

AmericasBarometer Insights: 2012

Number 75

Who Blames the Government versus “the Rich Countries” for the Recent Economic Crisis, and *Why*?

By Daniel Zizumbo Colunga
daniel.zizumbo-colunga@vanderbilt.edu
Vanderbilt University

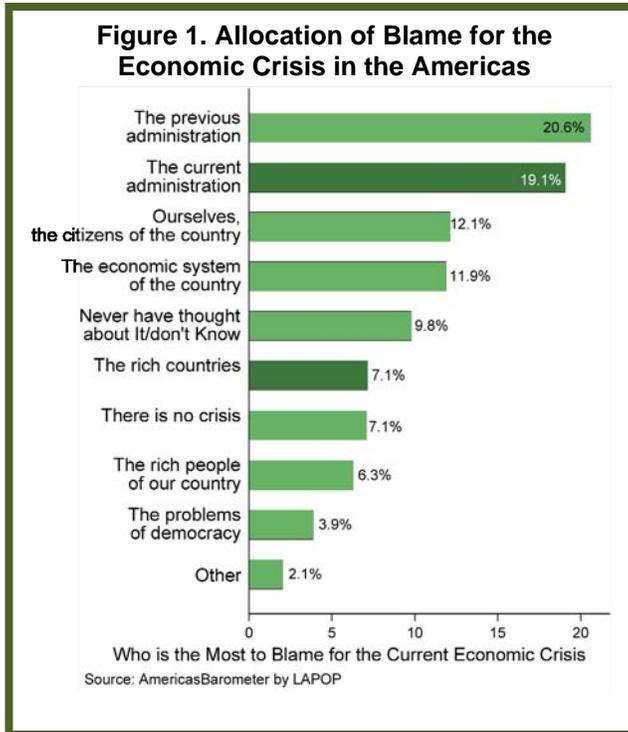
Executive Summary. What explains variations in blame attribution for economic crisis? This *Insights* report investigates why some citizens of the Americas blame their own government while others blame “rich countries” for the economic crisis that began in 2008. Using data from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer surveys, I test whether, holding other economic determinants constant, citizens who perceive the government to be effectively handling the economy are less likely to blame the government for the economic crisis. Further, building on the clarity of responsibility literature I test whether incumbents that have stayed in power for a longer amount of time and have more control over the legislature are blamed more for the crisis. Overall, the results show that citizens are less likely to blame their own government when they perceive it to be handling the economy effectively. Additionally, the results show that governments that have been in power longer are blamed more for the crisis. Yet, there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that executives with more control over the legislature are more likely to be blamed for the crisis than executives whose parties make up a congressional minority.

The *Insights Series* is co-edited by Mitchell A. Seligson, Amy Erica Smith, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.

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In 2008 a global financial crisis shook many countries in the Western hemisphere.¹ According to the AmericasBarometer, while most individuals in the Americas perceived the existence of an economic downturn, not everyone agreed on whom to blame. Attributions of responsibility are an important determinant of citizens' attitudes and behavior with respect to political actors (see, for example Iyengar 1996). It is therefore crucial to understand what factors influenced individuals' varying allocations of blame in the wake of the recent economic crisis.

To assess attributions of responsibility for the recent economic crisis, in the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP² respondents were first asked whether they thought there was an economic crisis.³ The 92.9% who thought there was were then asked:



CRISIS2. Who is the most to blame for the current economic crisis in our country from among the following: the previous administration; the current administration; ourselves, we [the people of the country]; the rich people of our country; the problems of democracy; the rich countries; the economic system of the country; or have you never thought about it?⁴

Figure 1 shows the percentage of Latin American citizens who chose each of the offered alternatives (in order to represent the full population, the figure also includes the 7.1% who were not asked about blame attributions because they reported that there was no economic crisis in response to the previous question).

The largest percentages chose to blame either the previous or current national government: 20.6% of citizens in the Americas blame the previous administration for the crisis, while 19.1% consider the crisis to be the fault of the incumbent administration.

Other domestic agents also receive some blame. For example, 12.1% of citizens in the Americas blame the citizens of their own country for the crisis, and 6.3% blame the rich people of their country. In addition, 11.9% of respondents blame their country's economic system, but only 3.9% blame the "problems of democracy." This latter result is consistent with previous research (e.g., Booth and Seligson 2009; Orcés, Seligson,

because there was a change of president during the fieldwork.

⁴ The non-response rate for this question averaged 1.84% across all countries.

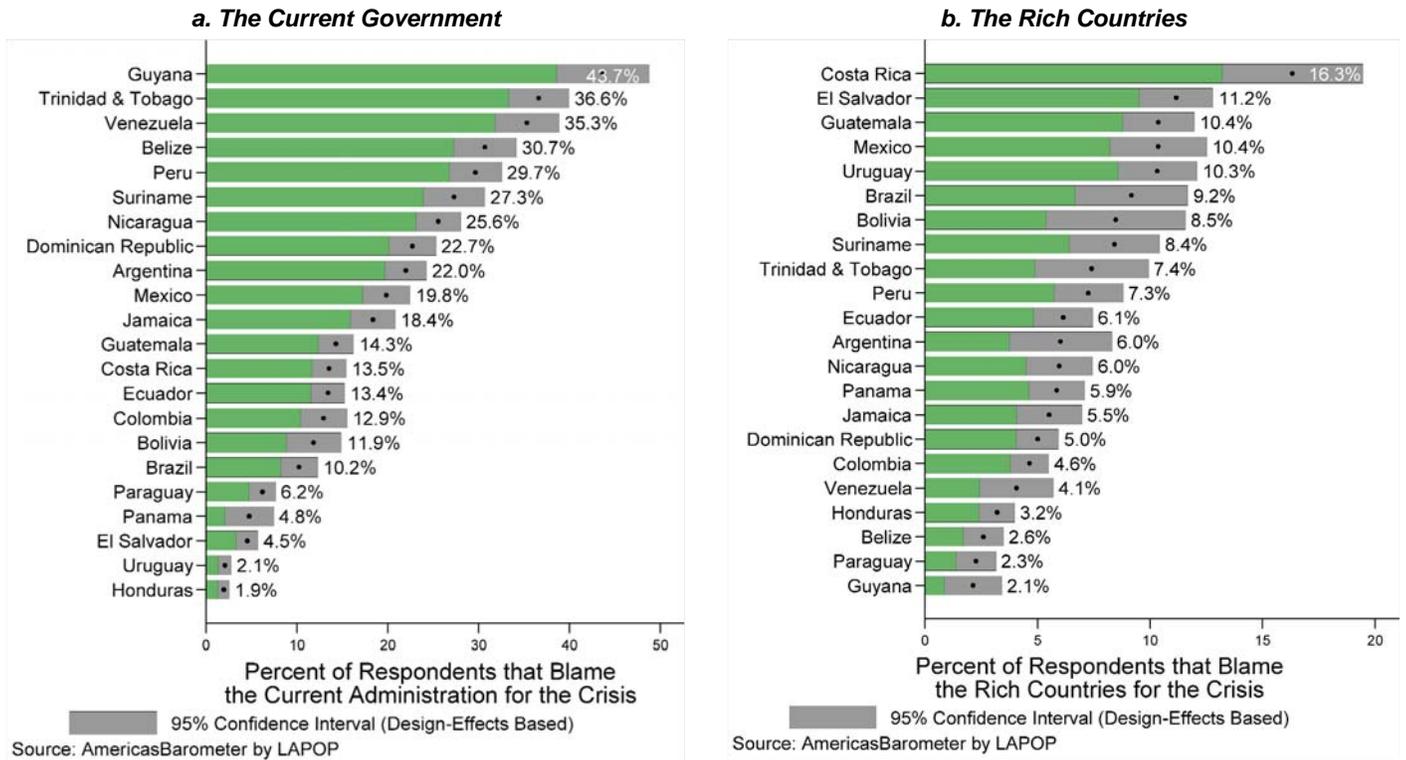
¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>

The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

² 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.

³ Throughout this report Haiti and Chile as well as the United States and Canada were excluded from the analyses. The last two countries were excluded because of the study's focus on Latin American and the Caribbean as well as the ambiguity that might have been introduced in these two countries in having their citizens choose between the "rich countries" and "the current government." Haiti, for its part, was excluded because the question was not included in this wave of the AmericasBarometer and Chile was excluded

Figure 2. Blame in Comparative Perspective



and Smith 2010; also see Easton 1975), which suggests that diffuse support for democracy is highly resistant to economic crisis. Finally, a small proportion of citizens – 7.1% - place blame outside the confines of their own country; specifically, they blame “the rich countries.”

In this *Insights* report, I analyze why some citizens in the Americas blame their current government for the economic crisis while others blame “the rich countries.” I test two principal hypotheses: first, that other things held constant, citizens are less likely to blame the current government for the crisis when they believe that it has handled the economy effectively; and second, that administrations that have been in power longer and that have stronger control over policy receive more blame than weak and new administrations. This latter expectation draws on scholarship that proposes that certain contextual and institutional features of the political system make citizens more prone to blame the incumbent government for political

and economic outcomes (Powell and Whitten 1993; Duch and Stevenson 2008).

A first step in narrowing the focus to only two response options - blame the rich countries or the current government - is to examine the percentage of individuals who placed blame in these two categories cross-nationally. As Figures 2a and 2b show, there is substantial variation in the pattern of attribution of responsibility for the crisis across countries.

In some countries, such as Guyana (45.2%), Trinidad & Tobago (38%) and Venezuela (37.6%), the proportion of citizens who blame the current administration for the economic crisis is relatively large. Yet, in others, such as Honduras (2%), Uruguay (2.1%) and El Salvador (4.5%), only a small minority of respondents answered that the current government of the country was to blame for the current economic crisis.

Similarly, countries also are very different in the proportion of their citizens that blame the rich countries of the world. For instance, in Costa Rica (16.3%), El Salvador (11.2%) and Guatemala (10.4%), relatively large proportions of the population blame “rich countries.” Conversely, in countries such as Guyana, Paraguay and Belize only a few citizens blame rich countries for the crisis.

Why Do Individuals Blame the Current Administration For the Economic Crisis?

The 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers was widely publicized, suggesting the important role “rich countries” played in triggering the crisis. Nonetheless, a sizable number of citizens in the Americas blamed their current administration for the economic crisis. Why?

Individual-Level Economic Factors

Although Wall Street’s financial collapse had a broad and deep impact in the countries of Latin America,⁵ not all citizens suffered economically to the same degree. One level on which we can evaluate the crisis’ economic impacts is that of the household. While some citizens saw their household income substantially reduced during the economic crisis, others experienced less of an impact.⁶ Drawing on basic tenets of retrospective voting theory (e.g., Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981), we might expect that those who perceived a negative change in their household income are more likely to blame their current government for the crisis. Along these same lines, I also test whether more general

evaluations of the state of one’s personal economic situation have a similar effect.⁷

Yet, it is possible that citizens’ evaluations of the national economy are more significant to their placement of blame. An important strand of literature has underlined the importance of perceptions of the national economy in determining political attitudes and behaviors (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Other authors have noted that people are more likely to blame the president instead of other actors when they perceive that the national economy is performing poorly, and thus feel higher levels of economic threat (Heider 1944; Tyler 1982). Thus, I test whether more negative retrospective evaluations of the national economy help predict the likelihood of blaming the current administration for the crisis.⁸

In addition, it is also important to assess the impact of citizens’ evaluations of the government’s economic performance (Downs 1957). A number of scholars have argued for the importance of citizens’ evaluations of the efficacy with which the incumbent administration handles the economy as an important determinant of a wide array of political behavior, ranging from voting to political identification (see, for example, Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2008). In this *Insights* report, I propose that citizens who perceive that the government is doing an effective job handling the economy and fighting unemployment and poverty are less likely to blame it for the current crisis.⁹

⁷ The variable used to measure this is Q10E. *Over the past two years, has the income of your household decreased, remained the same, or increased?*

⁸SOCT2. *Do you think that the country’s current economic situation is better than, the same as or worse than it was 12 months ago?*

IDIO2. *Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?*

⁹I create a single measure based on the following questions: N1. *To what extent would you say the current administration fights poverty?*

N12. *Combats unemployment?*

N15. *Is managing the economy well?*

⁵ Annual GDP change for Latin America in 2009 was -2.09% (see Izquierdo and Talvi 2010).

⁶ Orces, Seligson and Smith (2010) report that 27.3% of the citizens of the Americas indicated their income decreased and 22.8% indicated their income increased.

Individual-Level Controls

In assessing predictors of blame, I include a number of individual-level control variables in the model. These include two important economic controls: indicators of individuals' actual economic condition and their expectations with respect to the role of the state. The former I measure using the LAPOP wealth measure described in detail in Córdova (2009). With respect to the latter, respondents who expect the government to be responsible for citizens' economic welfare might be more prone to blame the government for the lack thereof during crises. To measure this, I include an index that gauges individuals' general preferences about the role of the state.¹⁰

Additionally, given prior research that proposes that under situations of economic threat, citizens with low levels of information are more likely to blame the president as opposed to other actors (Tyler 1982; Gomez and Wilson 2001), it is important to control for both political knowledge and education.¹¹ Because of its obvious importance in this issue I also control for the respondent's approval of the administration of the current president.¹²

This scale has a high level of internal reliability ($\alpha > .86$).

¹⁰ The AmericasBarometer asked respondents: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statements:*

ROS2. *The (Country) government, more than individuals, should be primarily responsible for ensuring the [well-being of the people].*

ROS3. *The (Country) government, more than the private sector, should be primarily responsible for creating jobs.*

ROS4. *The (Country) government should implement strong policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and the poor.*

This scale has a high level of internal reliability ($\alpha > .78$).

¹¹ The AmericasBarometer survey includes a battery of questions designed to recover levels of political knowledge based on respondents' answers to three factual knowledge questions: GI1. *What is the name of the current president of the United States?* GI3. *How many provinces/departments/states does the country have?* GI4. *How long is the presidential/prime ministerial term of office in country?* ($\text{Alpha} = 0.53$). In addition the AmericasBarometer asked the respondents about the last year of education they completed.

¹² Respondents of the Americas Barometer were asked: M1. *Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of President (NAME)?*

Clarity of Responsibility and Blame

Aside from individual differences in the degree to which citizens have and perceive they have been affected by the economic crisis, it is evident in Figures 2a and 2b that there are substantive differences in blame attribution between countries. I propose that one explanation for this variation may be found in the extent to which a country's institutional context promotes clarity of responsibility.

A wide array of literature has looked at the way punishment for political and economic downturns varies across political contexts (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2008; Stokes 2001). Some have noticed that specific institutional and situational characteristics affect the degree to which citizens are able to hold their government accountable (Powell and Whitten 1993; Powell 2000; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002; Tavits 2007).

These scholars have proposed that as power becomes more centralized and the actor responsible for the incumbent government more salient and clear, citizens become more prone to "assign responsibility for economic and political outcomes to the incumbent" (Powell and Witten 1993, p. 398).

In addition, and with the objective of controlling for possible partisan (Campbell et al 1960; Nawara 2011; Rudolph 2003, 2006) and winner/loser status biases (see Anderson et al. 2007), I include a control for those who voted for the incumbent in the last election. I also control for the respondent's ideology (to do so, I use the *L1* and *L1r* measures, and combine these into a series of dummy variables: Right/Conservative, Left/Liberal, Center, and Missing). I include ideology because, in Latin America, left wing rhetoric often argues that the economic fortunes of peripheral economies are influenced by the dynamics and fortunes of central (rich) countries within the world system (e.g. Cardoso and Fishlow 1992; Wallerstein 2004). Finally, because of its theorized direct and indirect roles as a determinant of performance evaluations, I also control for the respondent's nationalism (see Hetherington and Nelson 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997) and media exposure (Iyengar and Kinder 1988; Iyengar 1996).

A contextual feature that may make the incumbent more easily identifiable as responsible for outcomes is the length of time that he or she has spent in power. The notion is that over time it will become easier for citizens to recognize who is the incumbent and, as well, easier for them to believe that the incumbent has had an important impact on the economy. With this in mind, I test whether governments that have been in power longer are more likely to be blamed for the economic crisis.¹³

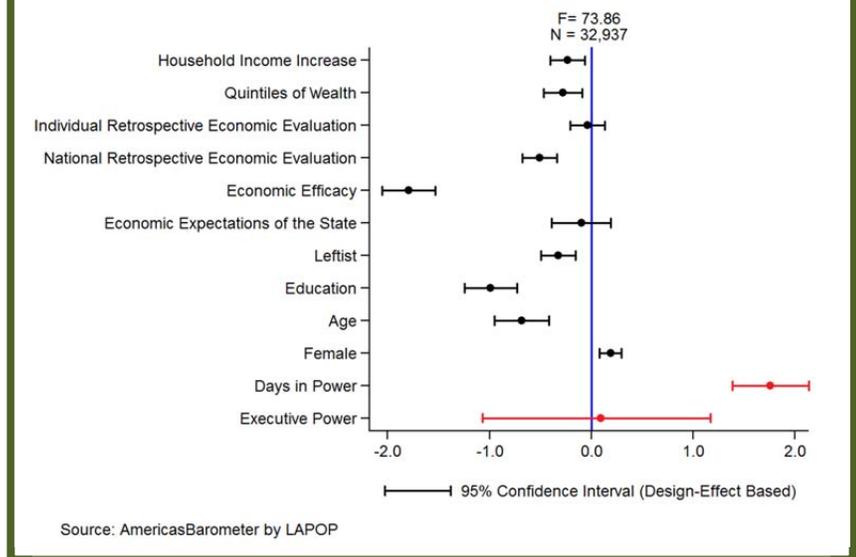
In addition, it might be the case that executives that have broad control over the legislature are more easily blamed for the crisis because citizens perceive they are better able to push through the legislation necessary to react or adapt to economic problems facing the country. I measure executive power as an ordinal variable where 1 represents an executive whose party is a minority party in the lower chamber; 2 represents an executive whose party is the largest minority (and there is no majority party) in the lower chamber of the legislature; and 3 represents an executive whose party controls more than 50% of the seats in the lower (or only) chamber of the national legislature.

Results

Before engaging in the analysis the dependent variable was recoded to reflect one of three types of blame attributions: blaming one's own government; blaming the rich countries; or blaming another actor for the crisis (that is, any other blame assignment shown in Figure 1). Because the dependent variable has three categories, I run a multinomial logit regression; for the sake of parsimony, only the part of this

¹³ I measure the executive's time in office as a count of the number of days between his or her inauguration day and the median date of the AmericasBarometer fieldwork in the country.

Figure 3. Predictors of Blaming the Current Administration vs. Blaming Rich Countries for the Recent Economic Crisis



analysis that focuses on blaming the current administration versus the rich countries is shown here (see appendix for full model).

Thus, Figure 3 shows the determinants of the probability that a respondent will blame the current administration of her own country for the crisis instead of the rich countries.¹⁴

Each dot in the graph represents the estimated effect of the independent variable noted to the left, while the horizontal line represents the 95% confidence interval. If the dot is to the left of the central vertical line, it means that as the level of the independent variable increases, the likelihood of a respondent placing blame for the crisis on the current administration of her own

¹⁴As a reminder, controls included in the analysis but not shown in the figure are: centrist ideology, missing ideology, presidential approval, nationalism, political knowledge and media consumption. Although the figure presents multinomial logit estimates, the results are robust to both a multinomial probit specification and a hierarchical multinomial logistic specification treating Days in Power and Executive Power as second level variables. Results of other specifications can be found in the appendix. Analyses were conducted with STATA v11 and HLM v7. Confidence intervals in red reflect standard errors that appropriately disjoin the within and between country variance using HLM v7.

country, as opposed to the rich countries, *decreases*.

Similarly, if the dot is to the right side of the vertical line the results indicate that as the independent variable increases, the likelihood of a respondent blaming the current administration, versus the rich countries, *increases*. Finally, if the horizontal line crosses the zero line, then it should be concluded that regardless of the direction of the measured association, there is not sufficient evidence to be 95% confident of an effect in either direction.

With this in mind, the results shown in Figure 3 indicate that citizens of the Americas in the lower quintiles of wealth are more likely to blame their own government and less likely to blame the rich countries. Similarly, citizens whose income increased in the last two years are less likely to blame the current government than to blame the rich countries of the world.

With respect to subjective perceptions, although individual retrospective economic evaluations do not seem to make a big difference, citizens who perceive that the state of the national economy is worse now than a year ago are more likely to blame the current administration of their country for the economic crisis. This result supports the earlier-stated expectation for the effect of evaluations of the national economy. The fact that personal evaluations are insignificant fits with classic economic voting scholarship, which typically finds that sociotropic evaluations exert a more important effect than pocketbook ones on political evaluations and choice.

With respect to the evaluation of the performance of the incumbent administration, the results are consistent with the expectation that, other things held constant, citizens that perceive their government to be doing an effective job handling the economy are also less

likely to blame it for the economic crisis.¹⁵ The opposite is equally true: citizens who perceive their government to be handling the economy ineffectively are more likely to blame it for the crisis than the rich countries.

In addition, there seems to be ideological bias in blame attributions. This is, respondents who identify with the left are more likely to blame the rich countries for the crisis than the government of their own country, even when variables like education, income, partisanship, and presidential approval are taken into consideration.

Finally, the results indicate that older and more educated citizens are less likely to blame the current government of the country for the crisis than they are to blame rich countries. For their part, female respondents are less likely than men to blame the rich countries for the crisis, as opposed to the current administration.

In addition, to some degree context matters, in line with expectations developed based on the clarity of responsibility literature. Overall, Figure 4 shows that as the amount of time that an incumbent remains in power increases, so does the probability that the average citizen will blame her for the economic crisis. On the other hand, the analysis shows that there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that, once their time in power is held constant, executives with majorities in the legislature were more strongly blamed for the crisis than those whose parties controlled only a minority in the legislature.

The dots labeled with country names in Figure 4 are based on the raw data for the percentage of people in a country blaming the current

¹⁵ It is important to note that the results shown here cannot completely isolate the reciprocal causation between citizens' likelihood to blame the government for the economic crisis and the perceived effectiveness of the government in handling the economy. However, many of the control variables included in the model address potential causal pathways by which an effect in the opposite direction might occur.

administration, and for the executive's time in office. They show that those administrations that had been in power for more time when the survey was conducted in 2010 were more likely to be blamed for the economic crisis than administrations that had only been in office for a short period of time. The straight line in the figure represents the predicted values, based on the bivariate relationship. As can be seen in the figure, a one month increase in the time that an administration has been in power is associated with around a .19 percentage point increase in the percentage of people blaming the current government.

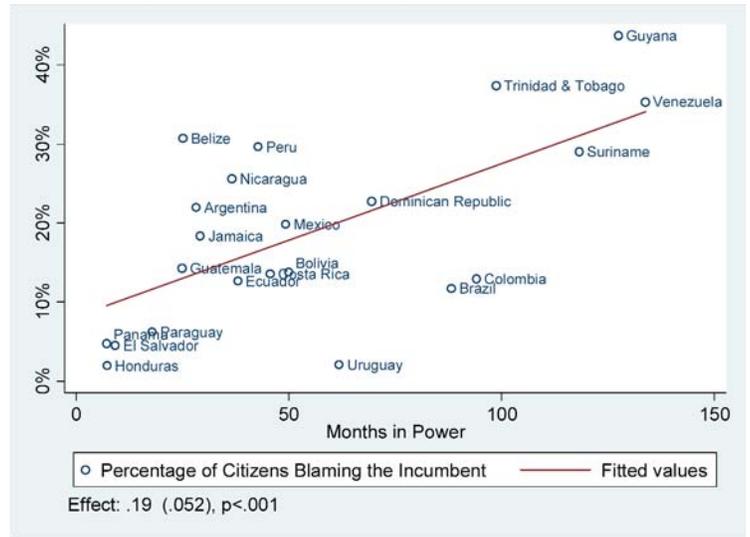
Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this report show that citizens in the lower wealth quintiles, those who reported their income to have decreased in the last two years, and those who perceive the national economy to be worse now than a year ago are more likely to blame the current administration than the rich countries of the world for the recent economic crisis in their country.

In addition, and consistent with the hypothesis presented at the beginning, I found that, holding other things constant, as citizens perceive that their government handles the economy, fights poverty, and combats unemployment more effectively, they are less likely to blame it for the current economic crisis.

This is of relevance for politicians and policymakers who need to be aware that, even

Figure 4. Bivariate Relation between Time in Power and Percentage of People Blaming the Current Government



in the face of an international economic crisis, to the extent that they implement responsible economic policies and are able to communicate their efforts to their citizens, they might be able to avoid being blamed for the economic downturn. Conversely, even in the face of an exogenous economic crisis, if citizens perceive that their government does not take efficient action to solve the problems derived from the crisis, the administration will start to be blamed for the economic troubles.

With respect to the economic context, it is important for policymakers to consider that as their term in office advances they will be more likely to be blamed for negative economic conditions. Overall, those politicians who have remained for a longer time in power should expect to pay a heftier toll for economic crises than those who are relative newcomers.

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Appendix

A1. Multinomial Logistic Regression Estimates

VARIABLES	(1) Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries [†]	(2) Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries	(3) HMNL Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries
Power of Executive	---	0.375*** (0.0963)	0.072 (0.582)
Days in Power ^{††}	---	1.489*** (0.112)	1.90*** (0.67)
Wealth	-0.267*** (0.0972)	-0.280*** (0.0972)	-0.296*** (0.084)
Household Income Increased	-0.238*** (0.0905)	-0.234*** (0.0878)	-0.212*** (0.082)
Retrospective Personal Economy	-0.0431 (0.0864)	-0.0360 (0.0863)	-0.032 (0.083)
Retrospective National Economy	-0.449*** (0.0867)	-0.507*** (0.0866)	-0.483*** (0.086)
Gov. Economic Performance	-1.473*** (0.136)	-1.794*** (0.134)	-1.51*** (0.13)
Government's Role	-0.135 (0.152)	-0.0992 (0.148)	-0.215 (0.136)
Female	0.209*** (0.0551)	0.188*** (0.0545)	0.201*** (0.054)
Age	-0.499*** (0.140)	-0.686*** (0.136)	-0.45*** (0.143)
Education	-1.104*** (0.136)	-0.989*** (0.132)	-1.071*** (0.129)
Centrist	-0.270*** (0.0731)	-0.245*** (0.0735)	-0.3*** (0.068)
Leftist	-0.311*** (0.0921)	-0.325*** (0.0879)	-0.325*** (0.088)
Missing Ideology ^{†††}	-0.0741 (0.0953)	-0.0698 (0.0971)	-0.096 (0.083)
Presidential Approval	-2.273*** (0.149)	-2.250*** (0.140)	-2.267*** (0.14)
Voted for the Incumbent	-0.480*** (0.0637)	-0.399*** (0.0625)	-0.50*** (0.06)
Nationalism	0.345** (0.172)	0.298 (0.185)	0.34** (0.143)
Political Knowledge	-0.390*** (0.119)	-0.532*** (0.116)	-0.32*** (0.103)

A1. Multinomial Logistic Regression Estimates

VARIABLES	(1) Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries [†]	(2) Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries	(3) HMNL Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries
News Consumption	-0.0747 (0.139)	-0.0650 (0.138)	-0.039 (0.127)
Constant	3.811*** (0.328)	3.614*** (0.298)	-0.357 (0.45)
Countries	22	22	22
Observations	32,937	32,937	32,937

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

[†]Country fixed effects Included but not shown in the table

^{††}Variable was recoded from 0 to 1 in order to show maximum change like the rest of the independent variables. 0 is the executive with the fewest days in power and 1 is the executive with the most days in power.

^{†††}“Missing ideology” refers to those who did not answer the ideology question. Left and Liberal are combined into the same category in the analyses, as are Right and Conservative (only one of two ideology questions, left-right or liberal-conservative, was asked in each country; see the codebooks available on the LAPOP website for more information). Right/Conservative is the baseline (comparison category).

Note: Haiti, the United States, Canada and Chile were excluded from the analyses.

A2 Multinomial Probit estimates

VARIABLES	(1) Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries [†]	(2) Blame the Current Government Vs. Blaming the Rich Countries
Power of Executive	---	0.231*** (0.0645)
Time in Power [†]	---	1.074*** (0.0756)
Wealth	-0.180*** (0.0623)	-0.177*** (0.0620)
Household Income Increased	-0.167*** (0.0586)	-0.163*** (0.0563)
Retrospective Personal Economy	-0.0281 (0.0565)	-0.0267 (0.0555)
Retrospective National Economy	-0.311*** (0.0569)	-0.355*** (0.0560)
Government Economic Performance	-1.003*** (0.0900)	-1.186*** (0.0874)
Government's Role	-0.0716 (0.0987)	-0.0470 (0.0957)
Female	0.129*** (0.0363)	0.114*** (0.0352)
Age	-0.360*** (0.0929)	-0.465*** (0.0884)
Education	-0.717*** (0.0890)	-0.646*** (0.0848)
Centrist	-0.198*** (0.0475)	-0.171*** (0.0473)
Leftist	-0.228*** (0.0601)	-0.223*** (0.0572)
Missing Ideology ^{††}	-0.0565 (0.0610)	-0.0537 (0.0616)
Presidential Approval	-1.581*** (0.0974)	-1.598*** (0.0905)
Voted for the Incumbent	-0.328*** (0.0411)	-0.275*** (0.0402)
Nationalism	0.229** (0.114)	0.195 (0.120)
Political Knowledge	-0.255*** (0.0758)	-0.354*** (0.0728)
News Consumption	-0.0337 (0.0889)	-0.0406 (0.0875)
Constant	2.613***	2.437***

Countries	(0.213)	(0.191)
Observations	22	22
	32,937	32,937

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Fixed effects included but not shown in the analysis.

† This variable was rescaled to go from 0 to 1 where 0 is the country in which the executive has had the least time in power and 1 is the country in which the executive has had the most time in power.

†† “Missing ideology” refers to those who did not answer the ideology question. Left and Liberal are combined into the same category in the analyses, as are Right and Conservative (only one of two ideology questions, left-right or liberal-conservative, was asked in each country; see the codebooks available on the LAPOP website for more information). Right/Conservative is the baseline (comparison category).

Note: Haiti, the United States, Canada and Chile were excluded from the analyses.
