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Prosperity and Protest in Brazil: The Wave of the Future for Latin America?

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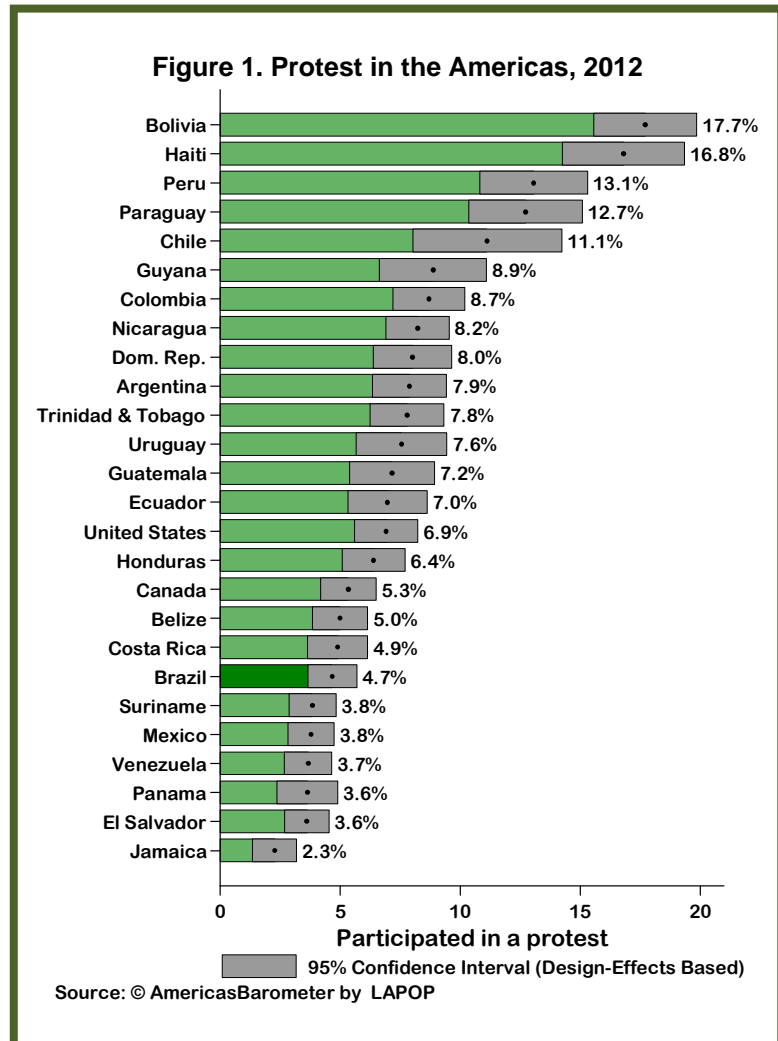
Executive Summary. Results from the 2012 AmericasBarometer Survey indicate that the current protests in Brazil are truly unprecedented in the country's recent history. However, the 2012 data from Brazil also reveal certain trends in socioeconomic development and disenchantment with government performance that have created an environment ripe for the emergence of contentious demonstrations. In a regional analysis of protest participation, rising education levels, increased use of social media, and widespread dissatisfaction with public services emerge as critical determinants of contentious politics, thus shedding light on the recent demonstrations in Brazil. More generally, these findings suggest that across Latin America, the past decade of strong economic growth, advances in education and increased access to social media may portend a new era of protests in countries such as Chile, Uruguay, and Peru that have enjoyed similar periods of rapid socio-economic development amidst high levels of citizens dissatisfaction with public services.

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With all eyes on Brazil during the recent Confederation's Cup—the precursor to next summer's World Cup—the country emerged as a picture of social disarray. What began on June 6 as a local conflict over a hike in public transportation costs in São Paulo evolved into a nationwide indictment of low quality public services, widespread political corruption, and worsening inflation. These extraordinary mass demonstrations are the largest and most contentious in Brazil since 1992, when protestors called for and eventually achieved the deposal of a sitting president.¹ As hundreds of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets throughout the month of June, it appeared that the “country of the future” had now become embroiled in a highly contentious present.

What led to this explosion of protests in Brazil? Was there any way to predict that Latin America's most notable economic and political success story of the 2000s was on the verge of entering such a tumultuous period? Finally, what might these protests in Brazil imply for the rest of Latin American and Caribbean countries? In this *Insights* report, we look to the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey for answers.²



Recent Protest Participation in Brazil

As most commentators have noted, the events of June are unprecedented in the recent history of Brazil. As recently as 2012, Brazil registered one of the lowest rates of protest participation in region, with only 4.7 percent of Brazilians claiming they had taken part in a protest rally or public demonstration in the previous year.³ This rate places Brazil well behind fellow middle-income South American countries like Argentina and Chile, and even behind the United States and Canada.

¹ Notably, that president, Fernando Collor, has revitalized his political career and is now a senator for the state of Alagoas.

² Funding for the 2012 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>

³ 41,632 persons were asked the question **PROT3**: “In the last 12 months, have you participated in a demonstration or protest march?” The non-response rate was 0.51 for the whole sample.

Because protest participation has been so low in Brazil—since the AmericasBarometer began in Brazil in 2006, it has never recorded a rate of over 6 percent—it would seem difficult to glean much from predictors of past participation. Below we look to other socioeconomic trends that might have made Brazil a ticking time bomb for contentious political activity.

Explaining the Current Protests

“Resource mobilization” theory argues that protest movement formation depends both on the existence of a particular grievance *and* contentious actors’ access to the organizational resources that allow for a movement’s dissemination and growth (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983). In other words, in addition to the presence of some motivating issue, potential protestors must also possess the tools necessary to foment and consolidate their movement by spreading it to additional actors. This approach dispels the notion that protestors are extremists in pursuit of drastic reforms and is backed by substantial empirical evidence (e.g. Norris 2002, Norris et al. 2005, Dalton et al. 2010, Booth and Seligson 2009).

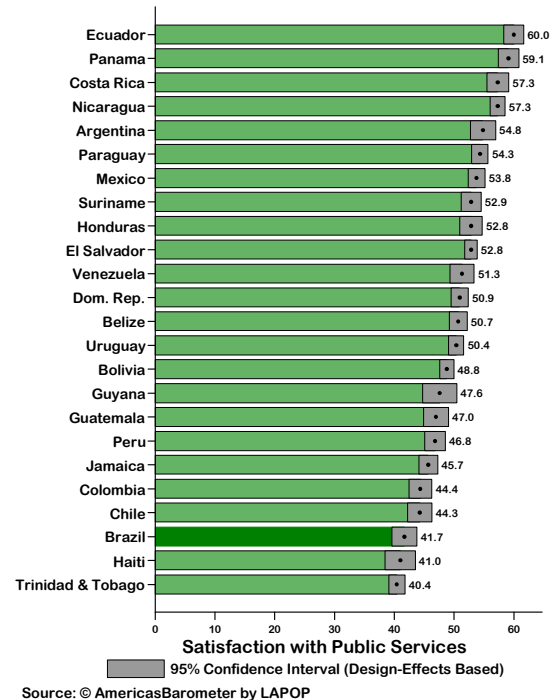
In this section, we take these two factors in turn, focusing on the potential grievances and organizational resources that could have facilitated the current demonstrations in Brazil.

Seeds of Discontent?

Public Services

Despite Brazil’s substantial economic and social gains over the past decade, Brazilians rank as some of Latin America’s most dissatisfied citizens regarding the government’s provision of social services. Much of this probably has to do with the high taxes that Brazilians pay

Figure 2. Satisfaction with Public Services in the Americas, 2012



(about 36% of GDP), and the perception that citizens are paying rich country taxes for poor country services.⁴

While the current protests are unprecedented in Brazil, conditions were ripe for widespread demonstrations.

Figure 2 summarizes Brazilians’ approval of three different public services: the quality of roads, public schools, and public health services. Respondents rate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction on a four-

point scale for each of these services. We recode those responses on a 0-100 scale where higher scores reflect higher satisfaction with services. From the average level of satisfaction with public service provision in these three areas, it is clear that Brazil ranks very low in Latin America, ahead of only Haiti and Trinidad and Tobago. This estimate coincides with recent

⁴ “Taking to the Streets.” *The Economist*, June 22, 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21579857-bubbling-anger-about-high-prices-corruption-and-poor-public-services-boils-over>

news reports and some protestors' messages that highlight the failure of Brazil's public sector to match heightened expectations with corresponding improvements in service quality.

Perceptions of Corruption

Another common rallying cry of protestors has been that Brazil's political system is fundamentally corrupt. In 2012, around 65 percent of Brazilians perceived that the political system was corrupt – a figure that is not necessarily high by regional standards, but which merits further attention as an individual level determinant of participation in protests.

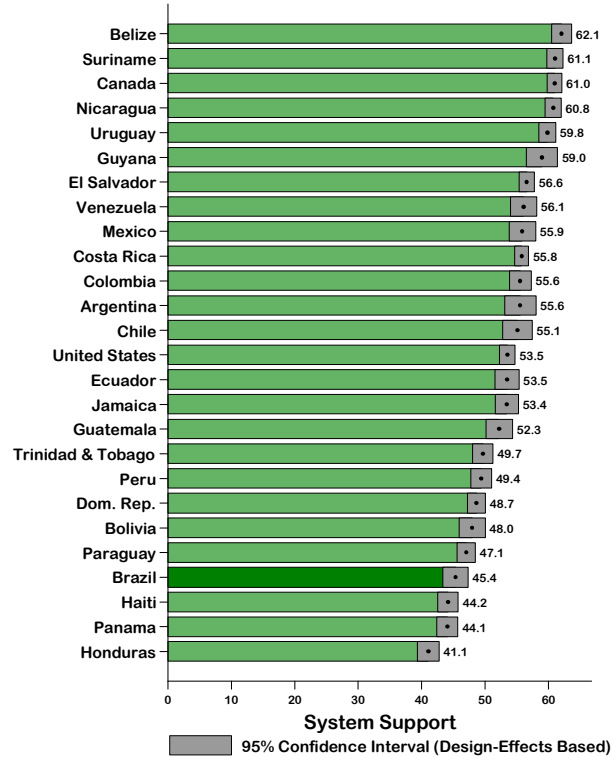
System Support

Despite its recent economic boom, in 2012 Brazil ranked 22nd among 26 countries in the Americas in terms of support for national political institutions (Figure 3).⁵ As Booth and Seligson (2009) have noted, this type of disenchantment with the political system can motivate individuals to adopt more aggressive forms of political participation in an effort to make their voices heard. Thus, the low levels of support for key national political institutions we observe in Brazil might have created an environment where mass protests could potentially take hold, even if they had yet to actually appear in Brazil.

Political Efficacy

Another potential source of frustration theoretically fueling these protests is widespread dissatisfaction with Brazil's system of democratic representation. In 2012, less than

Figure 3. Support for the Political System in the Americas, 2012



Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

35% of Brazilians believed that politicians were interested in what people like them thought, an indication of how disconnected most Brazilians feel from their political system.

Increasing Organizational Resources

The basis of the resource mobilization approach to understanding protest is that protestors are generally educated, interested in politics, and have access to organizational resources via traditional civil society groups or more recently, social media networks. In other words, the citizens who protest are usually the same ones who participate through “conventional” vehicles, and are, on average, more educated, affluent, and politically engaged than non-protestors (e.g. Norris et al. 2005, Dalton et al. 2010).

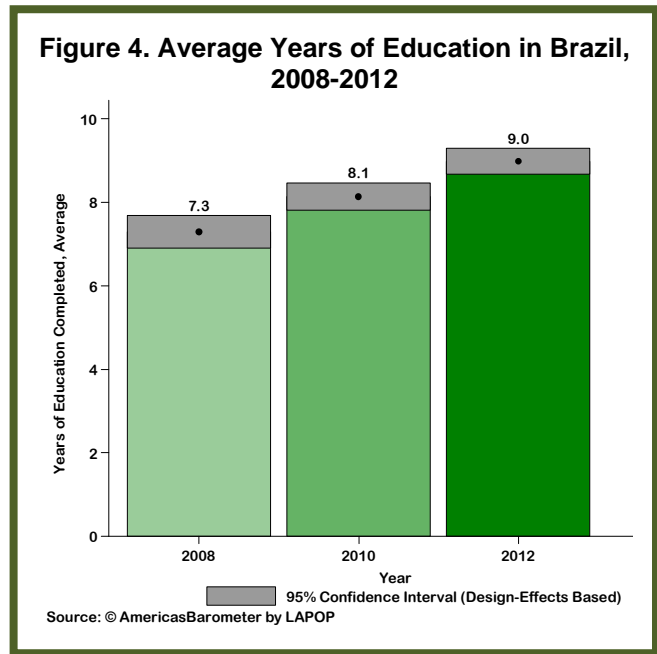
⁵ Support for national institutions is measured by scale summarizing results of seven B-series questions (B2 B3 B4 B6 B21 B13 B31): **B2.** To what extent do you respect the political institutions of (country)? **B3.** To what extent do you think that citizens' basic rights are well protected by the political system of (country)? **B4.** To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of (country)? **B6.** To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of (country)? **B13.** To what extent do you trust the National Legislature? **B21.** To what extent do you trust the political parties? **B31.** To what extent do you trust the Supreme Court?

According to analysts, thirty-five million Brazilians have climbed out of poverty since 2003.⁶ Whereas in the early 1990s as much as 25 percent of the Brazilian population lived in extreme poverty, that number fell to 2.2 percent in 2009. In 2011, Brazil's Gini coefficient, a common measure of income inequality, reached a 50-year low of .52.⁷

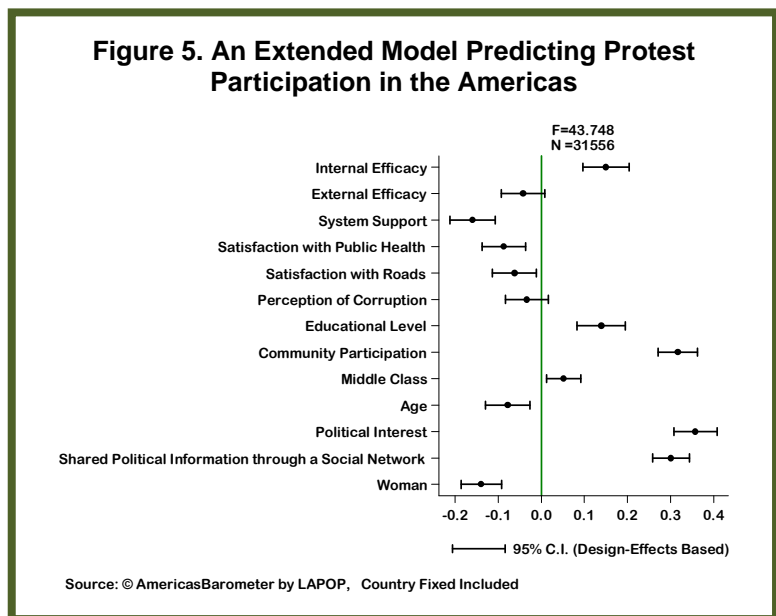
This economic progress is borne out in the survey data as well. According to the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey of Brazil, the country experienced substantial increases in average years of education completed, rising from an average of 7.3 in 2008 to 9.0 in 2012. Moreover, in 2012 Brazil ranked third to last in Latin America in food insecurity, illustrating the vast gains in poverty reduction obtained by a country once stricken by some of the most severe poverty in the region. These developments create a more easily mobilized society, as more educated and less impoverished citizens are more likely to have access to groups that recruit and organize activism via interpersonal relationships or the Internet, and are more likely to be aware of the issues facing Brazilians that could potentially merit involvement in contentious modes of participation.

A Predictive Model of Protest

Figure 5 presents findings from a logistic regression that analyzes individual-level predictors of Latin American



respondents' self-reported protest participation in the year prior to the 2012 survey. We use a



⁶ Gupta, Girish. "Brazil's Protests: Social Inequality and World Cup Spending Fuel Mass Unrest." *TIME Magazine*, June 18, 2013. <http://world.time.com/2013/06/18/brazils-protests-social-inequality-and-world-cup-spending-fuel-mass-unrest/>

⁷ The Gini Index ranges from 0-1 with a higher score representing a more unequal distribution of income. The Gini coefficient for neighboring Uruguay is .45, These data are drawn from the World Bank Brazil country review, accessed June 25, 2013: www.worldbank.org/en/country/brazil/overview and the World Bank development indicators page: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>

regional analysis because there are too few observations of protest participation in the 2012 data from Brazil to offer sufficient insight into the recent mass demonstrations. This regional model, then, offers a more general treatment of what causes individuals to protest and allows us to investigate the explanatory value of some of the factors discussed above.

As predicted by the resource mobilization theory of protest, education, community activity,⁸ and interest in politics have a powerful positive impact on the likelihood that one participates in a protest. Clearly protestors across the region are more educated and politically involved citizens, who probably have access to the organizational tools necessary for movement mobilization. Protestors also appear to be young, male, and emerge from the middle class. Insofar as recent socioeconomic trends have increased the number of people who belong to these groups, Brazil has become a country where mass protests are more likely.

One of the most interesting findings from this logistic regression is the importance of information sharing through social networks in mobilizing protest participation. In

Brazil, where Internet usage has risen from roughly 3 percent of the population in 2000 to 45 percent in 2012,⁹ this increased ability to share information regarding movement activities clearly plays an important role in explaining why the current demonstrations arose now as opposed to before.

Discontent like that expressed by protestors in Brazil also seems to have an important impact on the probability that one protests across the region. Specifically, satisfaction with public services like healthcare provision and the quality of schools *decreases* the probability of protesting (conversely, dissatisfaction with these services will *increase* the likelihood of

⁸ Community participation is calculated as the average response to three questions regarding involvement in a religious organization, parents' association, or general community improvement association.

⁹ Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics for Brazil, accessed July 3, 2013. www.internetworldstats.com/sa/br.htm

protest). Considering the widespread criticisms of public services expressed in Brazil in 2012, this finding would seem prescient in explaining the current conflict. Perceptions of corruption, on the other hand, fail to correlate with protest behavior.

In 2012, on the heels of a decade of impressive economic growth, the standard LAPOP series of items measuring support for the system was surprisingly low. We now believe that low score was a leading indicator of the protests that have broken out, the particular catalyst for which is of course unpredictable. In the regional model, an increase in level of system

support decreases the probability of protest participation. In fact, system support has an even stronger effect on participating in a protest than satisfaction with public services, the most oft-mentioned

rallying-cry in Brazil.

Finally, measures of efficacy have an interesting dual effect on protest participation. Internal efficacy—or the belief that one understands the most important issues facing the country—has an important positive impact on the probability of protesting. If internal efficacy has increased along with levels of education and interest in politics in Brazil, it might be important in explaining why so many Brazilians currently feel affirmed in expressing their opinions in such an open and confrontational manner. However, external efficacy—the belief that politicians are interested in what the people think—decreases the probability of protesting, suggesting those people have faith in more traditional, formal modes of representation.

Socioeconomic progress combined with low quality political institutions and poor public services might signal the rise of protest throughout Latin America.

Conclusion

The recent protests in Brazil have been unprecedented due both to their sheer size and seemingly spontaneous nature. However, according to results from the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey, Brazil displayed several harbingers of potential protest activity, including widespread dissatisfaction with public services and core democratic institutions, increasingly high levels of education and Internet usage, and decreasing levels of poverty. Though a substantial majority of Brazilians also perceived that the political system was corrupt, we find no direct effect of these perceptions on the probability of protest activity.

In many ways, the protests appear to be achieving their goals as we understand them from the AmericasBarometer data. Following the demonstrations against the bus fare hike in São Paulo, the local government reneged on the proposed rate increase. On June 24 President Dilma Rousseff announced an additional 23 billion dollars would be dedicated to public transportation, and renewed the government's commitment to improving a variety of other public services. More surprisingly, she announced a five-point proposal to reform the political system through constitutional amendment that included proposed changes to campaign finance law, the electoral system, replacement of senators, votes in Congress, and political party alliances.¹⁰

Should these protests be viewed in a positive or negative light? On one hand, they appear motivated by grievances related to poor public services and a lack of faith in key political institutions—areas where the Brazilian government obviously needs to improve. While most of the demonstrations have been peaceful, violent actions on the part of both the protestors and the government are also

concerning. However, the findings presented above also indicate that the current demonstrations might have been made possible by a more educated and politically active citizenry that is finally taking ownership of their democracy. Indeed, one could argue that Brazil's enormous social and economic gains over the past decade actually lie at the root of the current demonstrations, which have been led by educated, middle-class Internet users rather than fringe extremists.

Taking a step back from Brazil, then, our findings suggest that conditions may be ripe for an outburst of protest in many of the region's countries where rising education rates and sustained economic growth combine with low quality political institutions and inferior and sporadic public service provision. While few countries will have a catalyst for protest similar to Brazil's staging of multiple international sporting events, the potential for such widespread protests appears to exist in many Latin American regimes.

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¹⁰<http://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2013/07/dilma-sugere-que-plebiscito-aborde-ao-menos-5-temas-diz-cardozo.html>

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Appendix

Table 1. Determinants of Protesting in the Americas, 2012

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Female	-.1390**	.02401
Shared Political Information	.3011**	.0216
Interest in Politics	.3580**	.02537
Age	-.0783**	.02628
Middle Class	.0516**	.02026
Community Participation	.3167**	.0234
Years of education	.1389**	.0286
Perception of Corruption	-.0332	.0254
Satisfaction with Roads	-.0624**	.02591
Satisfaction with Public Health	-.0864**	.0258
System Support	-.1595**	.0267
External Efficacy	-.0418	.0258
Internal Efficacy	.1502**	.0274
Mexico	-.1275**	.03794
Guatemala	-.02566	.03578
El Salvador	-.1355**	.03728
Honduras	-.01745	.03639
Nicaragua	.03326	.03256
Costa Rica	-.0503	.03685
Panama	-.1319**	.04537
Colombia	.00386	.03346
Ecuador	-.03364	.03568
Bolivia	.21024**	.04783
Peru	.10680**	.03217
Paraguay	.10808**	.0336
Chile	.09379**	.03853
Brazil	-.114 **	.03497
Venezuela	-.17263**	.03833
Argentina	.03544	.03461
Dominican Republic	-.05433	.03370
Haiti	.15017**	.03519
Jamaica	-.2386 **	.04570
Guyana	.05150	.03589
Trinidad & Tobago	-.05343	.03428
Belize	-.04803	.03388
Suriname	-.09950**	.03857
Constant	-2.732	.0322
F	43.75	
Number of Observations	31,556	

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at ** p<0.05. Country of Reference: Uruguay