AmericasBarometer Insights: 2012

Number 71

Why are There More Partisans in Some Countries than in Others?

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Executive Summary. This *Insights* report attempts to understand why some citizens, but not others, are attached to political parties across the Americas. Using data from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer surveys, the analysis tests the hypothesis that less complex political environments foster partisanship by helping voters assign responsibility for outcomes to political parties. Less complex political environments have a smaller number of parties and individuals competing for power, and also tend to display more concentration of responsibility for political and economic outcomes among groups. After taking into account some individual level factors that could explain variation in partisanship, the analysis tests the relevance of four different indicators of clarity of responsibility. Interestingly, the results indicate that none of those four measures helps to explain the different proportion of partisans across countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The conclusion can be stated quite simply: less complex political systems do not have more partisans than more complex ones.

Party identification – or simply partisanship – refers to "people's psychological association to parties" (Campbell et al, 1954, p. 90; Campbell et al, 1960). The extent to which people are attached to political parties is important for a variety of reasons. Dalton (2007) argues that public attachment to parties is an indicator of party system development; similarly, Jones (2005) builds on research by Mainwaring and Scully (1995) to argue that partisan ties reflect the extent to which a party system is institutionalized. Downs (1957), followed by many others, stresses the importance of partisanship as a heuristic that helps citizens to organize and simplify information relevant to electoral competition. Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) present evidence that partisanship stimulates participation and voting behavior. For these and other reasons, the examination of partisanship in comparative perspective is a relevant topic in the study of democracy.

Why do some citizens declare a preference for a political party, while others do not? At least three sets of individual factors may help answer this question. First, factors such as political interest and knowledge may help citizens to better understand the role of parties in politics, and also to distinguish the positions of different parties on relevant issues. So, more interested and knowledgeable citizens are more likely to be partisans (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Huber et al, 2005). Second, socialization over the life course seems to be one of the most important reasons people like parties (Converse & Pierce, 1992; Dalton & Weldon, 2007), and so partisanship may vary by age cohorts.[1] Third, individuals may acquire partisanship from a "running tally" of retrospective assessments, which is a series of evaluations they make concerning party performance (Fiorina, 1981). Even though many individuals learn to like parties in their earlier socialization, they may update their partisanship based on the performance of parties in office. While testing the latter expectation is outside the scope of this

Figure 1. Percentage of Citizens who are Partisans by Country in the Americas, 2010
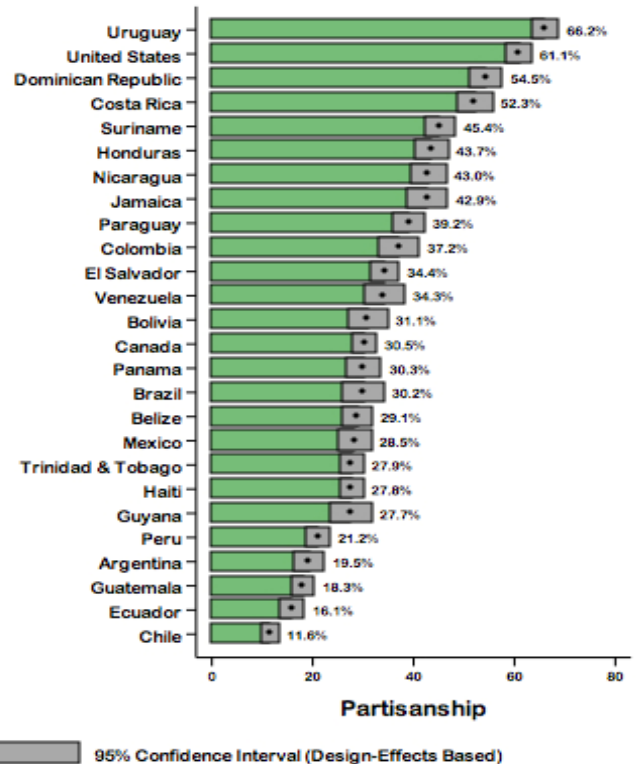
paper, in this *Insights* report I assess the extent to which factors such as an individual's age, political interest, and political knowledge help predict partisanship.

In addition, it is possible that context plays a role. In what follows I test, but fail to find evidence for, the argument that the degree to which institutions are structured so that political responsibility is comparatively clearer may affect the extent of partisan ties in a country.

The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) asked 43,990 respondents the question at the center of this study in the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer:[2]
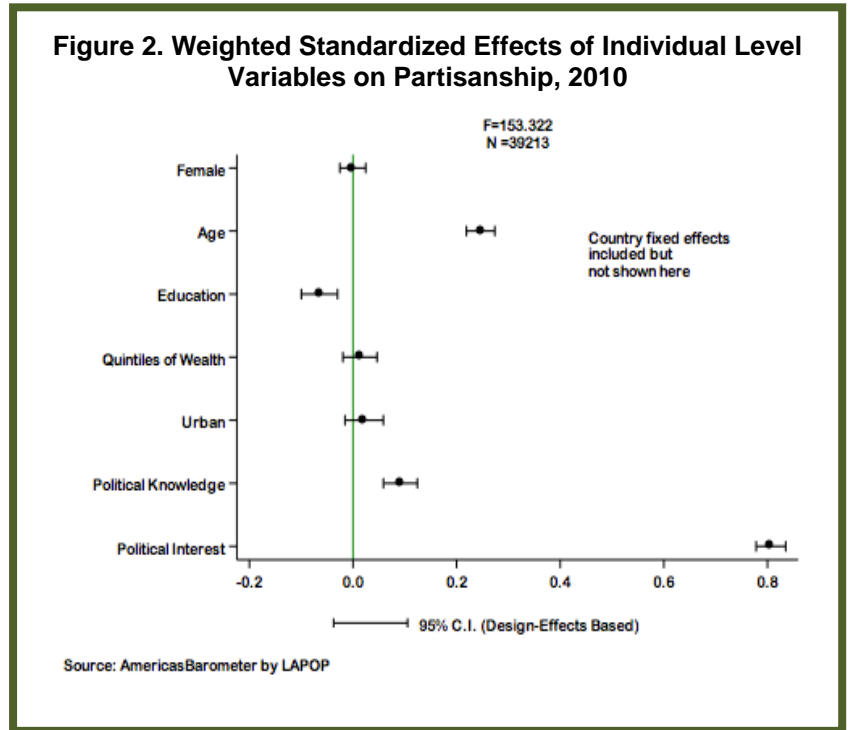
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[1] In addition, though not tested here, extant scholarship suggests that individuals in older party systems may learn to like a specific party because their parents transmit their own long-standing attachments to their children.

VB10. Do you currently identify with a political party?

Positive answers to the question were coded as one, while negative answers were coded as zero.[3] Figure 1 shows the proportion of partisans with confidence intervals among citizens in all 26 countries in the AmericasBarometer surveys.[4]

Figure 1 shows that there is a lot of variation in the proportion of partisans across the Americas. Uruguay and United States appear in the top of the graph as the only countries in which more than 60% of the respondents have preference for a party. At the bottom, four countries have partisanship levels lower than 20%: Argentina (19.5%), Guatemala (18.3%), Ecuador (16.1%), and Chile (11.6%).

Why there is so much variation in the proportion of partisans across those countries? One can argue that those differences are exclusively due to individual factors. According to this line of reasoning, some countries have more partisans because citizens have higher values on the individual level factors that cause partisanship. However, one can argue that there may be differences across countries that do not relate directly to individual level factors. Factors such as electoral rules and party system complexity could facilitate the psychological attachment in some countries, while they could undermine those attachments in other countries. The next section explores the extent to which selected individual and contextual factors predict partisanship.

Figure 2. Weighted Standardized Effects of Individual Level Variables on Partisanship, 2010

F=153.322
N =39213

Country fixed effects included but not shown here

95% C.I. (Design-Effects Based)

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Individual Traits, Knowledge, and Interest as Predictors of Partisanship

Figure 2 displays the results of a logistic regression model that assesses the determinants of the likelihood an individual reports being a partisan. The analysis does not include the United States and Canada. The model includes seven independent variables. Political interest and political knowledge indicate respondents' involvement with politics and are expected to have positive effects.[5,6] I also test the relevance of age with an index of 6 age categories.[7] Four additional socioeconomic and demographic variables are included as control variables:

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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.
[3] Item non-response was 2.5% excluding the United States and Canada, and 2.4% excluding the United States, Canada, and Haiti.
[4] All analyses presented here were conducted using STATA v11.1.

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[5] The question about political interest (POL1) asked: "How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?" Item non-response on the question was about 1%.
[6] A battery of factual political information questions measured political knowledge. The questions were about the number of provinces/departments/states in the country (GI1), the name of the US President (GI3), and the length of the presidential/prime ministerial term in the respondent's country (GI4). The questions were coded 1 if correct and 0 if incorrect. Missing values were coded as 0. The final variable was the sum of the three items.
[7] Item non-response on this question (Q2S) was 0.5% with and without Haiti.

female, education, wealth, and urban. Wealth is an index comprising 5 quintiles and is based on an analysis of household assets.[8] Education is measured in years of schooling.[9] Female and Urban are binary variables.[10] The model also includes a binary variable for each country (except for Uruguay, which was the country of reference); these country fixed effects are not shown in the figure.

In Figure 2, the dot indicates the standardized regression coefficient. If the dot is to the right of the vertical line, the effect is positive; if it is to the left, the effect is negative. The horizontal lines extending from the dot are confidence intervals and, if they do not pass through the vertical line, the effect is statistically distinguishable from zero. Figure 2 shows that, as expected, the associations between partisanship and political interest and knowledge are positive and statistically significant. The effect of political interest is very strong, indicating that motivational attachment to politics may be even more important than cognitive factors such as knowledge in explaining partisanship. Age has a positive and statistically significant association, so that those who are older are more likely to express a partisan attachment.[11] The measures of sex (female), wealth, and urban residence have no association with partisan ties. Interestingly, education has a surprising negative association when interest and knowledge are included in the analysis.[12] This result deserves further treatment, beyond this report.

In general, some important individual level factors explain the probability of a respondent reporting to be a partisan. However, those factors do not account for all the country level

variation. The binary variables for each country still have strong and statistically significant effects, meaning that the country level differences remain when the individual level factors are included in the analysis (see Appendix Model 1). Therefore, the next section uses country level variables to test if the complexity of the political system helps to explain the different proportion of partisans across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Simpler Political Systems Do Not Produce More Partisans

Among the many possible answers to the question about cross-national variation of partisanship, one approach focuses on the complexity of the political system (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Huber et al, 2005). In this view voters' attachments towards political parties operate as "running tallies" of retrospective assessments (Fiorina, 1981). Voters use new information about political and economic outcomes to update their orientations towards the parties and other relevant political actors. Arguably, the nature of the political system could facilitate or stymie voters' task of attributing responsibility for outcomes to parties and other political actors. In less complex contexts, it is thought to be easier for voters to punish or reward parties and candidates according to their performances. Thus, according to this argument, in less complex political systems the availability and clarity of information about the political process make it easier for voters to update their running tallies about the parties and, possibly, make it more likely that voters report a partisan attachment.

To assess this expectation, I use four indicators of clarity of responsibility. It is often said that federal systems disperse power in comparison with unitarian systems, and hence make it more complicated for voters to identify to what extent incumbents from national and sub-national levels are responsible for outcomes (Gerring & Thacker, 2004). Also, Powell and Whitten (1993) argue that bicameralism may contribute to the dispersion of power and the complexity of the distribution of responsibility that voters perceive. Another common indicator of clarity

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[8] Item non-response in this question (QUINTALL) was 0.3% and 0.2% without Haiti. More details about the construction of this variable can be found in a previous number of the *Insights* series (Córdova, 2009).
[9] Item non-response in this question (ED) was 0.5% and 0.4% without Haiti.
[10] These variables had no missing values.
[11] A parallel model tested and confirmed the linearity of this relationship by including binary indicators of each age category.
[12] Education has a positive impact on partisanship when political interest and knowledge are not included in the analysis.

of responsibility is the number of effective parliamentary parties (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979). This number indicates the extent of legislative fractionalization and also relates to how difficult it is for voters to find out which political actors are responsible for which outcomes (Huber et al, 2005, p. 372). Finally, the electoral formula is usually seen as relevant. In proportional systems, the number of parliamentary candidates tends to be higher, which could make the environment much more complex than in majoritarian systems ("first-past-the-post").

Figure 3 displays the results from a hierarchical logit model in which partisanship is the dependent variable. Once again the model does not include the US and Canada, and includes the same individual level independent variables as in the model presented in Figure 2.[13] As indicated, four country level variables represent clarity of responsibility. "First-past-the-post" and unicameralism are binary variables expected to enhance clarity of responsibility and increase the probability of a respondent being a partisan. If complexity matters to partisanship, they should have positive effects. By contrast, the binary variable indicating that the country is a federal system should have a negative effect. The effective number of parties is a continuous variable and should also have a negative effect.[14]

The results in Figure 3 show that clarity of responsibility does not seem to be the answer to the question of what causes cross-national variation in partisanship in Latin America and the Caribbean. None of the four variables has statistically significant effects. Further, the signs on the coefficients for the electoral formula ("First-past-the-post") and unicameralism measures are contrary to what was the expected. These null results are robust to analyses in which just one measure of clarity of

Figure 3. Weighted Standardized Effects of Individual and Country Level Variables on Partisanship, 2010
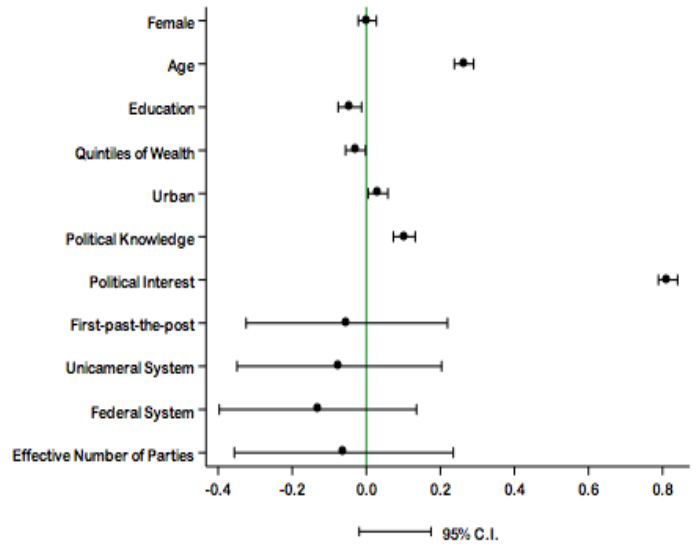
Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

responsibility/system complexity is included at a time.[15]

Discussion

This *Insights* report asked what predicts varying levels of partisanship at both the individual and country levels. The analysis focused on countries from Latin America and the Caribbean. Several individual characteristics were shown to predict partisanship, including political interest, political knowledge, and age.

According to some scholarly perspectives, different levels of partisanship across countries might be explained by the complexity of the political system. However, after controlling for individual level determinants of partisanship, the analysis did not support the hypothesis that political environments in which it is easier for voters to assign responsibility for outcomes have more partisans.

So, since clarity of responsibility does not seem to explain the variation in partisanship across

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[13] In addition, Haiti was excluded in this analysis because the information about the country level variables is either not available or not reliable.
[14] Data for this variable were collected from Gallagher and Mitchell (2008).

[15] One could be concerned that the null results in Figure 3 are due to a problem of collinearity among indicators of clarity of responsibility; however, none has a statistically significant effect when included one at a time.

the countries analyzed in this report, other factors should be considered in further examinations. The age of the party system and the salience of social and ethnic divisions inside the countries are common alternative explanations (Huber et al, 2005), and these might be examined by future research on this topic in the Americas. Other types of citizen-party linkages in Latin America and the Caribbean may also constitute interesting avenues of research on the topic, such as how some parties connect to voters through clientelistic practices (Vidal et al., 2010).

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Appendix. Predictors of Partisanship in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Unstandardized Coefficient (Standard Error)	Standardized Coefficient	Unstandardized Coefficient (Standard Error)	Standardized Coefficient
Female	-0.001	0.000	0.006	0.003
	(0.025)	(0.013)	(0.025)	(0.012)
Age	0.161*	0.246*	0.171*	0.264*
	(0.009)	(0.014)	(0.009)	(0.013)
Education	-0.015*	-0.065*	-0.010*	-0.044*
	(0.004)	(0.018)	(0.004)	(0.016)
Quintiles of Wealth	0.009	0.013	-0.020*	-0.029*
	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.010)	(0.014)
Urban	0.045	0.022	0.066*	0.032*
	(0.039)	(0.019)	(0.029)	(0.014)
Political Knowledge	0.095	0.091	0.107*	0.103*
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.015)
Political Interest	0.835	0.807	0.840*	0.815*
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.013)
First-past-the-post			-0.165	-0.053
			(0.435)	(0.139)
Unicameral System			-0.146	-0.073
			(0.283)	(0.141)
Federal System			-0.342	-0.131
			(0.356)	(0.136)
Effective Number of Parties			-0.030	-0.061
			(0.075)	(0.151)
Mexico	-1.449	-0.277		
	(0.114)	(0.022)		
Guatemala	-1.925	-0.362		
	(0.110)	(0.021)		
El Salvador	-1.143	-0.218		
	(0.094)	(0.018)		
Honduras	-0.754	-0.146		
	(0.095)	(0.018)		
Nicaragua	-0.519	-0.099		
	(0.110)	(0.021)		
Costa Rica	-0.341	-0.064		
	(0.105)	(0.020)		
Panama	-1.275	-0.242		
	(0.101)	(0.019)		
Colombia	-0.933	-0.175		
	(0.108)	(0.020)		

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Unstandardized Coefficient (Standard Error)	Standardized Coefficient	Unstandardized Coefficient (Standard Error)	Standardized Coefficient
Ecuador	-2.037 (0.118)	-0.531 (0.031)		
Bolivia	-1.345 (0.115)	-0.351 (0.030)		
Peru	-1.736 (0.103)	-0.326 (0.019)		
Paraguay	-0.769 (0.104)	-0.145 (0.020)		
Chile	-2.432 (0.122)	-0.520 (0.026)		
Brazil	-1.178 (0.115)	-0.281 (0.027)		
Venezuela	-1.167 (0.134)	-0.219 (0.025)		
Argentina	-2.067 (0.117)	-0.377 (0.021)		
Dominican Republic	-0.333 (0.095)	-0.062 (0.018)		
Haiti	-1.170 (0.095)	-0.237 (0.019)		
Jamaica	-0.703 (0.127)	-0.132 (0.024)		
Guyana	-1.249 (0.132)	-0.237 (0.025)		
Trinidad and Tobago	-1.463 (0.100)	-0.275 (0.019)		
Belize	-1.214 (0.106)	-0.228 (0.020)		
Suriname	-0.926 (0.101)	-0.175 (0.019)		
Constant	-1.173* (0.110)	-0.873* (0.018)	-2.137* (0.372)	-0.810* (0.122)
Number of Obs.	39,213		37,701	
*p<0.05				

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at *p<0.05, two-tailed