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Iran is Not Highly Trusted in the Western Hemisphere

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Executive Summary. The rising influence of Iran in the Western Hemisphere has raised concerns among policymakers in the United States. This *Insights* report examines whether citizens in the Americas trust in the government of Iran and what factors explain their trust or distrust of the country. We find that Iran is largely unknown among citizens of the Americas but that citizens who live in countries that are part of ALBA are more likely to be aware of its existence. With regards to the predictors of trust in Iran, we find that citizens of ALBA countries are more likely to trust Iran if they give their president a high approval rating, self-identify as being on the left of the political spectrum and are less supportive of democracy. None of these factors are statistically significant in non-ALBA countries.

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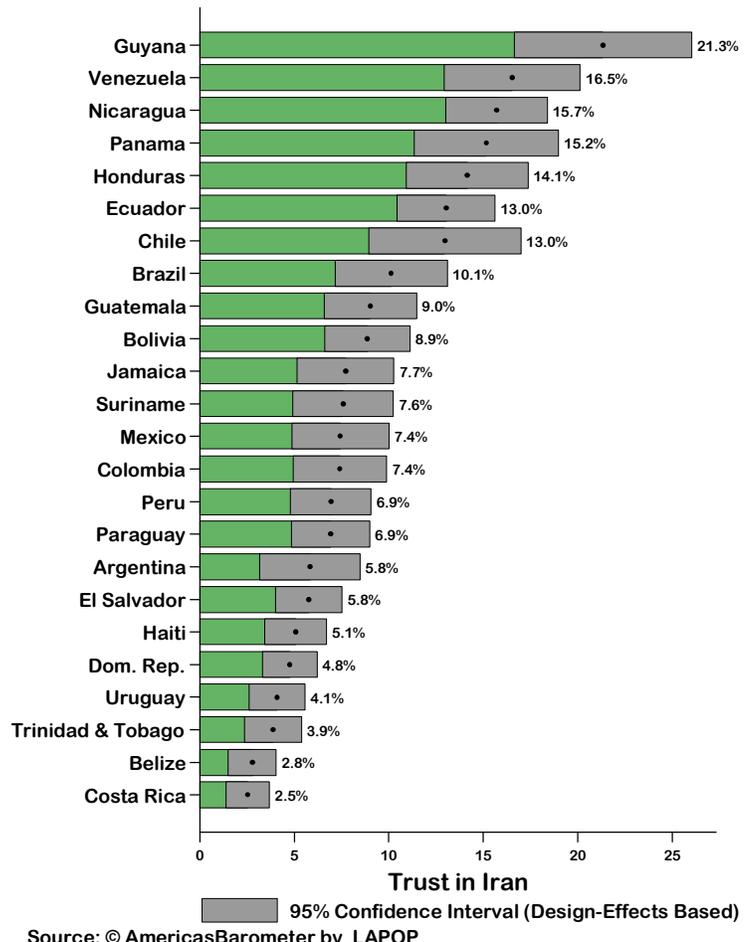
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This *Insights* report explores the extent and the determinants of trust in the government of Iran in the Western Hemisphere.¹ This report is possible because in 2012 the AmericasBarometer survey project included a module of questions that asked citizens about their views of several foreign governments, including Iran.²

Washington's Concern about Iran's Presence in the Americas

Over the past two decades, some countries in the Americas have significantly expanded their ties with countries outside of the Western Hemisphere, notably China. Yet it is the region's growing ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran that have most visibly alarmed policy-makers in the United States. Washington's distress culminated in 2012 with the passage of the "Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012," passed by an overwhelming majority in Congress and signed into law by President Obama on December 28.³ The five-page bill calls for the United States "to use a comprehensive government-wide strategy to counter Iran's growing hostile presence and activity in the Western

Figure 1. Trust in the Government of Iran in the Americas
(percent who trust as opposed to distrust or give no opinion)



Hemisphere" and instructs the Secretary of State to carry out an assessment of Iran's activities within 180 days.⁴

There is no doubt that Iran has expanded its connections in the Western Hemisphere. Iran added six new embassies in the region since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, bringing the total to eleven.⁵ Presidential visits between Iran and Latin America have also multiplied. Such visits were most notable

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>

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³ "H.R. 3783--112th Congress: Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act of 2012." [www.GovTrack.us](http://www.govtrack.us). 2012. <<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/hr3783>>

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3783-2.

⁵ The six new embassies are in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Uruguay. The five older embassies are in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico and Venezuela.

in the countries that make up the Venezuela-led Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA),⁶ but also included non-ALBA members, most significantly Brazil (Johnson 2012, ix).⁷ Iran's economic ties with the region have also risen. Trade between Iran and Latin America, while still rather miniscule, has multiplied from less than \$1 billion in 2007 to \$4 billion today, with Brazil and Argentina accounting for more than 95% of the total (Latinvex 2012). Beyond trade, Iran has also pledged to make significant aid contributions and investments in Latin America, especially in the ALBA countries. However, with the possible exception of Venezuela, few of Iran's pledged investments have yet materialized. Iran's increased presence in Latin America has triggered a fierce debate in Washington as to whether or not Iran's actions should be regarded as a serious threat to U.S. national security or merely an "annoyance" (Arnson, Efsandiari and Stubits 2010).

In addition to advancing its economic interests, it is clear that Iran has a political agenda aimed at decreasing the country's international isolation, particularly by forming alliances with other countries that share its anti-American stance. Yet some observers believe Iran has more menacing goals in Latin America such as obtaining uranium for its nuclear program or developing the infrastructure to carry out terrorist attacks against Western targets in the region (Berman 2012, Cárdenas 2012, Goforth 2012, Noriega 2012, Seligson 2013). Declarations by the Venezuelan government that Iran is assisting Venezuela in its search for uranium reserves certainly heightened suspicions about

the nature of the two country's interactions (Padgett 2009). Moreover, critics note that Iran and its proxies are implicated in the terrorist bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires in 1994 and the foiled plot to hire a Mexican drug cartel to kill the Saudi Ambassador to the United States in 2011 (Levitt 2012, Savage and Shane 2011). Still, others remain skeptical that Iran's increased presence in the region poses a serious security threat to the United States, dismissing such claims as either unfounded or simply paranoid (Main 2013, Miller 2013).

In short, Iran has moved from a position of obscurity to one of increased visibility in the Americas. Although this has become a hot topic in Washington, one issue which has received little attention is how citizens in the region view Iran.⁸ We seek to fill this gap.

How Relevant is Iran for Citizens in the Americas?

The 2012 AmericasBarometer survey asked citizens in 24 countries if they considered the government of Iran to be very trustworthy, somewhat trustworthy, not very trustworthy or not at all trustworthy.⁹ For the purposes of our analysis we recoded the answers in to two categories: very and somewhat trustworthy were considered as positive responses and not very trustworthy and not at all trustworthy, as well as no opinion at all were considered as negative answers. Figure 1 shows the extent of trust in the government of Iran among citizens in the Americas. Taking into account the rate of non-response, the levels of trust in Iran among citizens who are aware of its existence is fairly low. In this report we pay particular attention

⁶ In 2009 the member countries decided to call the organization the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America - Peoples' Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP).

⁷ Ahmadinejad visited Latin America six times between 2005 and early 2012 and attended the funeral of Hugo Chávez and the inauguration of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela in early 2013. Iran also received Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez nine times, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega three times, Bolivian president Evo Morales two times, as well as Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, Guyanese president Bharrat Jagdeo and Brazilian president Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva.

⁸ An exception, with respect to Iran, is Stephen Johnson's short and descriptive review of Iran's image problem, based on recent polls conducted by the BBC and Pew Research Center (Johnson 2012: 20-21).

⁹ They were also given the explicit option of "or do you not have an opinion"? The question was not asked in the United States and Canada, the other two countries included in the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey.

to whether citizens in ALBA member countries (where Iran is an observer nation) are more likely to trust Iran than those in non-ALBA countries. We observe that even in the ALBA countries (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador), less than 20% of the population displays high levels of trust in Iran. In fact, in most countries in the Western Hemisphere less than 10% of respondents express trust in the government of Iran. By contrast, the levels of mistrust are rather high in most countries (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

It is very important to note that in most countries there seems to be little knowledge about Iran. We can glean this from the rates of non-response and “no opinion” responses, the details of which are in Table 1 in the Appendix.

The non-response/no opinion rates reach over 60% in Suriname, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Belize, Trinidad & Tobago and Uruguay and over 50% in El Salvador, Haiti, Jamaica, and Paraguay. In another seven of the 24 countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guyana, Honduras and Panama) over 40% of citizens did not give an answer about Iran. The percentage of non-response is lower in three of the ALBA countries, Ecuador, Nicaragua and particularly Venezuela, where only 32% of citizens have not heard about Iran. Nonetheless, in another of the ALBA countries, Bolivia, almost half of the population did not answer the question about trust in Iran.

Who Trusts the Government of Iran?

Even though the number of citizens of the Americas who trust the government of Iran is relatively low, it is important to understand the reasons that lie behind that trust. Our main research question revolves around the reasons why some citizens are more likely than others to trust Iran. Those citizens who trust Iran are

evidently aware of the existence of a country that is largely unknown in the region and believe that the government of that country is trustworthy in spite of the questionable reputation of Iran at the international level.

Given that historically the United States, and to a lesser extent other advanced democracies, has been the dominant external actor in the countries of the Western Hemisphere, there is little theoretical background for understanding trust in extra-hemispheric actors, particularly

those that, like Iran, are regarded as rogue states.¹⁰

One approach is to try to look at the theories behind anti-Americanism, which seems to be a common point of

agreement between Iran and the countries in the Western Hemisphere that have sought to strengthen relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Rubinstein and Smith (1988) anti-Americanism has at least four variations: issue-oriented, ideological, instrumental and revolutionary. We examine if two of these explanations, instrumentalism and ideological empathy, help explain trust in the government of Iran in the Western Hemisphere. Instrumentalism refers to the manipulation of anti-American sentiments by political elites seeking domestic support for their own political agendas (Rubinstein and Smith 1988). Ideological empathy refers to the identification that individuals may have with anti-imperialism, which is a common trait of the left in Latin America (Levitsky and Roberts 2011, Smith 2008). In addition, other scholars have found that paying attention to the news can influence anti-American attitudes (Chiozza 2007, Blaydes and Linzer 2012).¹¹ Finally, given

The majority of citizens in the Americas do not have an opinion about trust in the government of Iran.

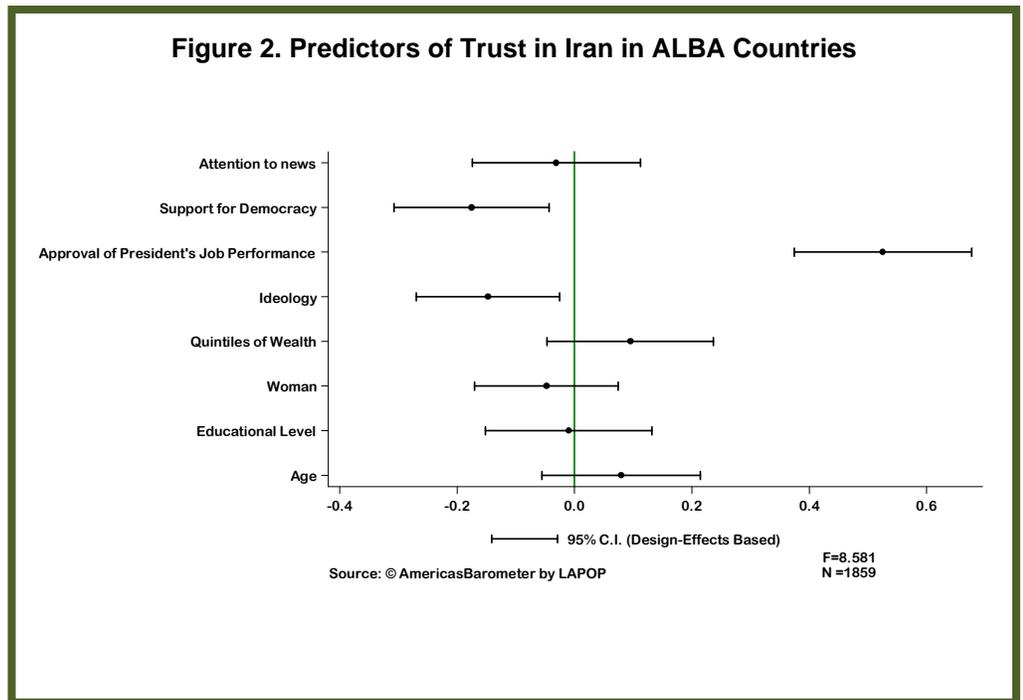
¹⁰ For a definition of the term rogue state, see Hoyt (2000).

¹¹ Following Chiozza (2007), those who are more aware of news would be less likely to hold feelings of anti-Americanism. This hypothesis is based on the premise that

that Iran is an authoritarian regime, it is feasible that citizens who trust the government of that country are, at least to some extent, more willing to tolerate authoritarian leaders and less prone to support democracy.

In order to identify whether these or other variables are associated with trust in the government of Iran we propose a logistic regression model and test it on citizens of two separate groups of countries: those that belong to ALBA (4 countries) and those that do not belong to ALBA (20 countries). As explained above, the inroads that Iran has made in the ALBA countries merit a separate consideration. The regression model uses a dichotomous dependent variable (trust or no trust in Iran)¹² and the following independent variables: approval of the job performance of the country's president (to test for instrumentalism)¹³; ideology (to test for ideological empathy)¹⁴; attention paid by the

respondent to the news¹⁵; and a variable that measures the support for democracy.¹⁶ In



addition to country dummy variables (see the appendix), we add to the model four standard control variables: level of education, age, gender and wealth.

individuals who explore international news are more likely to 'learn the truth' about the United States than if they derived their news exclusively from domestic media sources. Of course, it is also conceivable that media attentiveness could exacerbate anti-American attitudes. In their study of the Islamic world, for instance, Blaydes and Linzer find that "Muslims who regularly follow international news also tend to be more anti-American" (2012, 233).

¹² In the regression the dependent variable was recoded into a dummy variable in which 100 represents respondents who said that the government of Iran was very or somewhat trustworthy. Respondents who answered a little, not at all or who did not provide an answer were coded as 0.

¹³ This variable (M1) asks: Speaking in general of the current administration, how would you rate the job performance of president (NAME): 1) Very good 2) Good 3) Neither good nor bad 4) Bad and 5) Very bad. We have recoded the variable in a 0-100 scale, in which 100 means a positive rating.

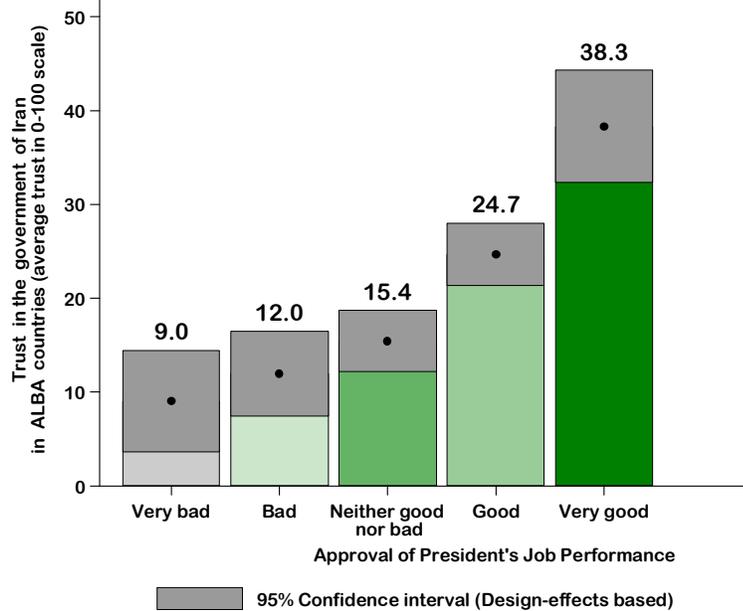
¹⁴ This variable (I1 or I1b) asks: According to the meaning that the terms 'left' and 'right' have for you, and thinking

of your own political leanings, where would you place yourself on this scale? The scale, as is customary in surveys around the world, ranges from 1 (left) to 10 (right). In Caribbean countries the terms liberal and conservative are used instead.

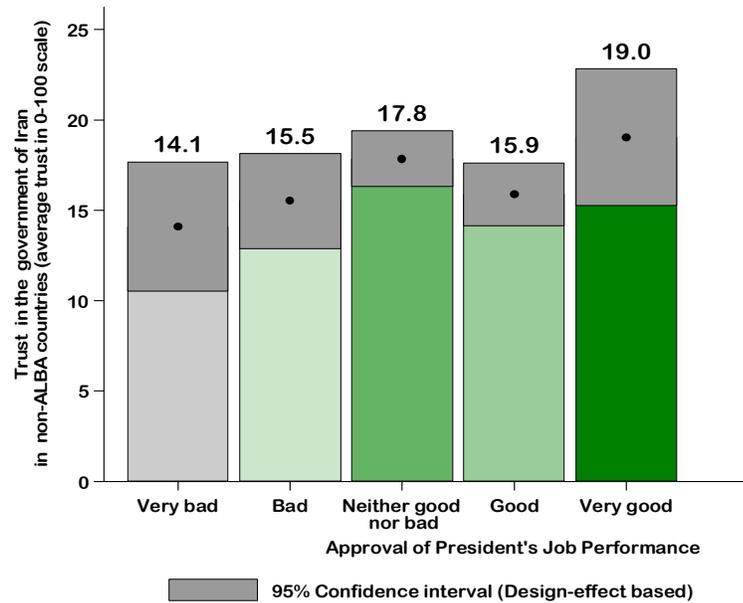
¹⁵ This variable (gi0) gauges on how often respondents listen, watch or read news. The options are: 1) Daily 2) A few times a week 3) A few times a month 4) Rarely and 5) Never.

¹⁶ This variable (ing4) is considered a 'Churchillian' measure of democracy. It asks respondents: 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? (1-7 scale)

Figure 3. President's Approval and Trust in Iran



Source: © AmericasBarometer 2012



Source: © AmericasBarometer 2012

First we examine the determinants of trust in Iran among citizens of countries that belong to ALBA. Figure 2, which presents standardized beta coefficients (dots) accompanied by a confidence interval (horizontal line) around those estimates, shows that the most important predictor of support for Iran among citizens of

ALBA countries is approval of their own president's performance. As noted earlier, the presidents of the ALBA countries have all visited Iran on more than one occasion and the current president of Iran has also visited several of those countries. It is interesting to note that the influence of the president in those countries could expand to issues of an international nature. Figure 2 also shows that ideology is a significant factor in explaining trust in the government of Iran among citizens of ALBA countries: those who self-identify themselves as being on the left of the political spectrum are more likely to trust Iran. Finally, it is important to note that a lower support for democracy is associated with a higher level of trust in Iran, a non-democratic country.

The model shows that the level of attention paid to the news and the sociodemographic variables (gender, age, wealth and education) are not significantly related to trust in the government of Iran. The details of the regression model can be found in Table 2 in the Appendix.

We next ran the same regression model using the 20 countries in the sample that do not belong to ALBA. The results, presented in Table 3 in the Appendix, contrast sharply with those in Figure 2. While in the ALBA countries the approval of the president's performance, left ideology and a lower support for democracy are all associated with a

higher level of trust in Iran, none of these variables are relevant in the non-ALBA countries. Instead, in the non-ALBA countries, only one variable, gender, is correlated with a higher trust in Iran: men are slightly more likely to trust Iran.

Conclusion

An examination of the extent of trust in the government of Iran in 24 countries of the Western Hemisphere shows that, at least from the public opinion perspective, Iran appears to be an inconsequential actor. High levels of non-response/no opinion to a question about trust in this country suggest that the country is largely unknown among citizens in the Americas, even in countries that in recent years have strengthened relations with Iran, particularly those that belong to the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). Nonetheless, it is clear that citizens in those countries are more aware of the existence of Iran than in most other countries in the hemisphere, and also display higher levels of trust in the government of that country.

We also examined the predictors of trust in the government of Iran. We found that there are stark differences between citizens who live in countries that belong to ALBA and countries that do not belong to that organization. Citizens of ALBA countries who have higher levels of approval for their president are more likely to trust Iran. As can be observed in Figure 3, which shows mean values from the survey data, this is not the case for countries that do not belong to ALBA.

Additionally, we found that citizens in ALBA countries who place themselves to the left of the political spectrum, and those who show lower support for democracy are more likely to trust Iran. By contrast, we found that ideology and support for democracy are not correlated with higher or lower trust in the government of Iran in non-ALBA countries. In the latter only gender turned out to be a significant predictor, with men being more likely than women to trust Iran. Sociodemographic factors are not

correlated with trust in the government of Iran in ALBA countries.

Overall these results indicate that the concern about the inroads that Iran is making in the Western Hemisphere may be overstated. Although the situation seems to be somewhat more relevant in countries whose leaders are open advocates of strengthening ties with Iran, even in those countries, public support does not seem to be strong and far-reaching.

Trust in the government of Iran is closely related to approval of the president's performance, but only in countries that belong to ALBA.

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Appendix

Table 1. Knowledge and Trust in the Government of Iran in the Western Hemisphere, 2012 (Percentages)

<i>COUNTRY</i>	<i>TRUST</i>	<i>NO TRUST</i>	<i>NO RESPONSE/OPINION</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
ALBA COUNTRIES (1)				
Bolivia	8.9	44.5	46.6	100%
Ecuador	13.0	54.0	33.0	100%
Nicaragua	15.7	45.5	38.8	100%
Venezuela	16.5	51.5	32.0	100%
<i>Average for ALBA countries</i>	13.5	48.9	37.6	100%
NON-ALBA COUNTRIES				
Argentina	5.8	45.2	48.9	100%
Belize	2.8	32.9	64.3	100%
Brazil	10.1	49.7	40.1	100%
Chile	13.0	49.3	37.7	100%
Colombia	7.4	43.2	49.4	100%
Costa Rica	2.5	57.1	40.3	100%
Dominican Republic	4.8	25.8	69.4	100%
El Salvador	5.8	43.8	50.5	100%
Guatemala	9.0	22.7	68.3	100%
Guyana	21.3	30.9	47.8	100%
Haiti	5.1	41.4	53.5	100%
Honduras	14.1	40.3	45.5	100%
Jamaica	7.7	39.7	52.6	100%
Mexico	7.4	54.0	38.6	100%
Panama	15.2	40.2	44.6	100%
Paraguay	6.9	42.1	51.0	100%
Peru	6.9	53.3	39.7	100%
Suriname	7.6	19.9	72.5	100%
Trinidad & Tobago	3.9	35.2	60.9	100%
Uruguay	4.1	31.1	64.8	100%
<i>Average for non-ALBA countries</i>	8.1	39.9	52.0	100%

(1) Other ALBA members were not included in the 2012 survey: Cuba, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Table 2. Predictors of Trust in the Government of Iran in ALBA countries in 2012

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Age	.0797329	.0686917
Level of education	-.00971	.0721406
Gender (woman)	-.0477796	.0622918
Wealth	.0950116	.0722433
Ideology	-.1470223*	.0620506
Approval of president's performance	.5254089***	.0768049
Support for democracy	-.1752604**	.0670658
Attention to news	-.0307039	.0730163
Nicaragua	.0683317	.0874079
Ecuador	-.1903318*	.0945552
Venezuela	.1472737	.0885782
Constant	-1.398521	.0874477
<i>Goodness-of-fit-test</i>		41.17*
<i>Number of Observations</i>		1,859

Note: Coefficients marked with asterisks are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Country of Reference: Bolivia

Table 3. Predictors of Trust in the Government of Iran in non-ALBA countries in 2012

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Age		
Level of education	-.078206	.0411484
Gender (woman)	-.0674305	.0495796
Wealth	-.0749962*	.0364302
Ideology	.0237667	.0436024
Approval of president's performance	.0759929	.0401259
Support for democracy	-.0024404	.0384796
Attention to news	.0307896	.0421934
Mexico	.023058	.0711186
Guatemala	.2603629	.0663453
El Salvador	.0131954	.0667635
Honduras	.2295456	.0666903
Costa Rica	-.1941811	.0800608
Panama	.2532724	.0633006
Colombia	-.0525547	.0739203
Peru	.0098987	.0678116
Paraguay	.0280408	.0678917
Chile	.1918217	.067922
Uruguay	.0064499	.0693931
Brazil	.088526	.0688861
Argentina	.0353786	.0771515
Dominican Republic	.0542975	.0678604
Haiti	-.0270666	.074885
Jamaica	.0914408	.0659983
Guyana	.356381	.0660379
Trinidad & Tobago	-.1397511	.078166
Belize	.1826932	.0767719
Constant	-1.701451	.0471729
<i>Goodness-of-fit test</i>		89.22*
<i>Number of Observations</i>		5,883

Note: Coefficients with asterisks are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, two-tailed.

Country of Reference: Suriname