

# AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2011

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## Political Efficacy in the Americas

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**Executive Summary:** In this *Insights* report, we present a preliminary look at internal efficacy using a question from the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey, which considers the extent to which constituents believe that they understand the most important political issues within their respective countries. The data reveal moderately low values of internal efficacy across the majority of countries in the region. We draw on extant literature to identify and assess factors that might affect levels of internal efficacy, paying particular attention to political and civic participation and victimization. Our findings suggest that participation is likely to increase this belief; in contrast, we find little support for the hypothesis that victimization is negatively correlated to internal efficacy, a result we suggest warrants further research.

LAPOP is pleased to note that this report was developed and written by Vanderbilt undergraduate students participating in a Vanderbilt University honors seminar (HONS186, taught by Professor E. J. Zechmeister).  
Biographies of the authors are provided in the report appendix.

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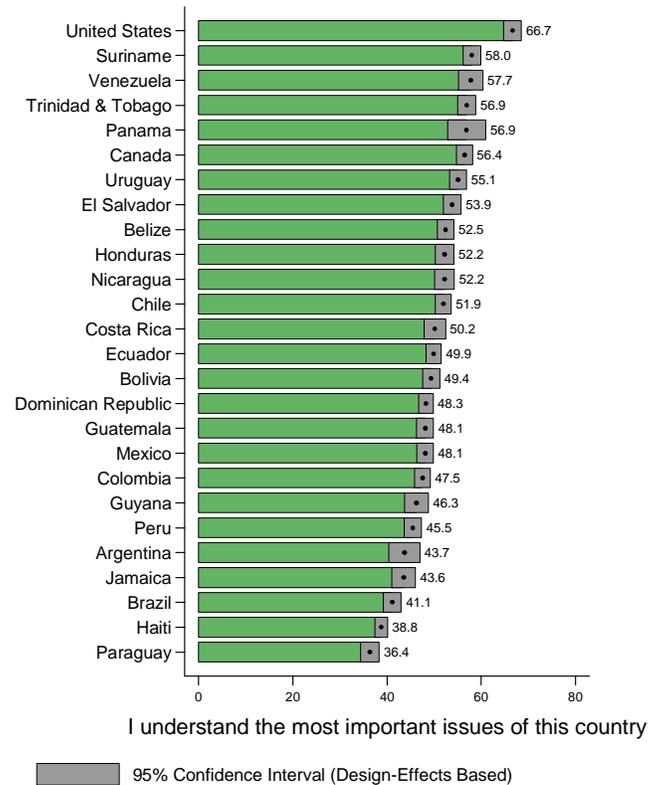
Political efficacy, the extent to which people believe they can exert influence over the political system, is considered crucial to the health of a “participatory democracy” (Pateman 1970). In Almond and Verba’s (1963, p. 253) words, “the sense of ability to participate in politics appears to increase the legitimacy of a system and to lead to political stability.” Scholarship on political efficacy makes a distinction between two basic forms: external (an individual’s belief that government is responsive to his needs) and internal (an individual’s belief that she can effectively participate in politics). Across both measures, we find that levels of political efficacy in the Americas are low. Thus, many in the region do not believe that their governments are responsive, nor do they believe that personally they are adequately equipped to influence government. This is troubling to the extent that it encourages those people to disengage from politics or, at the extreme, leaves them willing to support extrajudicial methods to achieve political ends (Linz and Stepan 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

In this *Insights* report<sup>1</sup>, we assess the state of *internal* efficacy in the Americas. After describing relatively low but varying levels across countries in the Americas, we turn to factors that might predict individual-level differences in internal efficacy. Specifically, we suggest and find support for the notion that participation is positively correlated with feelings of efficacy. We further assess the hypothesis that victimization by crime and corruption is negatively related to efficacy, but here we find less support.<sup>2</sup> We focus on the following question from the 2010

<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> In other analyses, we examined external efficacy using the EFF1 variable and found a significant negative relationship between victimization and external efficacy.

**Figure 1. Average Levels of Internal Political Efficacy in the Americas, 2010**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

AmericasBarometer<sup>3</sup> survey by LAPOP, in which 42,490 survey participants from 26 countries were asked to respond on a seven-point agree/disagree scale to the following statement:

**EFF2.** You feel that you understand the most important political issues of this country.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 shows mean responses to this statement, which have been recalibrated on a 0-100 scale, where higher values indicate greater

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Non-response was 3.7% for this question across the sample as a whole. The question was asked of only half the sample in the United States and Canada. Analysis was conducted using STATA v10.

internal efficacy. The highest mean level of perceived efficacy is found in the United States, which reports an average value of 66.7. After the United States, Suriname, Venezuela, and Trinidad & Tobago also show comparatively high values, ranging from 58.0 to 57.7 to 56.9, respectively. The majority of other countries fall within the high 40s-50s range; the exceptions are Haiti and Paraguay, with values of 38.8 and 36.4, respectively. When considering the region as a whole, one sees that aside from the U.S. and Paraguay, there is little variance across countries; the great majority fall within a 16.6-point range of one another (57.7 to 41.1). This indicates that a majority of those in the Americas do not express high levels of internal efficacy. As noted in footnote 2, we conducted additional analyses of external efficacy, and we found evidence that a majority of individuals in this region also do not believe that their governments are interested in the opinions of the people. For now, we turn to an exploration of factors that help predict the extent to which an individual reports low or high levels of *internal* political efficacy.

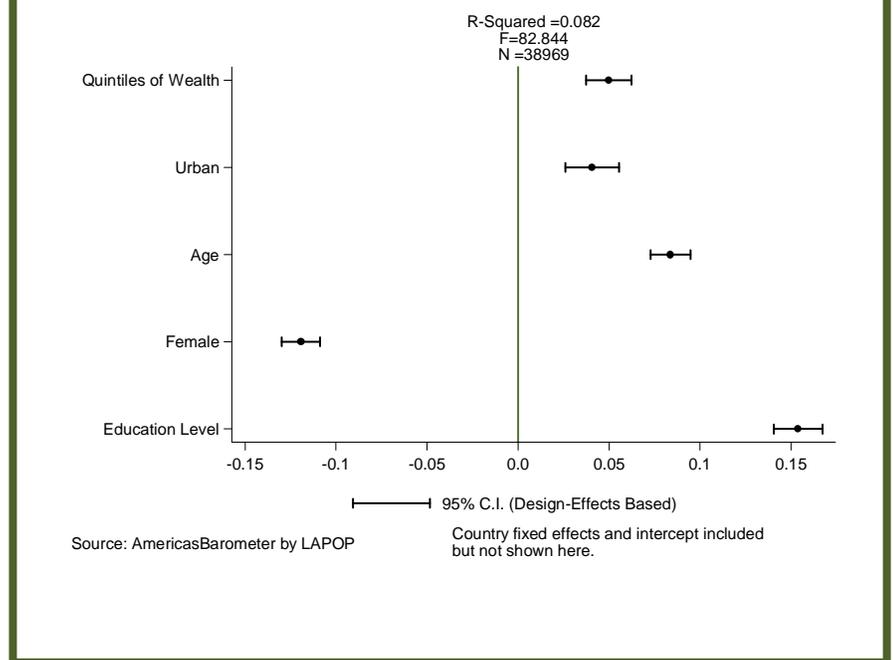
## Individual Characteristics and Belief in Internal Efficacy

Initially, we look at the role certain basic socioeconomic and demographic variables play in predicting individual levels of political efficacy. These variables are wealth<sup>5</sup>, urban versus rural locale, age, gender, and education level. Results of a linear regression analysis predicting levels of internal efficacy with these variables are presented in Figure 2.

When the bar representing the confidence interval of a variable does not overlap the

<sup>5</sup> For more information about the wealth measure see Córdova (2009).

**Figure 2. Socio-economic and Demographic Characteristics Predicting Levels of Internal Efficacy, 2010**



vertical “0” line, that variable is statistically significant. All of the variables we examine here are statistically significant, with 95% confidence. Variables with effects on the right side of the “0” line are positively correlated with efficacy, while those on the left side are negatively correlated with internal efficacy. The magnitude of the effects indicates their relative importance, since the coefficients have been standardized.

The results in Figure 2 show that wealth and education have a statistically significant and positive association with efficacy.<sup>6</sup> This means that lower levels of wealth and education

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in analyses we conducted to examine external efficacy (using the EFF1 variable in the AmericasBarometer survey), we find that wealth and education have negative and significant effects. The results we report for internal efficacy and education are consistent with work by others including Letki (2006), who contend that individuals are affected by a range of socioeconomic factors, most notably education and, in particular, political education. These can have a profound impact on internal efficacy because they influence how capable and thus confident individuals are with respect to understanding the nature of participatory institutions.

predict lower levels of political efficacy. Age also has a positive relationship with an individual's expressed internal political efficacy such that older individuals, in general, have higher internal efficacy. In addition, we find that women report lower levels of internal efficacy compared to men and that those living in urban areas report higher levels compared to those in rural areas.

Although efficacy can be partially explained by these five variables, the consistently low levels of efficacy expressed across the Americas justify further analysis of the topic, with additional variables.

*People who participate in politics become more self-confident ... and thus are more likely to believe that they understand important issues facing their countries.*

## Relating Political Participation to Internal Efficacy

Among the wide range of variables that may be considered relevant to a broader understanding of efficacy, we suggest that participation is especially important. Drawing on extant scholarship, we suggest that participation improves perceptions of internal efficacy.<sup>7</sup> Classic research indicates that individuals who participate in various aspects of civic life gain political competence (Verba 1961; Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). In general terms, participation builds and nurtures internal political efficacy. Finkel (1987) references classical political theories from Rousseau, which hypothesize that any form of participation leads to greater personal development and an increased belief in political efficacy. People who participate in politics become more self-confident and feel more in

control of their surroundings, and thus are more likely to believe that they understand important issues facing their countries. It is also more likely that they will be participants in the future (that is, it is consistent with existing scholarship to believe that efficacy increases participation), creating a pattern of participation leading to efficacy, and vice versa.

Scholarship by Easton and Dennis (1967) concludes that participatory activities at an early age are likely to imprint norms of efficacy that define individuals' long-term opinions of democratic regimes. Nevertheless, the timing

and nature that participation must take in order to promote such beliefs in efficacy are disputed, as is the extent of their influence (Finkel 1987). Our expectation, generally, is that participation will improve beliefs in internal efficacy across the Latin American and Caribbean region. At the same time, to examine the topic more thoroughly, we consider different types of participation.

Participation is a multifaceted concept that includes conventional (or formal) and unconventional (or informal) behavior. In determining the effect that participation has on efficacy, examining individual voting behavior may not be sufficient. In fact, in examining Mexican-American voters in the 1960s, Buehler (1977) determined that an individual's choice of whether or not to vote did not reliably predict efficacy. Examining vote choice alone in Latin America, in particular, might be misleading given that in some systems the vote is compulsory, to at least some degree. Ultimately, the fact that an individual votes may not mean that s/he believes that s/he is personally efficacious nor that the regime or institutional framework is responsive to him or her; in exploring the effects of various factors on efficacy, Chong and Rogers (2005) failed to

<sup>7</sup> It is also possible that efficacy affects participation. Modeling a complex system, for example, in which participation affects efficacy and, simultaneously, the reverse, is outside the scope of this report; the potential for such relationships to hold, however, should be taken into account when drawing conclusions from the results presented here (see, e.g., Finkel 1987 for more on this topic).

statistically demonstrate that traditional voting was affected by such factors. Although we examine voting, we include additional forms of participation as well.

Non-electoral forms of participation include community involvement, especially within local governments, as well as campaign involvement, protests, and demand making on the government. In examining *collective efficacy*, or "shared beliefs in the power to produce effects by collective action," Bandura (2000, p. 76; 78) found that "those who believe they can accomplish social changes by perseverant collective action, but view the governing systems and officeholders as untrustworthy, favor more confrontive and coercive means of participation outside the traditional political channels." Our contention is that individuals who participate in civic and political groups are likely also to solidify their knowledge of the political process, resulting in an association between collective action and *internal efficacy* as well. Those who attend meetings or protests are likely to be in tune with the most prevalent political issues of the day. Further, research in an industrial factory setting demonstrates that involvement in certain workplace organizations also correlates with increased political efficacy; this also supports the expectation that non-electoral forms of participation may lead to increased efficacy (Elden 1981; Pateman 1970).

In addition to examining the relationship between participation and efficacy, it is also important to assess non-participatory variables that may be relevant. Victimization may affect certain individuals' sense of efficacy. Many studies (Davis & Friedman, 1985; Green, Streeter, and Pomeroy, 2005; Kilpatrick et al. 1985) have shown that victims of crime suffer lasting psychological effects including depression, social anxiety, distrust of members of their community, and low levels of self-esteem. These psychological effects, whether individually or in combination, could have a direct effect on how individuals view their own efficacy. Lowered perceptions of self worth and

a general distrust of others might diminish a person's belief in her capacity to understand, engage in, and catalyze change in government or political entities.

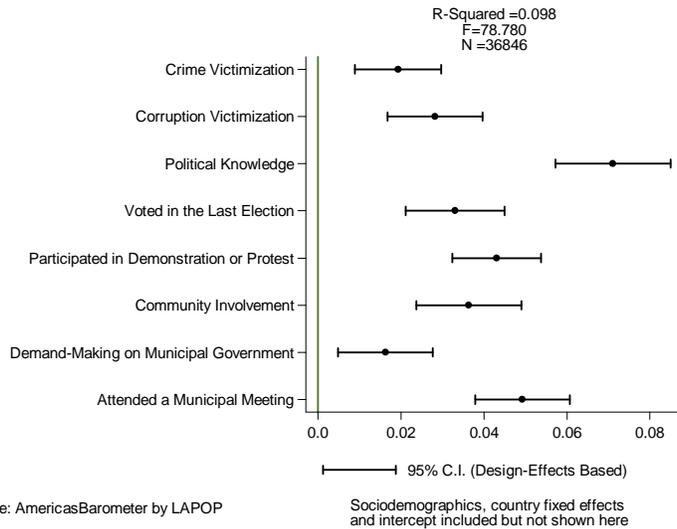
Some scholars have argued that victimization by corruption can decrease efficacy levels because individuals have less confidence in the potential results of their participation. As some scholars have contended, this could be because corruption "diminishes [officials'] bases of authority and [undermines] their legitimacy" (Canache and Allison 2005, p. 92). Further, Ward (1989) argues that corruption has alienating social effects that add to individuals' cynicism about politics and the political process. From a broad survey of scholarship focusing on the relationship between corruption and perceptions of efficacy, we draw the following expectation: corruption lowers perceptions of efficacy (see Della Porta 2000; Schedler et al. 1999; Anderson and Tverdova 2003). *However*, we caution that this may not apply to internal efficacy, as the arguments appear more relevant to external efficacy. Therefore, we test the relationship between corruption victimization and internal efficacy. We also test the relationship between victimization and external efficacy and, while we do not show these analyses, we will make note of them below.

To assess our expectations concerning participation, knowledge, and victimization, we predict internal efficacy with an individual-level linear regression model. Results are presented in Figure 3.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, while we were not certain whether it would be a significant predictor given extant scholarship, we find that voting is a statistically significant and positive variable in the model. In addition, we find that other participatory variables correlate with efficacy. Protest participation, community

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<sup>8</sup> Correlations between participation variables were tested, and the maximum correlation between any two forms of political participation is  $r = .32$ . The measure of political knowledge is an index based on responses to questions GI1, GI3 and GI4, which ask about country-specific institutional structure and leadership.

**Figure 3. Participation, Knowledge, and Victimization as Predictors of Internal Efficacy, 2010**



involvement, demand-making at the municipal level, and attending a municipal meeting are all positively and significantly correlated with internal efficacy.<sup>9</sup>

Building on our findings with respect to education and arguments made by scholars such as Letki (2006), we included an indicator of political knowledge. Figure 3 shows that political knowledge is a strong, positive predictor of internal efficacy, a result that is similar to the relationship between formal education and internal efficacy.

In contrast to our expectations, we find that victimization – both crime and corruption – are positively and significantly correlated with internal efficacy. This result is somewhat puzzling. As a means of exploring the topic in more detail, we assessed the relationship between these variables and *external* efficacy

<sup>9</sup> The N for this analysis drops from 38,969 cases to 36,846 due to the high number of missing values in the following variables: vote (789), community involvement (694), attend a municipal meeting (505), and protest (310), demand-making (223) and crime victimization (166). See the appendix for the full set of regression results.

(using the EFF1 variable in the AmericasBarometer survey) and, in this case, we found the predicted results. Thus, victimization in the Americas, all else equal, correlates positively with internal efficacy but negatively with external efficacy. We suggest that this interesting contradiction, where victims appear to feel more capable of understanding politics but less attended to by government, is worthy of future study.

## Conclusion

As Almond and Verba (1963, p. 230) note, “competence and participation are at the heart of the definition of democracy.” In this brief report, we have attempted to create a basic understanding of the state of efficacy in the Americas and to document, especially, the close and positive connections between various forms of political participation and internal efficacy in the Americas.

Ultimately, our analysis shows that participation broadly speaking, meaning voting but also other forms of engagement, is positively related to feelings of efficacy. These findings support the theoretical perspective noted earlier, which posits that participation leads to stronger perceptions of control, which subsequently encourages participation and beliefs in efficacy in a reciprocal causal relationship (Finkel 1987). Nevertheless, this begs the question: how can governments formally and informally promote participation? Additional research could assess when citizens are most willing to engage in their communities and thus shed light on how to improve internal efficacy, with its positive externalities for democratic politics at the local and national levels. In particular, building on the intellectual foundation established by Easton and Dennis’ (1967) research regarding how children develop values of political efficacy through participatory activities, such efforts might focus on maximizing the civic and

political involvement and knowledge of school-aged children.

While our results with respect to participation affirm arguments and findings from other scholarship, our results with respect to crime and corruption victimization are more puzzling.

Extant scholarship appears to suggest numerous reasons to believe that victimization would harm efficacy. However, we find that the relationship does not hold in our

analyses of internal efficacy. We did, in analyses noted but not shown here, find the expected relationship in analyses of external efficacy. To continue to explore the relationships between victimization and both forms of efficacy, one might examine the relationship between domestic violence and efficacy. It is difficult to elicit honest answers to such a personal question as one regarding domestic violence, yet the psychological effects of spousal abuse might have a tremendous impact on one's perception of one's own political efficacy. Peterson and Franzese (1988) present evidence that spousal abuse severely diminishes an individual's perceived efficacy.<sup>10</sup>

We are not alone in our finding that corruption may not always dissuade individuals from engaging in their system. Kiewiet de Jonge (2009) has studied corruption's effects on actual political participation and found that, contrary to popular belief, corruption actually drives individuals to participate politically. As this finding and the findings we report here are similarly counterintuitive, we recommend researchers continue to investigate this topic closely.

*Voting, protest, community involvement, demand-making at the municipal level, and attending a municipal meeting are all positively and significantly correlated with internal efficacy.*

In this brief report it was not possible to examine all of the many variables that might predict efficacy across the Americas; efficacy is a topic that warrants extensive research, and one which we hope will be considered in greater depth in the future. In the meantime, our hope is that we have created a broad understanding of

perceived internal efficacy in the Americas and indicated various factors that help explain its variance across individuals within the region.

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<sup>10</sup> However, the authors do point out that this result was more pronounced in females. See pg. 288-9.

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## Appendix A

Table 1. Predictors of Internal Efficacy in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Coefficient	Standard Error
Education	0.154	0.0068	0.1234	0.0073
Female	-0.119	0.0054	-0.1097	0.0057
Age	0.084	0.0056	0.0650	0.0061
Urban	0.041	0.0076	0.0407	0.0076
Quintiles of Wealth	0.050	0.0063	0.0381	0.0065
Crime Victimization			0.0192	0.0053
Corruption Victimization			0.0282	0.0059
Political Knowledge			0.0711	0.0071
Voted in the Last Election			0.0331	0.0061
Protest			0.0431	0.0055
Community Involvement			0.0363	0.0064
Demand-making on Municipal Government			0.0162	0.0058
Attended a Municipal Meeting			0.0493	0.0058
Mexico	-0.034	0.0075	-0.0311	0.0076
Guatemala	-0.021	0.0078	-0.0254	0.0077
El Salvador	0.009	0.0072	0.0027	0.0071
Honduras	0.015	0.0075	0.0121	0.0077
Nicaragua	0.004	0.0085	0.0141	0.0086
Costa Rica	-0.014	0.0083	-0.0143	0.0082
Panama	0.017	0.0115	0.0266	0.0115
Colombia	-0.052	0.0067	-0.0397	0.0068
Ecuador	-0.042	0.0095	-0.0333	0.0095
Bolivia	-0.044	0.0102	-0.0555	0.0103
Peru	-0.068	0.0079	-0.0686	0.0078
Paraguay	-0.105	0.0077	-0.1026	0.0079
Chile	-0.031	0.0080	-0.0065	0.0087
Brazil	-0.099	0.0104	-0.0876	0.0107
Venezuela	0.012	0.0094	0.0234	0.0093
Argentina	-0.065	0.0114	-0.0639	0.0133
Dominican Rep.	-0.027	0.0065	-0.0279	0.0067
Haiti	-0.077	0.0070	-0.0927	0.0075
Jamaica	-0.071	0.0095	-0.0597	0.0098
Guyana	-0.040	0.0099	-0.0377	0.0097
Trinidad & Tobago	0.019	0.0076	0.0321	0.0074
Belize	0.011	0.0073	0.0204	0.0076
Suriname	0.015	0.0080	0.0237	0.0083
Constant	-0.001	0.0070	0.0017	0.0071
<i>R-Squared</i>	0.082		0.098	
<i>Number of Observations</i>	38,969		36,846	

\* p<0.05

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

Country of Reference: Uruguay

## Appendix B: Author Biographies\*

At the time this report was written, Heather Borowski was a senior at Vanderbilt University and a member of the College Scholars (Honors) Program. She was pursuing a major in Political Science with minors in Corporate Strategy and Leadership and Organization. She was the outgoing Vice President of the Vanderbilt Programming Board as well as a teacher's assistant in Vanderbilt's Managerial Studies program. Her post-graduation plans were to move to Boston to pursue a career in international business.

Rebecca Reed just completed her sophomore year at Vanderbilt University and is part of the College Scholars Program. She is majoring in Anthropology and Classical Civilizations with a minor in Human & Organizational Development. She is Secretary of Model United Nations, and is also interning at the Vanderbilt Institute for Global Health. In the future, she plans to study abroad in Cape Town, South Africa and go to graduate school.

Lucas Scholl recently completed his junior year at Vanderbilt University and is a member of the College Scholars (Honors) Program. He is majoring in Economics and minoring in German Language. He is the outgoing treasurer of Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity and is the Attorney General of Vanderbilt Student Government. He plans a career in finance or consulting after graduation.

David Webb just completed his junior year at Vanderbilt University and is a member of the College Scholars (Honors) Program. He is majoring in English and History with a minor in Corporate Strategy. Since his sophomore year, David has served as the undergraduate representative on the English Majors' Association Board and is currently Vice President of Beta Theta Pi Fraternity. He plans to attend law school after graduation.

*\*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.*