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Can Democracy Exist Without Parties? Education Increases Support for Party-Based Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Executive Summary. Can democracy exist without political parties? In this *Insights* report, we examine responses to this question, using data from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer surveys. We begin with the notion that there are two opposing conceptions of democracy: one in which parties are critical for democratic governance, and one in which parties are unnecessary. Our analyses reveal that, across the Americas, political parties are generally regarded as necessary, but there is a relatively large degree of cross-national and individual-level variation in responses. Of the factors we examine, one of the most significant predictors of attitudes concerning the importance of parties to democracy is education. Those with higher levels of education are more likely to disagree with the idea that democracy can exist without parties. Moreover, as education levels increase, people become more likely to associate support for democracy with the belief that democracy relies on political parties to function effectively.

LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar in the Spring of 2012. That class, HONS186, was taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister and Margarita Corral acted as teaching assistant. Author names are listed here in alphabetical order; biographies of the authors are provided in the report appendix.

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Are parties truly essential for democracy? Throughout modern history, this question has been debated by a range of individuals. Some, like George Washington, have warned against political parties because of their potential to divide and corrupt the nation (Washington 1796). Others, including many political scientists, insist that political parties are necessary for political progress (Aldrich 1995, Bryce and Bryce 1921, Dahl 1990, Downs 1957; see also Schattschneider 1942). Thus, it appears that in theory two conceptions of democracy exist: one in which parties are vital to the democratic system, and one in which democracy can exist without a formal party system.

In this *Insights*¹ report, we explore the factors that influence which of these two conceptions of democracy the public holds. We find that education not only influences whether or not people believe that political parties are necessary for democracy, but also conditions the extent to which they relate support for democracy with support for political parties' role in democracy.

This report focuses on the following question from the 2010 round of the LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey.² Interviewees were asked to rate their response on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 7 indicating "strongly agree."³

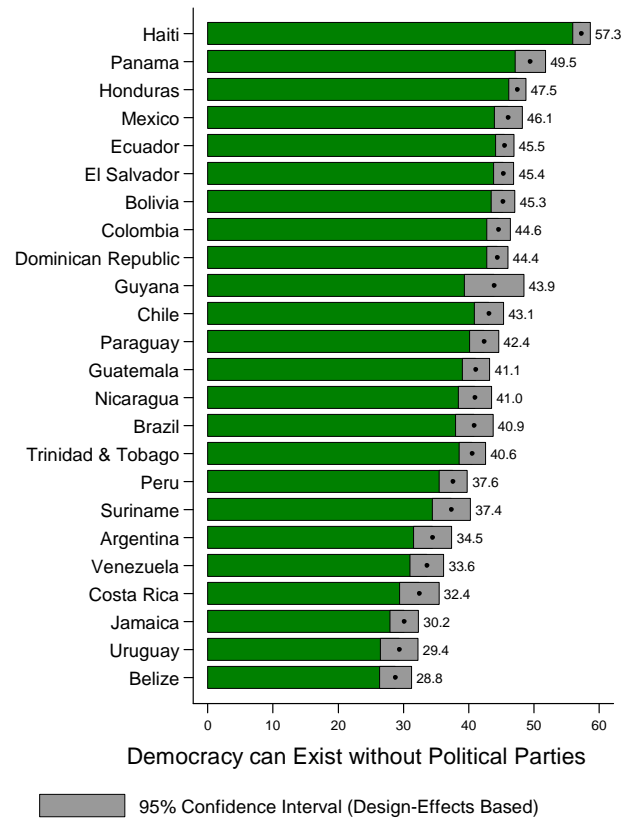
¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php> The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

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 The question was asked to 42,486 respondents across all 26 countries (a split sample format in the US and Canada meant the question was asked of only 750 individuals in each of these two countries, though we exclude these countries from analysis here in order to focus on Latin America and the Caribbean). The non-response rate for this question for the entire pooled sample was 7.32%.

Figure 1. Average Belief that Democracy can Exist without Political Parties, 2010



DEM 23: Democracy can exist without political parties. How much do you agree or disagree?

Figure 1 reports mean responses to this question, on a rescaled index that runs from 0 to 100. The figure shows that our variable exhibits considerable variation across Latin America and the Caribbean; the two extreme cases (Belize at the low end and Haiti at the high end) are separated by a range of just under 30 units on the 0-100 scale. The national averages seem to cluster around the low 40s with the mean across all nations landing at 41.3 units, indicating that, considering Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole, the average citizen displays only a slight preference for party-based democracy. Citizens of Haiti tend to have the strongest belief that democracy can exist without political parties, while in Belize the overall opinion tends toward greater faith in the role of political

parties in the democratic system, as demonstrated by its average score of 28.8. Another noteworthy result is Venezuela's low placement on the distribution. Considering that Hugo Chávez's leadership style has tended to rely on his personality and on political structures that differ from traditional democratic parties, some might be surprised to find that the Venezuelan public has a high degree of support for political parties' essential role in democracy.

Since the 26 nations surveyed show a substantial degree of variation in average responses to this question, it could be that country-level factors help predict attitudes on this variable; however, we tested whether polarization, level of democracy, or GDP were significant predictors and found no support for any of these relationships.

Therefore, we turn to an examination of various individual-level factors that help to explain the public's reaction to the idea of democracy without political parties. Our key focus is the influence of education as a direct predictor of belief in the necessity of parties and as a factor that conditions the ways in which people link support for democracy to the need for the parties within that system.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of the Belief that Democracy Can Exist Without Parties

Existing scholarship suggests a role for socioeconomic and demographic factors, especially education, in influencing public opinion about political parties. According to Gronke and Levitt (2007), there is some debate over whether heightened levels of education and knowledge of political systems leads to trust in the political institutions of one's country

or, instead, to cynicism; yet, at the same time, they argue that the more educated are also less likely to want to delegate power to a strong leader.⁴ Given that we are not examining trust *per se*, but instead whether one conceives of democracy as needing parties, we draw from this discussion the notion that education may exert a strong, direct, and negative influence on the belief that democracy can exist without political parties.

Belief that parties are unnecessary for democracy is highest in the Haiti. Considering Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole, the average citizen displays only a slight preference for party-based democracy.

Literature on individual characteristics has indicated that age is also related to a person's attachment to the political system, with older citizens exhibiting stronger party ties and younger people showing more skepticism (Converse 1969, Dalton 1984, Henn, Weinstein,

and Wring 2002). Therefore, we suspect that being older is associated with lower values of our dependent variable, since such a response indicates support for the role of political parties in democracy.

In Figure 2,⁵ we assess the above expectations, while also examining the role of urban versus rural area of residence and wealth.⁶ More specifically, the figure presents the results of an OLS regression analysis in which the belief that political parties are not necessary for democracy is predicted by education, age, gender, location

⁴ Interestingly, varying levels of education have also been connected to the types of parties people support, with the lesser educated tending to show greater support for parties with a religious or highly conservative background, and more educated people favoring liberal parties (Arian and Barnes 1974). Exploration of this tendency here is outside of the scope of this report.

⁵ See full results of the models in the Appendix.

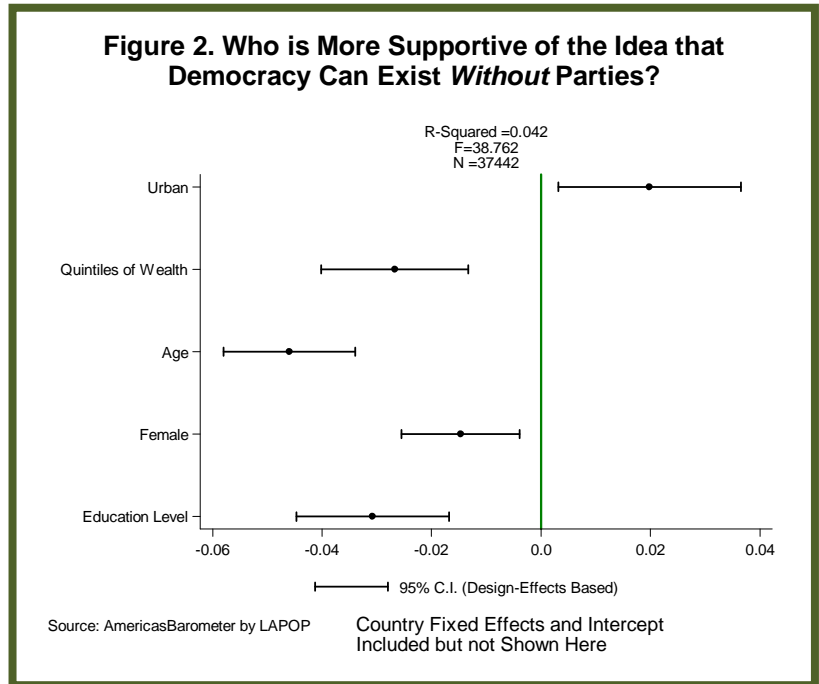
⁶ See Abby Córdova, 2009, "Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth using Household Asset Indicators" for a description of the construction of the wealth index:

<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/I0806en.pdf>

(urban vs. rural) and quintiles of wealth. It is important to recall that higher values on our dependent variable indicate greater support for the notion that democracy can exist without parties.

The independent variables are shown on the vertical axis, while belief in the need for political parties is the dependent variable. Since none of the dots' corresponding bars (which represent 95% confidence intervals) intersect the vertical "0" line in our figure, we conclude that all five variables are statistically significant. Dots falling to the left of the "0" line indicate a negative correlation, which for our purposes means that greater values on the predictor are associated with a tendency to reject the idea that democracy can exist without parties. Dots falling to the right of the "0" line, on the other hand, indicate a positive correlation, indicating an association between higher values on that variable and the belief that political parties are not necessary for democracy.

Figure 2 shows that the wealthier, older, and more educated, along with women, have lower agreement with the statement that democracy can exist without political parties, while living in an urban area is associated with a greater belief that parties are unnecessary. The strongest predictor of the belief in the need for political parties is age. However, education, which is the principal focus of this paper, also shows a significant relationship. As we expected, education is negatively associated with the dependent variable, which means that the more educated have a greater attachment to the notion of political parties as important to



democracy. In the next section, we further explore how education affects individuals' beliefs by interacting it with support for democracy.

Education's Influence on Conceptions of Democracy

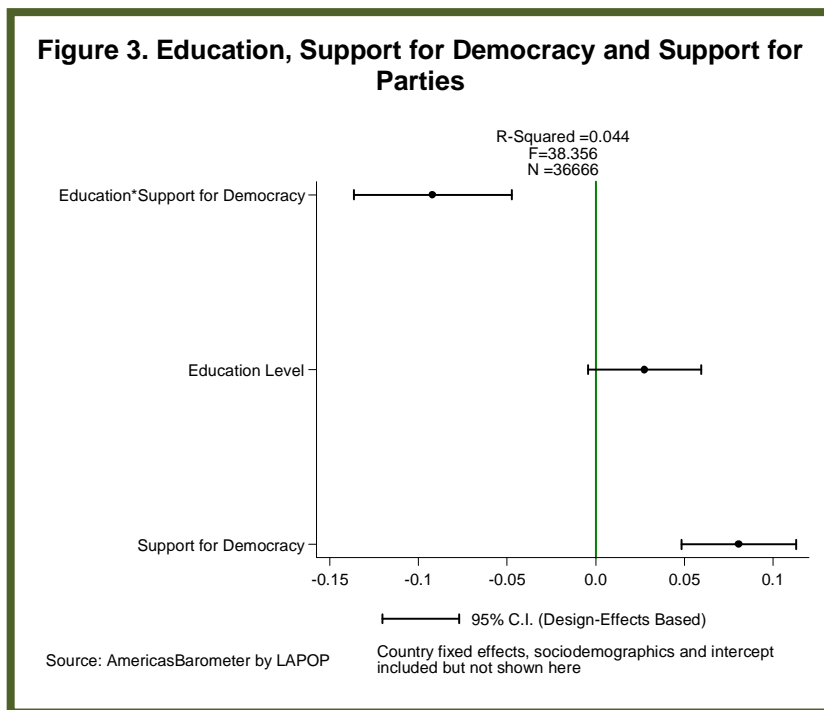
In this section we continue to focus on education, while at the same time introducing a more complex argument and model. Specifically, we argue that people's level of education influences how they relate their degree of support for democracy with the notion that democracy can exist without political parties.

Prior research indicates that an individual's beliefs about democracy are highly conditioned by his or her education level and, consequently, we suspect that education will act to produce different conceptions of the role of parties in democracy. In particular, several studies have noted the association between higher education levels and a stronger support for democracy (Dennis 1996, Evans and Whitefield 1995). Political knowledge, which is a logical result of greater education, has been observed to have the same relationship (Holmberg 2002). By the same token, education has also been linked to a rejection of authoritarian principles in favor of more democratic values (Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Shleifer 2006, Rose and Mishler 1996).⁷ Given that parties are traditionally key vehicles for political participation, this may then simultaneously increase individuals' belief that parties are necessary, and thus lead to a tendency for the highly educated to have belief systems in which support for democracy and belief in the need for political parties are strongly related.⁸

⁷ Glaeser, Ponzetto, and Shleifer (2006) observe as well that increased education levels are associated with the shift from dictatorship to democracy, but not in the opposite direction—education tends to stabilize democracy, and the authors propose that schooling may help to socialize citizens into a culture of political participation (on the general relationship between education and democracy, see also Lipset 1959).

⁸ Other studies have suggested that the opposite may be true: the highly educated may be more likely to turn away from parties. Although Finkel, Sabatini, and Bevis (2000) felt education was linked to support for democracy, they found that increased awareness of political systems leads people to critique them; from this, one could extrapolate the notion that higher levels of education lead individuals to be less trusting of parties. Similar findings suggest that as people become more educated, they tend to detach from the party system because they feel more capable of making political decisions independently (Dalton and Wattenberg 2001). While these authors' arguments run counter to our expectation that higher education will lead people to support a democracy that depends on the traditional structure of political parties, it is possible that their findings

Figure 3. Education, Support for Democracy and Support for Parties



To test this expectation, we created a model that interacts education with support for democracy.⁹ The results of this model are shown in Figure 3, which is presented in the same format as Figure 2; the analysis includes the same measures as before, but now also includes

are still consistent with our hypothesis. Although educated people may begin to detach from the party system and scrutinize it, this does not necessarily imply that they do not find it necessary for democracy; on the contrary, they may still view it as a useful tool that simply needs to be improved, as opposed to rejected altogether.

⁹ There is a suggested link between slow economic growth and political instability (Alesina et al. 1996). Furthermore, when it comes to the economy, people usually look to place blame or credit with one concrete group of people, especially when these leaders are easy to identify. (Anderson 2000). One might then consider whether perceived economic conditions are a significant determinant of whether or not a respondent believes political parties are necessary for democracy. However, examining this lies outside the scope of this particular report.

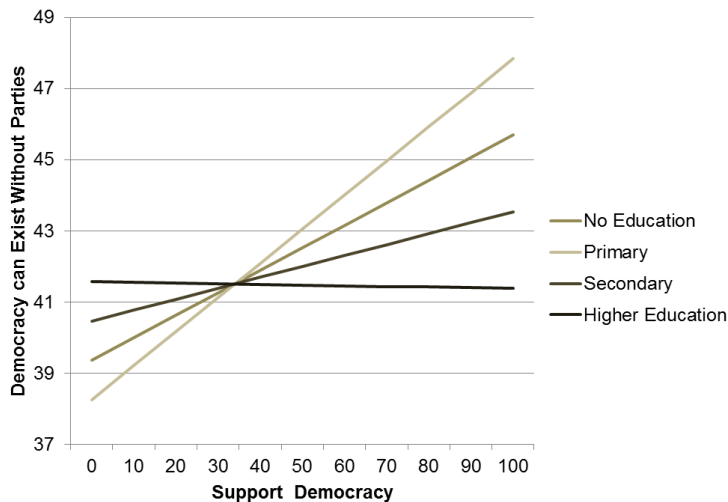
support for democracy¹⁰ and its interaction with education.^{11,12}

As before, the coefficients reported in the figure are standardized and confidence intervals falling entirely to the right of the “0” line indicate a positive correlation, which means that

belief that political parties are necessary for democracy.

The first variable presented in Figure 3 illustrates the interaction between education and support for democracy. Interaction terms are difficult to interpret directly from regression output, but we can nonetheless draw two conclusions. First, the interaction is significant, which lends support to our expectation that education conditions the relationship between support for democracy and our dependent variable. Second, the direct effect of support for democracy (the third variable listed in Figure 3) is significant and positive. Given that this result represents the effect of support for democracy for those with little to no education, we can conclude that for those with little to no education, support for democracy is positively and significantly related to a belief that democracy can exist without political parties.

Figure 4. Predicted Attitudes toward Party-Based Democracy at Varying Levels of Support for Democracy and Education



Source: The AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

higher values of a variable are associated with the belief that democracy can function without political parties. Conversely, variables whose confidence intervals fall entirely to the left of the “0” line show a negative relationship, meaning that increased values are associated with the

Because of the difficulty of interpreting Figure 3, we refer the reader to Figure 4. This new figure expresses the conditioning relationship in a different way, by presenting the predicted value of our dependent variable for people with different levels of support for democracy for each of the four education brackets. The darkest line shows the predicted relationship for those with higher education, while the lightest line shows the relationship for those without any education. The two lines in the middle represent the relationship among those with primary education and those with secondary education, respectively.¹³

As Figure 4 shows, people with secondary education or lower tend to reject the need for

¹⁰ We measured this using the ING4 variable, which asks “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?”

¹¹ When we ran the analysis with these new variables, all of the socioeconomic and demographic variables from Figure 2 remained statistically significant except for gender, which became insignificant.

¹² We also tested a model that included a control for trust in political parties; the coefficient is significant and positive, but including it does not change the results shown in Figure 3 and therefore, for the sake of parsimony, we omit this control variable.

¹³ The predicted levels of support for a democracy without political parties were calculated for male respondents with all other variables set at their mean.

political parties in democracy as their support for democracy increases, which suggests that they ascribe to a definition of democracy that does not include parties. This trend is the strongest for those with no education and weakens as education increases, with highly educated citizens showing a weak trend in the opposite direction. This means that for this demographic, higher support for democracy is (at least modestly) associated with a greater belief in the need for political parties. It therefore appears that formal education influences an individual's conception of democracy and the role of parties in it. While those with lower levels of education are able to simultaneously approve of democracy and cast off the role of parties in democratic government, the most educated in society view parties as a necessary element of democracy, and express support for democracy alongside the belief in the necessity of political parties.

[T]hose with the highest levels of education tend to support a vision of democracy that necessarily includes political parties.

Conclusion

In this *Insights* report, we have demonstrated that people with different levels of education perceive the relationship between political parties and democracy in drastically different ways. Whereas those with the highest levels of education tend to support a vision of democracy that necessarily includes political parties, many people with lower levels of education seem to hold a view of democracy in which parties are not vital. This is a surprising result that underscores the role of education in the formation of the public's political views and understanding of government structure.

Nevertheless, we must consider the possibility that the wording of the question used to measure political party support influenced the results of this survey. Since respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a statement that

claimed democracy can exist without political parties, a response of "disagree" introduces a confusing double-negative situation in which disagreeing with the statement somewhat counter-intuitively translates to support for the role of parties in democracy. In short, this is a difficult question and the ability to understand it may have varied by levels of education. Future scholarship on this topic might test different variations on this question, and determine whether the complex wording affects response patterns in ways that would be important for the conclusions we have drawn here.

Assuming that the findings reported here are accurate, the significant impact of education on people's overall definition of democracy bears important implications for public policy.¹⁴ It reinforces the role of schooling in the

formation of people's civic values, which suggests that in addition to continuing efforts to encourage people to pursue higher levels of education, policymakers who value political parties as vehicles for democratic communication and representation should consider including greater amounts of civic education in the early school years to give people with even a limited education a basic background in the functioning of democracy. While the importance of education is by no means a new concept, the results of this *Insights* report help to further justify it by suggesting that education can lead to more consistent public support for the role of party systems within modern democratic politics.

¹⁴ The fact that average levels of support for party-based democracy are fairly low across Latin America and the Caribbean also suggests that parties could do a better job securing the support of the people (see *Radiografía a los Partidos*, June 22, 2012).

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Appendix –

Table 1. Predictors of Support for the Idea that Democracy can Function without Parties
in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Education	-0.031*	0.007	0.028	0.016
Female	-0.015*	0.006	-0.012*	0.006
Age	-0.046*	0.006	-0.047*	0.006
Urban	0.020*	0.008	0.018*	0.009
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.027*	0.007	-0.029*	0.007
Support for Democracy			0.081*	0.016
Support for Democracy * Education			-0.092*	0.023
Mexico	0.088*	0.010	0.092*	0.010
Guatemala	0.060*	0.010	0.065*	0.010
El Salvador	0.083*	0.009	0.087*	0.009
Honduras	0.094*	0.009	0.098*	0.009
Nicaragua	0.058*	0.010	0.059*	0.011
Costa Rica	0.013	0.011	0.013	0.011
Panama	0.107*	0.010	0.109*	0.010
Colombia	0.081*	0.009	0.085*	0.009
Ecuador	0.118*	0.012	0.122*	0.012
Bolivia	0.116*	0.013	0.118*	0.013
Peru	0.044*	0.010	0.048*	0.010
Paraguay	0.067*	0.010	0.071*	0.010
Chile	0.084*	0.011	0.088*	0.011
Brazil	0.076*	0.014	0.079*	0.014
Venezuela	0.021	0.011	0.022	0.011
Argentina	0.023*	0.011	0.024*	0.011
Dominican Rep.	0.078*	0.009	0.083*	0.009
Haiti	0.156*	0.009	0.159*	0.010
Jamaica	0.007	0.010	0.009	0.010
Guyana	0.077*	0.015	0.079*	0.015
Trinidad & Tobago	0.059*	0.010	0.061*	0.010
Belize	-0.006	0.010	-0.003	0.010
Suriname	0.045*	0.011	0.047*	0.012
Constant	-0.035*	0.008	-0.034*	0.008
<i>R-squared</i>	0.042		0.044	
<i>Number of Observations</i>	37,442		36,666	

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

Country of Reference: Uruguay

Appendix: Author Biographies*

Patrick Ahern has just finished his freshman year in the College Honors Scholars Program at Vanderbilt University. He is planning to major in Economics, with a double minor in Corporate Strategy and Financial Economics. He is a member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity and actively participates in community service. Eventually, he plans on entering the business world, hopefully as a part of an entrepreneurial venture. Patrick is originally from Cincinnati, OH.

Neal Cotter is a sophomore College Scholar from Los Angeles, CA majoring in Spanish and Mathematics. On campus, he works as Training Director at WRVU, produces and hosts a cooking show on VTV, and writes music reviews for the Hustler. His plans after graduation are still undecided, but he is considering going into Marketing or Human Resources.

Duncan Hall has just finished his freshman year in the College Honors Scholars Program at Vanderbilt University. Originally from Lago Vista, TX, he is currently planning on majoring in Public Policy, with a double minor in Spanish and Theater. He is a member of Tongue-N-Cheek, Vanderbilt's comedic improv troupe, a member of Vanderbilt University Theater and an active participant in Manna Project. Currently, he plans on working in Foreign Service in Latin America or pursuing an acting career.

**Author names are listed alphabetically. Margarita Corral, a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at Vanderbilt University, acted as a technical consultant on this report.*