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Political Social Media Users in the Americas are Tolerant and Pro-Democratic

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Executive Summary. The report examines the use of social media for political purposes in the Latin American and Caribbean region. Analysis of a question included in the 2012 AmericasBarometer survey shows the proportion of citizens who have read or shared political information over social network websites in the last year varies across countries. In addition, younger, wealthier, more educated, and urban residents are more likely to engage in politics via social media. Furthermore, those who use social media for political purposes in the Latin American and Caribbean region are more ideologically polarized, but also more politically tolerant and more supportive of democracy in the abstract. Thus, the use of social media for political purposes in the Americas is a positive complement to more conventional forms of democratic political engagement.
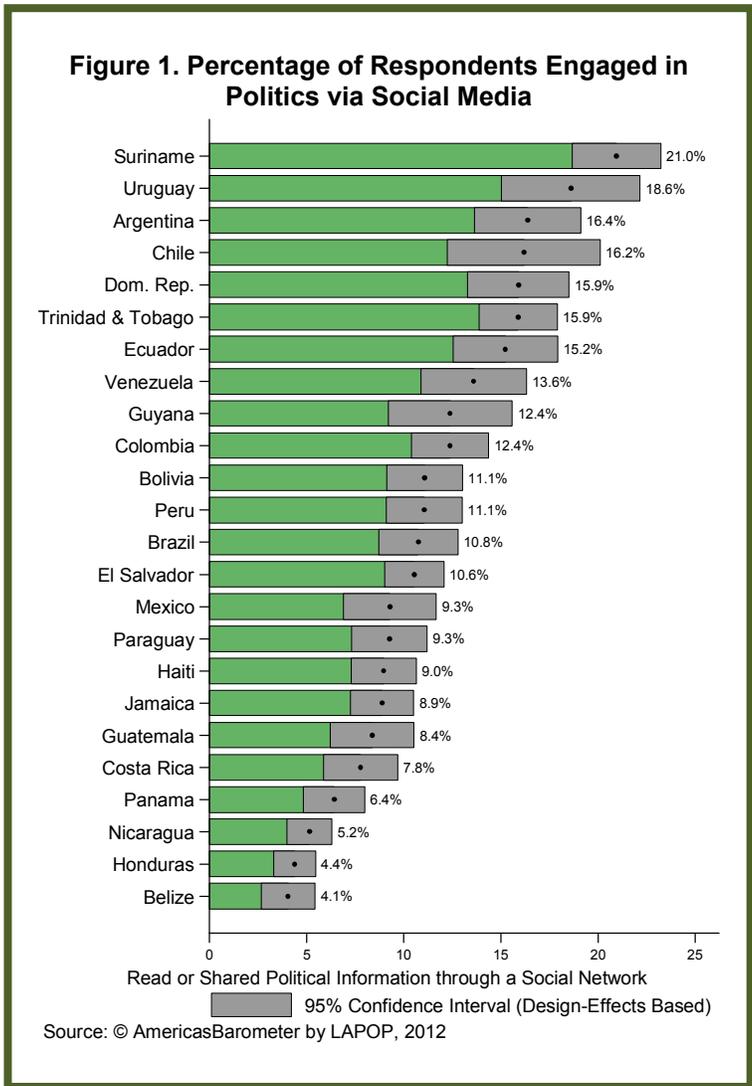
With the advent of social media, the twenty-first century is witnessing a revolution with respect to the ways in which individuals engage in politics. In the last decade, use of various sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Orkut has escalated across Latin America and the Caribbean (Synthesio 2011). Around the globe, citizens are increasingly using social media as a mechanism to distribute political information (e.g., Davis 2010). But, who are these citizens? While some scholars have examined this question in other contexts (e.g., Effing and Huibers 2001), little is known about who uses social media sites for political information gathering and expression in the Latin American and Caribbean region.

This *Insights* report[1] presents two profiles of the type of people who engage in politics using social media. First, I examine the extent to which socioeconomic and demographic factors predict this type of activity. Second, I assess the political profiles of those who utilize social media for political purposes. Some scholarship in other contexts has indicated that those who engage in politics via social media tend to be more politically polarized (Kushin and Kitchener 2009). Thus, this report asks: In 2012, are self-identified political social media users in Latin America and the Caribbean more or less supportive of democracy, politically tolerant and/or ideologically extreme?

This report is possible because, for the first time in 2012, the AmericasBarometer survey by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)[2] asked 41,632 individuals across 26 countries the following yes/no question:

Figure 1. Percentage of Respondents Engaged in Politics via Social Media

Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2012

PROT8. And in the last twelve months, have you read or shared political information through any social network website such as Twitter or Facebook or Orkut?[3]

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[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 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.

[3] In order to focus on the Latin American and Caribbean region, I omit the United States and Canada from this report. Rates of political participation via social media in these countries are 41.5% and 24.7%, respectively, in the AmericasBarometer 2012 studies. This report uses v47 of the AmericasBarometer 2012 merged dataset.

Figure 1 reports the percentage of individuals who answered affirmatively to this question.[4] Rates of political participation via social media vary significantly across countries, from a high of 21.0% in Suriname to a low of 4.1% in Belize.[5] Given very high estimates of general social media use for the region (and, in particular countries such as Brazil), we can conclude from the results in Figure 1 that the use of such websites for political purposes is much lower than are the rates of general, non-political social media use (Synthesio 2011).

In the next section I explore if higher levels of use of social media for political purposes are associated with certain socio-demographic groups in Latin America and the Caribbean. Not surprisingly, I find that the younger, wealthier, more educated, and urban residents are more likely to engage in politics via social media. But, what about their political preferences? In a subsequent section and set of analyses, I find that those who use social media for political purposes in the Latin American and Caribbean region are more ideological extreme, but also more politically tolerant and more supportive of democracy in the abstract.

> *[T]hose who use social media for political purposes in the Latin American and Caribbean region are more ideologically polarized, but also more politically tolerant and more supportive of democracy in the abstract.*

Who is More Likely to Use Social Media to Share and Acquire Political Information?

In this section I examine how specific demographic and socioeconomic factors predict social media use for political purposes. My principal expectation is that those who are younger, wealthier and more educated will be more likely to use social media for political activism because these individuals are likely to be more familiar with and fluent in social media in the first place (see Rainie et al. 2012).[6]

In assessing the political use of social media in the U.S., Rainie and Smith (2008) find that age is the most prominent determinant for social media political activism. According to the authors, two-thirds of American internet users surveyed under the age of 30 have social networking profiles and half of these utilize such sites to gain or share political information. Although their study focuses on the United States, it is reasonable to expect that a younger age – and, as well, a higher education, a higher income, and urban residence – positively predict social media use for political activism in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

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[4] Across the AmericasBarometer 2012 study as a whole, 3.0% of respondents did not answer the question; these individuals are not included in the analyses in this report.
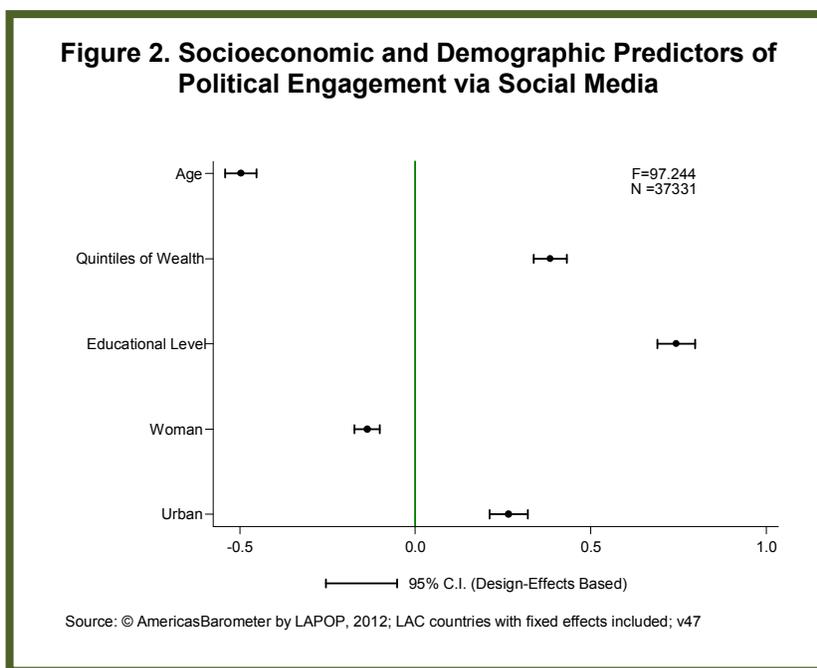
5 As a typical practice for the *Insights* series, I omit the United States and Canada from this and other analyses in the report to focus on Latin America and the Caribbean.

[6] Rainie et al. (2012) report on a survey of 2,253 adults in the U.S. on their use of Twitter.

To analyze these expectations, I developed a basic logistic regression model that uses socioeconomic and demographic measures (age, wealth, education[7], gender, and urban/rural residence) to predict the likelihood an individual reports using social media use for political information gathering or sharing. Figure 2 shows standardized coefficients from that analysis (see appendix for full results). The estimated effect of each factor is depicted by a dot. The corresponding bars represent a 95% confidence interval around the estimate for each factor. If the dot and bar fall to the left of the 0 line then the variable is both negative and statistically significant. If the dot and the bar fall to the right of the 0 line then such variable is both positive and statistically significant.

As expected, Figure 2 shows that those with a higher education level are more likely to use social media sites for reading and sharing political information compared to those with less education. Also in line with expectations, younger age cohorts use social media sites for political activism more than do older age cohorts (the negative coefficient shows that as one increases in age, one is less likely to report using social media to read or share political information). Additionally males and those who live in an urban population are more likely to use social media sites for a political purpose. In short, the socioeconomic and demographic profile of the average user of

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Political Engagement via Social Media

F=97.244
N =37331

95% C.I. (Design-Effects Based)

Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2012; LAC countries with fixed effects included; v47

social media for political purposes is similar across the Latin American and Caribbean region to that which has been found in the United States: mirror more general trends, using social media for political activism is most common among the young, the wealthy, the more educated, and those living in urban areas.[8]

Political Social Media Use and Political Attitudes in Latin America and the Caribbean

What else may determine the profile of individuals who use social media for political purposes? Rainie and Smith (2012) report that, in the U.S., the most active and engaged political participants on social media sites tend to be found on opposite and extreme ends of the ideological spectrum. The question of who uses social media for political purposes is thus important from the perspective of democratic politics: understanding the political attitudinal

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7 Education was coded into quartiles as follows: No Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, and Higher Education. The latter category is the baseline/comparison category in the analyses. For both the education and the wealth measures, I tested whether the relationship is non-linear with a series of dummy variables for education cohorts and wealth quintiles, and found no support for a non-linear relationship in the analyses.

8 It is interesting to note that while the study of the U.S. reported by Rainie et al. (2012) noted that women are more likely to use social media sites (but just as likely to use Twitter) compared to men, we see that men are more likely in the Latin American and Caribbean region to report using social media for political purposes.

profile of those who participate in this way provides important insight into the types of political content and discussion that are distributed via social media. Thus, this final section assesses the types of democratic attitudes and political ideological preferences that predict political use of social media use in the Latin American and Caribbean region.

In a model that builds on the results shown in Figure 2, I now include measures of support for democracy, political tolerance, system support and ideology to predict the likelihood that an individual responded affirmatively to using social media for political purposes. I measure support for democracy with a question that asks the extent to which the respondent agrees or disagrees that democracy is better than any other form of government.[9]

I measure political tolerance with an index based on the extent to which respondents agree that those who criticize the regime should be able to vote, conduct peaceful demonstrations, run for public office, appear on television to make speeches. System support is measured with an index based on one's perception that the state guarantees a fair trial, respect for political institutions, perception that the system protects basic rights, level of pride related to living in the country and the extent of belief that one should support the system. Finally, I include measures of left-right ideology to test whether political orientation is polarized among social media users for political purposes.[10]

Figure 3 presents the standardized regression coefficients from a regression analysis that includes all the variables from the prior analysis, plus these new indicators.[11]

Figure 3. Political Attitudes as Correlates of Political Participation via Social Media

F=79.215
N =34157

95% C.I. (Design-Effects Based)

Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2012; LAC countries with fixed effects included; v47
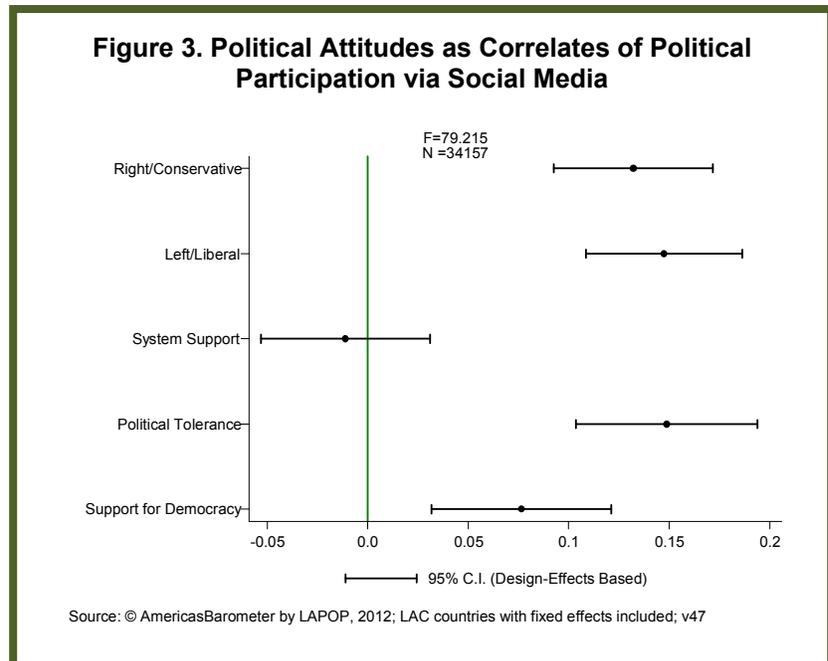
Figure 3 shows that while system support is not a statistically significant indicator of political social media use, political tolerance, support for democracy and a slightly more liberal ideology are all positive predictors of

and those rightists. In other words, some people sympathize more with the left and others with the right. 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?" Using responses to this question, I created a three-category variable, with response values of 1-3 coded as "Leftist Ideology", 4-7 as "Centrist Ideology" (the baseline here), and 8-10 as "Rightist Ideology." Missing values were included in the baseline category, "Centrist Ideology"; the results reported here are robust to changes in the coding of missing values as their own category, and to their exclusion from the analysis. In several Caribbean countries, the ideology question is asked in reference to liberal or conservative; in these cases, I considered and coded liberal as left and conservative as right, per the coding scheme noted here.

[11] In order to conserve space, the coefficients for gender, education, income, geographic distribution and age are not shown here, although these variables were included in the regression.

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[9] ING4: 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?

[10] L1: "On this card there is a 1-10 scale that goes from left to right. One means left and 10 means right. Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those leftists

using social media use for political purposes. In other words, the analysis shows that those who report having recently read or shared political information via social media are more likely to be on the "right" or the "left" of the ideological spectrum, as opposed to placing themselves in the "center" or not taking an ideological stance. In addition, those who report using social media for political purposes on average are more politically tolerant and more supportive of democracy in the abstract.

Conclusion

With the Arab Spring that began in 2010 and affected significant parts of the Middle East and Africa, the topic of social media for political activism has been recently placed under the global microscope. Although Latin America and the Caribbean and the regions affected in the Arab Spring are very different on some dimensions, social media around the world has gained traction as a medium capable of translating the voices of individuals into well-organized and collective movements for political change (Howard and Hussain 2011). The increasing rates of general social media use and the examples set by previously successful uses of social media for political activism suggest that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future. In fact, the AmericasBarometer 2012 survey supports the notion that those who engage in politics via online social networks are more likely to engage in grassroots and other forms of political participation. That is, in analyses not shown here for the sake of brevity, we find that political social media users in the Americas are more likely to have participated in a protest in the last twelve months, though they are not more likely (than those who do not engage in politics via social media) to have voted.[12]

Understanding who uses social media for political purposes in the Latin American and Caribbean region in 2012 is important, as it is likely that this profile will shift over time as new groups enter social media networks. At this point in time, the political use of social media networks in Latin America and the Caribbean is – like social media use more generally – more likely among those who are younger, wealthier, and more educated. It is also more likely to be found among urban (versus rural) residents.

From the perspective of democratic politics, even more interesting is the attitudinal profile of those who use social media for political purposes in the Latin American and Caribbean region. The analyses here support prior work that suggests those who are more ideologically polarized are more likely to use social media in this way. But, as well, I find that those who read and share political information via social network websites are also more politically tolerant and more supportive of democracy in the abstract. Thus, the use of social media for political purposes in the Latin American and Caribbean region provides a positive complement to conventional political participation. To the extent that those who are engaged in political discussions and activism via social media are more tolerant and more pro-democratic, this medium for political engagement has the potential to enhance the quality of democratic culture and politics in the Americas.

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[12] These results come from a model that extends from those presented in Figure 3 to also include a measure of whether or not the individual reports having protested in the last twelve months and whether or not s/he reports having voted in the last presidential elections.

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Appendix

	Figure 2		Figure3	
	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient	Standard Error
Urban	0.266*	(0.028)	0.263*	(0.028)
Woman	-0.137*	(0.018)	-0.115*	(0.019)
Educational Level	0.744*	(0.027)	0.711*	(0.028)
Quintiles of Wealth	0.385*	(0.024)	0.378*	(0.024)
Age	-0.497*	(0.023)	-0.512*	(0.023)
Support for Democracy[+]		.	0.076*	(0.023)
Political Tolerance[+]	.	.	0.149*	(0.023)
System Support	.	.	-0.011	(0.021)
Left/Liberal	.	.	0.147*	(0.020)
Right/Conservative	.	.	0.132*	(0.020)
Constant	-2.678	(0.031)	-2.666*	(0.032)
Number of Observations	*37331*		*34157*	
Prob>F	*0.000*		*0.000*	

Note: Coefficients marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at p<0.05, two tailed.

Country fixed effects are included but not shown.