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Who Trusts the Mass Media in Latin America?

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Executive Summary. This *Insights* report focuses on and assesses selected explanations of levels of trust in the mass media among citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean. On average, trust in the media is evident in the region; yet, many citizens remain unconvinced. To explain varying levels of trust, I focus on a range of indicators of political awareness. Interestingly, the results suggest that there are systematic differences in how different dimensions of political awareness relate to trust in the media. Thus, the report paints a nuanced portrait of the correlates of trust in the media in the region and raises many important questions that merit further study in the context of the Americas.

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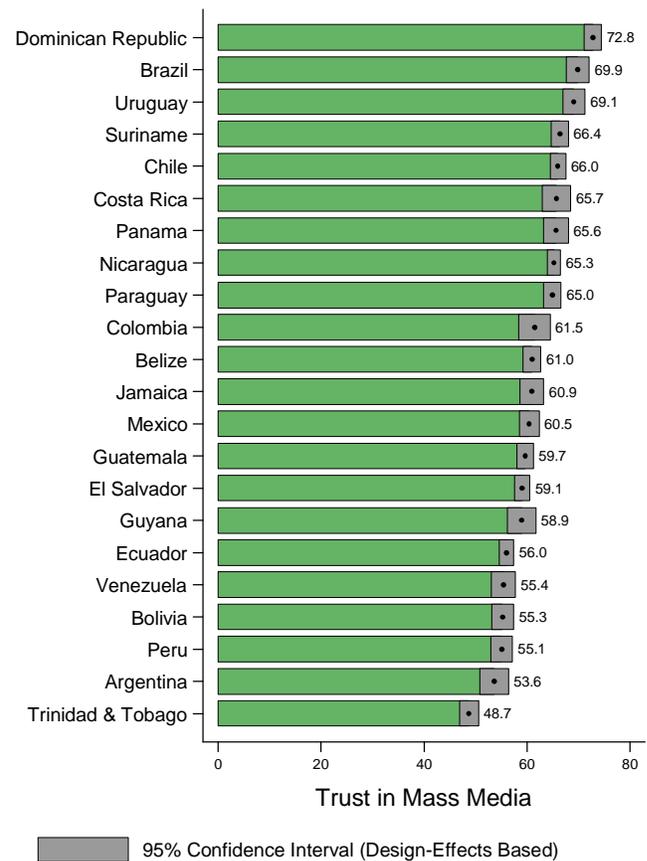
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In democracies, the media plays an intermediary role between elites and the mass public. When a society allows and protects the free exchange of ideas and when the media make use of that freedom, both elites and the mass public can benefit. Indeed, under these conditions, the media can be both an effective vehicle for criticism of ruling elites and a vital medium through which elites seek support for their electoral ambitions (Sen 1999, 152). At the individual level, the availability of political news, its content, and the way in which an individual allocates attention to that news significantly determine the political opinions of citizens (Zaller 1992) and can determine the extent of individual exposure to cross-cutting world views (Mutz and Martin 2001). Still, it is unlikely that the messages presented in the media will be persuasive to individuals unless they first trust the “messenger” (Boudreau 2009; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Miller and Krosnick 2000).

In this *Insights* report¹, I focus on and assess selected explanations of levels of trust in the mass media among citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean. On average, trust in the media is evident in the region; yet, many citizens remain unconvinced. To explain varying levels of trust, I focus on a range of indicators of political awareness. Interestingly, I find that there are systematic differences in how different dimensions of political awareness relate to trust in the media.

This report focuses on the following question from the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer survey by LAPOP:²

Figure 1. Average Level of Trust in Mass Media across Latin America and the Caribbean



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

B37. “To what extent do you trust the mass media?”³

Figure 1 shows mean responses (with confidence intervals) by country, with responses recalibrated from the original seven-point scale (on which responses ran from not at all, “1”, to a lot, “7”) to a 0-100 scale where

¹ Prior issues of 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 non-response rate for this question was 1.94%. This report excludes the USA and Canada because its emphasis is on Latin America and the Caribbean. Additionally, this report excludes Haiti and Honduras given the exceptional events leading up to the survey fieldwork, which may have altered citizen trust in media in unique ways. Moreover, these countries lack key measures for the models presented in the analysis to follow. After excluding these countries, non-response was 2.21%. For purposes of comparison, mean trust in the media in the excluded countries was: USA=28.3; Haiti=43.5; Canada=45.4; Honduras=59.8.

higher values indicate more trust in the mass media.⁴

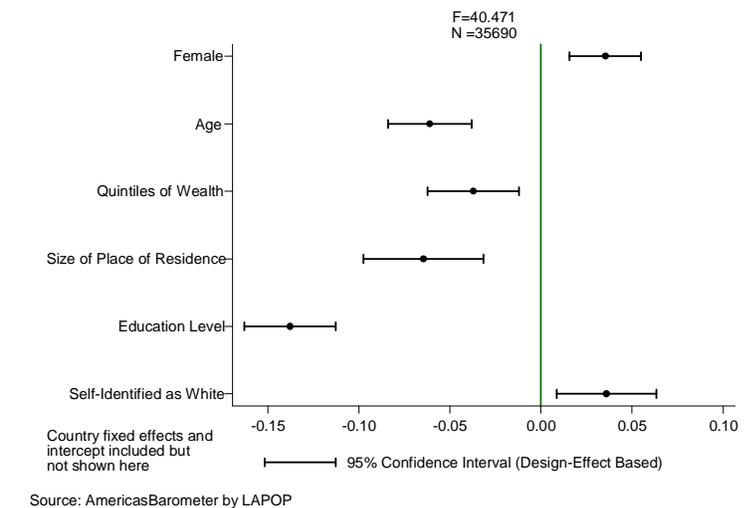
In Figure 1, mean levels of trust vary between a low of 48.7 in Trinidad & Tobago and a high of 72.8 in the Dominican Republic. In short, average trust in the mass media ranges from ambivalent levels (near the midpoint of 50) to fairly trusting levels across the countries examined here. Still, it is interesting to note that less than 5% of the variance in the measure of trust in the mass media is at the country level; the bulk of the variance is at the individual level.⁵ Given the relative invariance in trust at the national level, the remainder of this report will focus on individual-level determinants of trust in the mass media after controlling for the “fixed effects,” or mean levels of trust, at the national level.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Media Trust

The mass media provide an important source of information for citizens, although as Zaller (1992, 22) notes, citizens “are more than passive receivers of whatever media communications they encounter.” This raises the question of whether there are any systematic patterns as to who reports higher trust in the media.

In this section I examine the extent to which a simple battery of socioeconomic and demographic variables relates to trust in the media. Specifically, I include age (divided into six categories), gender, quintile of wealth⁶, level of education, size of the respondent’s city (town) of residence, and racial self-

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors as Predictors of Trust in the Mass Media



identification in the model of trust in the mass media. The results from this analysis appear in Figure 2.⁷ Independent variables appear on the vertical axis. The impact of each of these variables on levels of trust in mass media is shown by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical “0” line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left a negative impact. The horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals for these effects. We can be at least 95% confident that a given effect is statistically significant if its confidence interval does not cross the vertical axis at “0”. All variables are standardized for ease of comparison and the model includes country-fixed effects which are not shown in this figure for ease of presentation (see Appendix for details).

The results of this demographic model show that, on average and all else equal, women and those who self-identify as white are more trusting of the mass media than men and non-whites, respectively. Moreover, older, wealthier, and more educated respondents are

⁴ All analyses were conducted with STATA v11 and results were adjusted for the complex sample design employed.

⁵ Stated more precisely, after fitting a 3-level hierarchical linear null model, with individuals at level 1, primary sampling units (PSUs) at level 2 (to account for correlated variance among respondents in the same cluster), and country at level 3, 89.36% of the variance is found at the individual level, 6.04% at the PSU level, and 4.59% at the country level.

⁶ For details on the creation of the wealth measure see Córdova (2009).

⁷ The model is run using ordered logistic regression with parameter estimates corrected for the complex sample design. Full results appear in the Appendix.

less trusting of the mass media, as are respondents who live in larger cities. Of these findings, the correlation between education and trust in the mass media is the strongest. This strong finding for education raises the question of whether other measures of citizen awareness might explain additional variation in individual levels of trust in the mass media.

Informed Citizens and Trust in the Mass Media

Prior literature has proposed many dimensions of political awareness. Zaller (1992, 21) notes several of these: “media exposure, political participation, education, and self-described interest in politics,” as well as “simple tests of neutral factual information about politics” (i.e., political knowledge). An individual’s sense of internal efficacy (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991), or the degree to which they claim that they understand the most important issues in the country, is yet another component of awareness.

Arguably, each of these is a different dimension of an individual’s political exposure and awareness. The data used here include indicators of all of these dimensions of awareness and thus provide a means to test the effect that being informed in each of these different ways has on levels of trust in the mass media at the individual level.⁸ Some forms of

⁸ The items that measure each of these are as follows. *Media exposure* is measured using question **GI0**, “About how often do you pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers or the internet?” The response options are: daily, a few times a week, a few times a month, rarely, or never. *Political participation* is measured using two indicators of campaign and party activism, which is arguably the most awareness-intensive dimension of political participation identified in the literature (for other dimensions see Booth and Seligson 2009). *Opinion leader* is measured using **PP1**, “During election times, some people try to convince others to vote for a party or candidate. How often have you tried to persuade others to vote for a party or candidate?” Response options were “frequently,” “occasionally,” “rarely,” “never.” *Worked campaign* is measured using **PP2**, “There are people who work for parties or candidates during electoral campaigns. Did you work for any candidate or party in the last presidential

elections?” Response options were yes (1) and no (0). *Education* is measured using the level of school completed, as in the demographic model. *Interest in politics* is measured using question **POL1**. “How much interest do you have in politics: a lot, some, little or none?” *Political knowledge* is measured as a four-point count (0 to 3) of the number of factual political knowledge questions the respondent answers successfully, using items **GI1**, **GI3**, and **GI4**. *Internal efficacy* is measured using question **EFF2**, which asks respondents to report how much they agree or disagree with the following statement: “You feel that you understand the most important political issues of this country.” Admittedly, this is only one component of internal efficacy as traditionally conceptualized (Morrell 2003); however, it is the only component available in the 2010 data.

After controlling for the demographic variables examined in the previous section (age, gender, quintile of wealth, size of the respondent’s city of residence, and racial self-identification), the model of trust in the media proposed here attempts to isolate the effects of the several dimensions of being an informed citizen by controlling for other indicators that might contribute to the degree to which respondents are exposed to information. These controls include self-reported measures of two personality traits⁹: critical-quarrelsome and open-intellectual. The model also controls for interpersonal trust¹⁰ and church attendance¹¹ as indicators of the respondent’s inherent level of trust.

Respondents who self-report critical or quarrelsome personalities should be less trusting of the media, as they would be of any institution. Those who report being open and

⁹ Measured using **PER2** and **PER5** from the self-reported personality battery included in the 2010 questionnaire. There is an interesting literature that suggests that stable and enduring personality traits can significantly influence political outcomes including attitude change and engagement in political behaviors (e.g. Haugtvedt and Petty 1992; Mondak et al. 2010).

¹⁰ Measured using item **ITI1**: “Now, speaking of the people from around here, would you say that people in this community are very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or untrustworthy?”

¹¹ Measured using item **Q5A**: “How often do you attend religious services?”

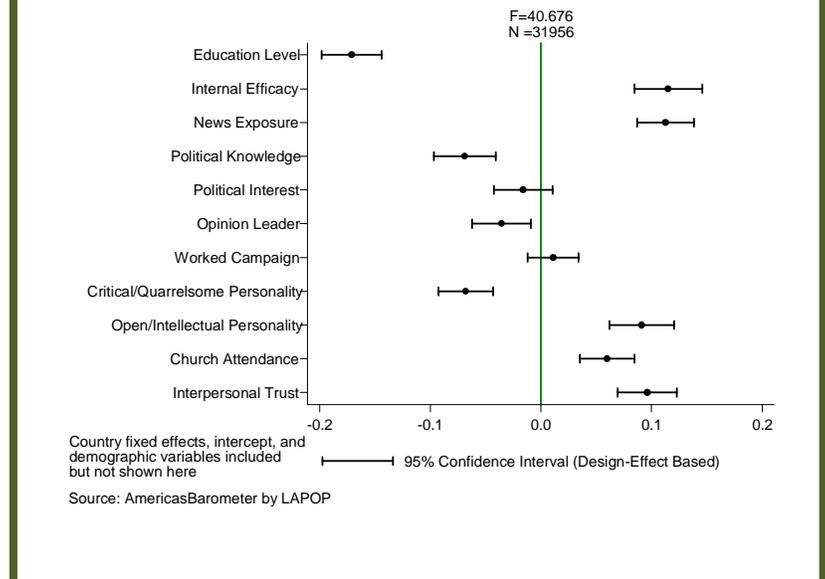
intellectual should be more trusting overall. Those respondents who have higher inherent trust (as observed by more frequent church attendance and higher interpersonal trust) should express higher levels of trust in the media.

The results of this model appear in Figure 3 in the same format as those presented in Figure 2.¹² Again, all variables are standardized for ease of comparison and the model includes country-fixed effects which are not shown in this figure for ease of presentation (see Appendix for details).

Considering the socioeconomic and demographic variables first, the results are nearly the same as those presented in Figure 2. Women express higher levels of trust in the mass media than do men; older respondents express lower trust; respondents in higher wealth quintiles express lower trust; residents of larger cities are less trusting than residents of smaller cities, and self-identifying whites express greater trust in the mass media than non-whites. If there is any change, it is that the effect of level of education is somewhat more negative in this model than before. Thus, these results, with the exception of those for level of education, are excluded from Figure 3 to allow for more focused attention on the new variables introduced here.

Looking briefly at the control variables, both personality type and inherent trust in others have significant effects on trust in the mass media. As expected, those who are critical or quarrelsome express lower trust in the media; those who are open or intellectual express higher trust. Respondents who attend church services more frequently express more trust in the mass media and respondents who express higher levels of interpersonal trust are also

Figure 3. Individual Factors as Correlates of Trust in the Mass Media



more likely to express higher trust in the media.

Finally, the key results here provide evidence of systematic dimensionality within the concept of political awareness. As with level of education, respondents with more political knowledge are less trusting of the mass media than those with more limited political knowledge. Moreover, respondents who have attempted to influence the political opinions of fellow-citizens are less trusting of the mass media than those who have not. Conversely, respondents who express higher levels of internal efficacy and respondents who have more frequent contact with the media express *more* trust in the mass media than otherwise.

Yet, there are two insignificant findings. First, respondents who worked for a campaign during the previous presidential elections are no more or less likely to trust the mass media than those who have not. Second, respondents who express more interest in politics are not significantly different in their trust of the media from those who are less interested in politics.

¹² As in the previous model, the model for Figure 3 is run using ordered logistic regression with parameter estimates corrected for the complex sample design. Full results appear in the Appendix.

Conclusion

The findings in this *Insights* report suggest that the mass media in Latin America and the Caribbean currently enjoys at least moderate trust across much of the region. However, there are signs that not everyone accepts the integrity of the media unquestioningly. Indeed, the results presented here show that there is an interesting tension among the factors that explain support for trust in the media in the region. Opportunities to become informed, in terms of political knowledge and education, as well as efforts to shape others' political opinions are all negatively correlated with trust in the principal means of communication in Latin American and Caribbean societies. On the other side of that tension, trust in the mass media correlates positively with news media exposure and efficacy.

Some of this tension may reflect the ambiguity in the dependent variable used here. In terms of socio-economic position, do the rich and the poor or the educated and uneducated consume the same type of media? Moreover, when we ask politically aware individuals about their trust in the media, do they take into account the same considerations as do unsophisticated respondents? More specifically, does the term "mass media" trigger thoughts of "news" or "entertainment" for respondents? Answering these questions in the context of the span of the Americas is well beyond the scope of this *Insights* report, but they are important questions to consider and explore further; depending on how we answer these questions the conclusions drawn from the findings presented here may vary considerably. For instance, it seems that it would be normatively desirable that citizens be able to trust their news outlets (even if citizens are self-selective in their media exposure), but it may be less heartening to find comparatively greater "trust" in mediums of entertainment.

Still, if we take the findings presented here as representative of an assessment of the integrity

of the means of transmitting factual information in Latin American societies, the tension in the relationships between alternative dimensions of awareness and trust in the mass media may be a good sign. These findings certainly seem to speak to Zaller's declaration that citizens are more than "passive recipients." In fact, these results tell a nuanced story that seems to suggest that citizens of Latin America and the Caribbean are neither unquestioning neophytes of the latest influential impulse nor, in spite of some turbulent, authoritarian histories, jaded cynics in relation to the mass media.

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Appendix

Table 1. Ordered Logistic Models of Trust in Mass Media (Design Effect Adjusted)

	Model 1		Model 2	
Education Level	-0.138*	(-10.79)	-0.171*	(-12.31)
Self-Identified as White	0.036*	(2.58)	0.032*	(2.26)
Size of Place	-0.064*	(-3.82)	-0.063*	(-3.71)
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.037*	(-2.89)	-0.051*	(-3.77)
Age	-0.061*	(-5.22)	-0.087*	(-6.92)
Female	0.035*	(3.54)	0.042*	(3.89)
Interpersonal Trust	-	-	0.096*	(7.04)
Church Attendance	-	-	0.060*	(4.74)
Open/Intellectual Personality	-	-	0.091*	(6.16)
Critical/Quarrelsome Personality	-	-	-0.068*	(-5.42)
Worked Campaign	-	-	0.011	(0.94)
Opinion Leader	-	-	-0.036*	(-2.63)
Political Interest	-	-	-0.016	(-1.19)
Political Knowledge	-	-	-0.069*	(-4.79)
News Exposure	-	-	0.113*	(8.57)
Internal Efficacy	-	-	0.115*	(7.40)
Mexico	-0.112*	(-5.72)	-0.127*	(-6.40)
Guatemala	-0.136*	(-7.47)	-0.149*	(-7.78)
El Salvador	-0.138*	(-7.80)	-0.159*	(-8.60)
Nicaragua	-0.066*	(-3.68)	-0.086*	(-4.42)
Costa Rica	-0.051	(-1.92)	-0.062*	(-2.31)
Panama	-0.058*	(-3.07)	-0.085*	(-4.43)
Colombia	-0.095*	(-4.42)	-0.119*	(-5.50)
Ecuador	-0.229*	(-9.44)	-0.253*	(-10.47)
Bolivia	-0.251*	(-9.17)	-0.260*	(-8.98)
Peru	-0.169*	(-8.67)	-0.166*	(-8.31)
Paraguay	-0.060*	(-3.25)	-0.075*	(-3.99)
Chile	-0.044*	(-2.25)	-0.054*	(-2.66)
Brazil	0.023	(0.87)	0.028	(1.05)
Venezuela	-0.175*	(-7.93)	-0.196*	(-8.70)
Argentina	-0.194*	(-8.81)	-0.184*	(-7.66)
Dominican Republic	0.058*	(3.04)	0.042*	(2.13)
Jamaica	-0.097*	(-4.50)	-0.114*	(-5.04)
Guyana	-0.137*	(-5.47)	-0.158*	(-6.28)
Trinidad & Tobago	-0.251*	(-13.24)	-0.278*	(-14.64)
Belize	-0.120*	(-6.13)	-0.129*	(-6.32)
Suriname	-0.02	(-1.06)	-0.037	(-1.88)
<i>Number of Observations</i>	35,690		31,956	
<i>F</i>	40.471		40.676	

Note: Standardized coefficients from ordered logistic regression are significant at * $p < 0.05$; t -scores presented in parentheses. Uruguay is the reference country.