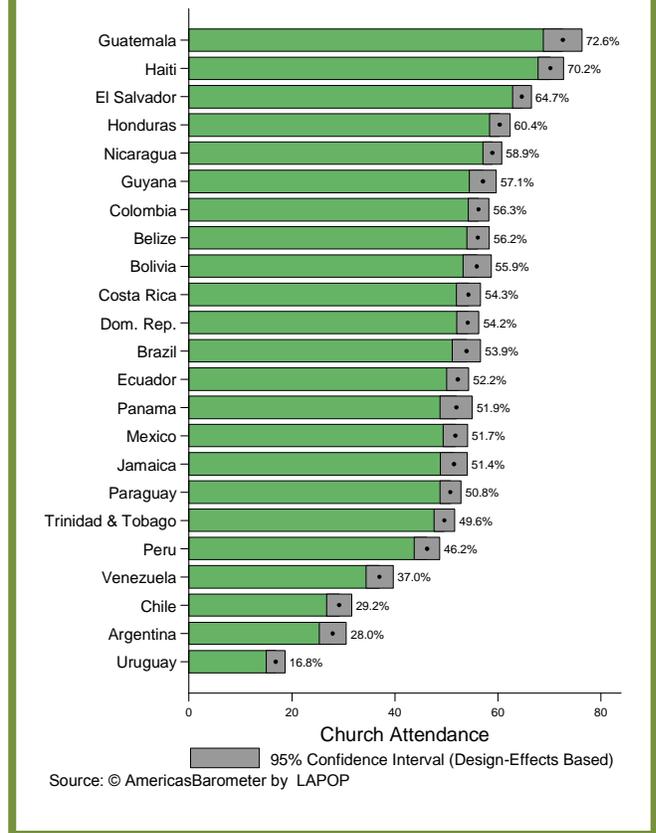
The traditional overwhelmingly Catholic countries (at the national level) score at the top, such as Paraguay, Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru and Colombia, whereas practically all the English speaking countries score near the bottom: Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, the US, and Suriname. It is noteworthy that more than three quarters of Argentines, the Pope’s fellow countrymen and women, report identifying as Catholic, a figure that sharply contrasts with specific religious behaviors as we will show in the following graphs.

Church attendance can indicate how deeply felt religious identification is in behavioral terms. The newly elected Pope comes from a country in which, as we have shown, most people are Catholic, but as we show here, few actually attend Church on a regular level. Levels of church attendance among Catholics across the Americas vary sharply from country to country, as shown in Figure 2.³

Central American Catholics are likely to attend mass almost every week, whereas Catholics from the three well-known religiously liberal South American nations, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina go to mass less than once a month on average (the respondents in the US and Canada were not asked this question).

Another important religious attitude refers to the link between parishioners and their communities, giving us a measure of “religious social capital,” such as levels of attendance in religious groups, as shown in Figure 3.⁴

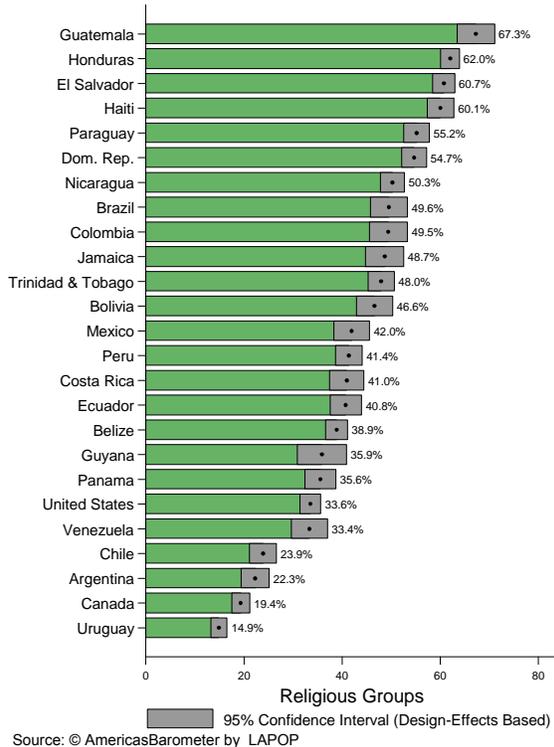
Figure 2. Catholic Attendance in the Americas, 2012



³ The question wording (q5a) reads: “How often do you attend religious services?”. Response categories are more than once per week, once per week, once a month, once or twice a year, and never or almost never.

⁴ The question wording (cp6) reads: “I am going to read a list of groups and organizations. Please tell me if you attend their meetings at least once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year, or never: meetings of any religious organization? Do you attend them...”

Figure 3. Catholic Attendance Religious Groups, 2012



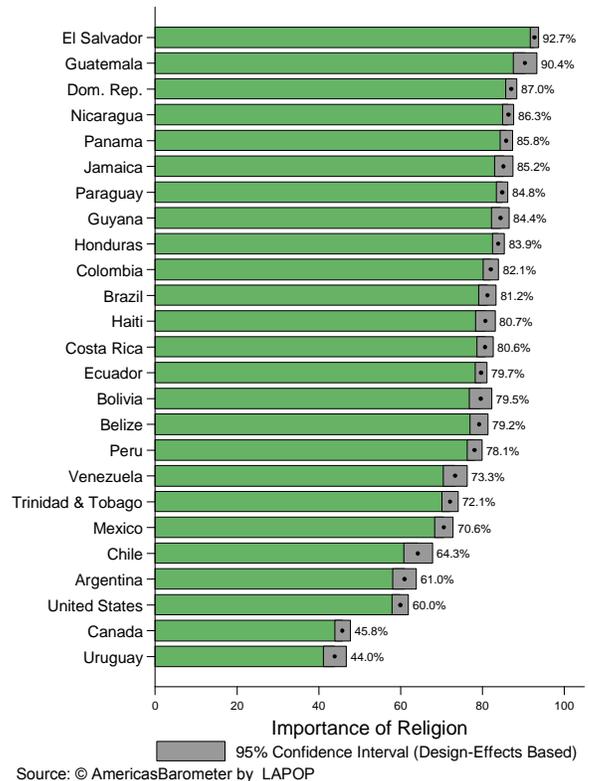
Once again, the Pope’s native Argentina scores near the bottom of the list. Central American Catholics score far higher.

How much Catholics in the Americas care about religion also varies, as shown in Figure 4,⁵ in which levels of importance of religion in the lives of the Catholic respondents is shown. Interestingly, although the US is typically considered as a very religious country, it ranks low in comparison to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Argentina is near the bottom. Central American countries again score at the top.

Church attendance however suggests a different scenario, in which all things equal, on average Catholics go to church less frequently when compared to non-Catholics. Similar behavior is reported for participation in religious groups, as shown in Figure 5. Overall, however, Catholics in the Americas are more likely to score higher when talking about how important religion is in their lives, when compared to non-Catholics.

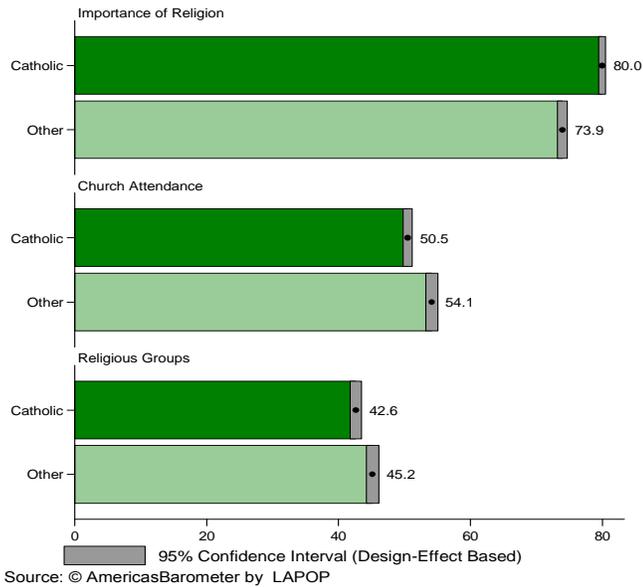
These pieces of evidence mainly suggest a spiritual continent, one now captivated with the first Pope from the region.

Figure 4. Importance of Religion, Catholics, 2012.



⁵ The question wording (q5b) reads: “Please, could you tell me how important is religion in your life?”. Response categories are very important, rather important, not very important, and not at all important.

Figure 5. Religious Attitudes in the Americas, 2012



Alejandro Díaz-Domínguez is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University, and Lecturer at the ITAM in Mexico City. He can be reached at alejandro.diaz@itam.mx

Dr. Mitchell A. Seligson is Director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and Centennial Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. He can be reached at mitchell.a.seligson@vanderbilt.edu.

Full results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer and the AmericasBarometer 2012 comparative study can be consulted on-line at www.LapopSurveys.org. The full data set is available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.