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## Political Knowledge and Religious Channels of Socialization in Latin America

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**Executive Summary.** In this *Insights* report, I consider how religion relates to what Latin Americans know about politics. Using data from the 2010 AmericasBarometer, I assess the effects of two components of religion: *belonging* and *behaving*. Overall I find little difference in political knowledge across Christian dominations and in comparison to the non-religious. Attendance of religious services is related to lower levels of political knowledge, though this relationship reverses itself among Mainline Protestants. In a previous report in the *Insights* series I showed that religious identification is related to higher levels of identification with political parties; this report, however, suggest the possibility that religion may not always boost political engagement and understanding.

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**K**nowledge about politics is not equally distributed among citizens of the Americas. Although what increases political knowledge in the US is well known (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), the determinants of Latin Americans' political knowledge are less understood (Boidi 2007). In this *Insights* report, I explore relationships between religious channels of socialization at the individual level and knowledge of political facts.<sup>1</sup>

In its 2010 AmericasBarometer surveys, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) conducted face-to-face interviews with nationally representative samples in 24 nations in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as web surveys in the United States and Canada. This yielded a total of 43,990 probabilistically selected respondents.<sup>2</sup> The AmericasBarometer asked all respondents in Latin America and the Caribbean the following questions in 2010:

**GI1.** "What is the name of the current president of the US?"

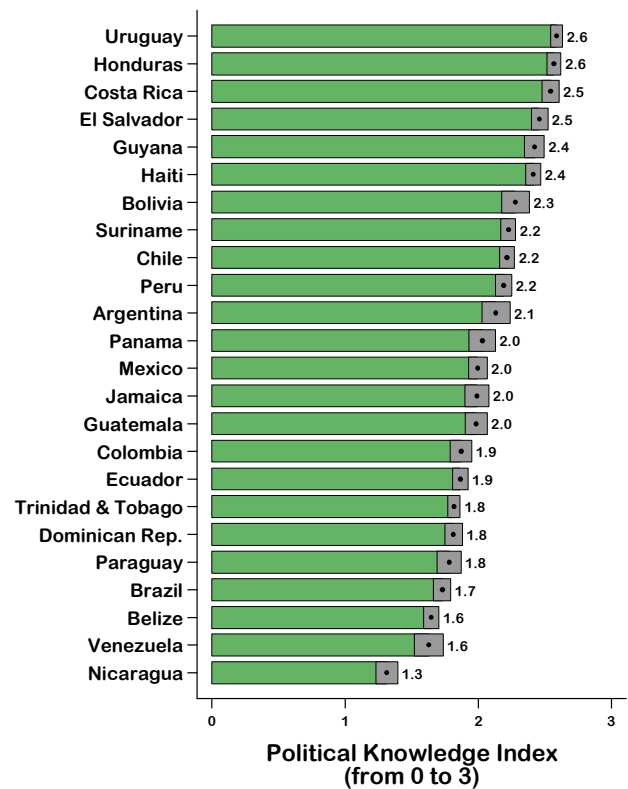
**GI3.** "How many [provinces / departments / states] does [the country] have?"

**GI4.** "How long is the [presidential / prime ministerial] term of office in [the country]?"

Responses were recorded as "correct," "incorrect," and "does not know." Each response was recoded here so that '0' indicates "Does not know/Incorrect" and '1' indicates "Correct"; I then created an additive index running from 0 to 3.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows national

average scores in the 24 countries where these questions were asked. Uruguay, Honduras, and Costa Rica have the highest averages, at 2.6 and 2.5, whereas Nicaraguans rank at the bottom with an average of 1.3 correct answers. The average number of correct answers in the region is 2.04, and eleven countries exceed this average. In sum, Figure 1 shows a great deal of variance across the region.

**Figure 1. Political Knowledge in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010**



95% Confidence Interval (Design-Effects Based)

Source: 2010 AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

<sup>1</sup> Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>  
The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

<sup>2</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>3</sup> The rate of "Does not know" (DK) responses in these 24 countries was 19.5% for GI1; 25.2% for GI3, and 8.9% for GI4. Some scholars argue that offering explicit "do not know" options increases the impact of individuals' varying propensities to guess on knowledge scores, and recommend avoiding DK options (Mondak 2001; Barabas 2002). The LAPOP question wording does not offer explicit DK options; thus, it seems reasonable to group DK and incorrect answers.

Although there is no consensus on what political knowledge entails (Luskin 1987; Mondak 2001), most scholars measure it by testing factual information about politics (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini *et al* 1996; Mondak 2001; Barabas 2002; Prior and Lupia 2008). Variance in the degree of factual information that the Latin American and Caribbean publics possess suggests that there are factors at the country-level that shape

citizens' abilities to respond correctly to these political information questions. These factors might include countries' distinct histories and institutional structures of government, as well as their traditions of civic education and levels of formal education. In this *Insights* report, however, I focus on individual-level predictors of knowledge. In order to increase comparability, I only assess predictors of knowledge in 15 countries (see the appendix) for which reliability tests at the country level suggest that the political knowledge questions comprise a robust index.<sup>4</sup>

## Religion as a Channel of Socialization

Conventional theories predict that citizens could learn politics through channels of socialization such as schools and churches (Wald, Owen and Hill 1988; Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995). I focus on two aspects of citizens' religious experiences: *belonging* and *behaving* (Layman 2001). I expect that *belonging* to certain religious denominations, such as Mainline Protestant churches, might increase political knowledge because parishioners from these churches tend to see political engagement as a natural consequence of religious activity (Djupe and Grant 2001: 311). *Belonging* to the Catholic Church and Evangelical churches, meanwhile, may decrease it (Djupe and Grant 2001;

*Church attendance may decrease sophistication if political facts are not salient for churches, and actually may lead to conscious withdrawal from the wider community.*

Campbell 2004), since parishioners from these denominations tend to engage in politics mainly "in times of crisis and opportunity" (Djupe and Grant 2001: 311). *Behaving*, as measured by church attendance, may decrease sophistication if political facts are not salient for churches (Converse 1964; 1966; Campbell 2004), and actually may lead to conscious withdrawal from the wider community (Campbell 2004). In particular, *behaving* is expected to decrease sophistication because citizens' time devoted to the church takes time away from engagement in politics and the broader community.<sup>5</sup>

I use two religious measures. The first is *belonging*, or affiliation with the five major religious groups in Latin America: Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses, and non-Christian religions.<sup>6</sup> Second, *behaving* is a measure of attendance of religious services, and is intended to capture a channel of socialization that I expect to have a negative effect on political knowledge, due to the withdrawal hypothesis.

## Predictors of Political Knowledge

In order to test the relationship between religious variables and political knowledge, I use a least squares regression at the individual level with country fixed effects, while adjusting for the complex survey sample design within

<sup>4</sup> Using Cronbach's alpha as a measure of reliability, the threshold was defined as 0.5 in order to maximize internal consistency among the three items (Manheim *et al* 2006: 159). In addition, this analysis excludes Haiti (alpha=0.65), in order to prevent unexpected effects of the earthquake that occurred on January 12, before the 2010 AmericasBarometer surveys were conducted; and Chile (alpha=0.49), where an earthquake occurred on February 27, 2010. However, when these countries are included in the analysis, the findings discussed below remain valid. Church attendance is significant and negative across denominations ( $p<0.013$ ), while coefficients are positive for Protestants ( $p<0.087$ ), negative for Evangelicals and Catholics ( $p<0.018$  and  $p<0.064$  respectively), and insignificant for Latter Day Saints (LDS) and non-Christians ( $p<0.835$  and  $p<0.44$  respectively).

<sup>5</sup> Although I will base my expectations on the aforementioned theories, questions remain regarding the causal mechanisms that explain *belonging's* impact on political knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> In the 15 countries of this report, 67.7% of respondents are Catholics; 7.07% are Protestants; 15.3% are Evangelicals; 0.9% are LDS; 0.4% are Jehovah's Witnesses, and 2.02% belong to non-Christian religions (Islam, Jews, and native religions). The reference category is comprised of people who do not profess any religion (7.4%). Given the small number of respondents who are Jehovah's Witnesses and members of LDS, these two denominations are grouped together in the analysis. For additional details regarding the classification of religious denominations please see Díaz-Domínguez (2009).

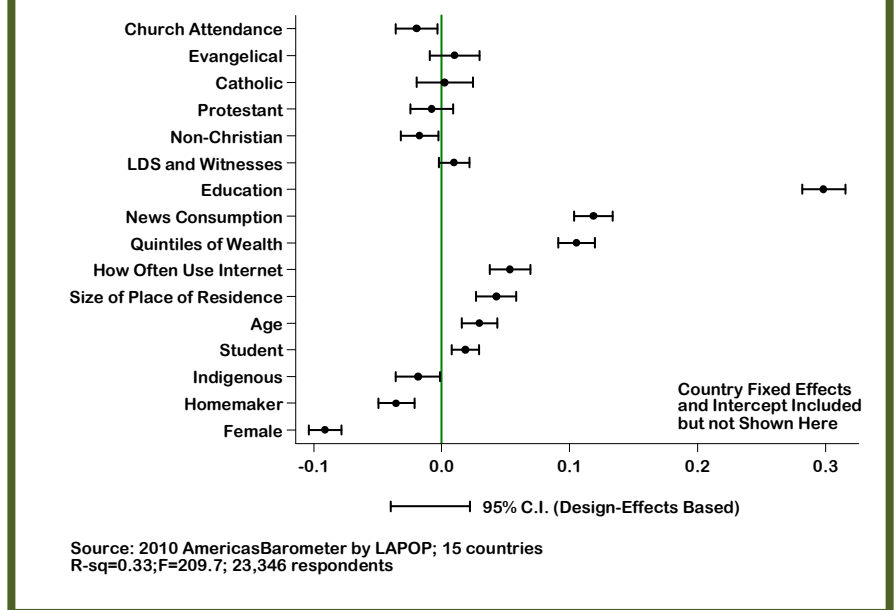
the 15 nations. The independent variables of interest are attendance of religious services, and belonging to five major religious denominations: Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses, and non-Christian religions.

The empirical model includes other channels of political socialization, such as current school attendance, i.e. whether the respondent is a current student (Morduchowicz *et al* 1996), and respondents' levels of education (Prior and Lupia 2008). It also includes variables tapping the lack of exposure to channels of political socialization, such as female gender (Bartels 1996; Kam, Zechmeister and Wilking 2008), homemaker status (Prior and Lupia 2008), and self-identification as indigenous (Boidi 2007). In addition, I include measures of citizens' available resources (Mondak 2001; Barabas 2002, Boidi 2007), such as news media consumption, from never to daily consumption of news on radio and TV; levels of wealth; urban residence; age; and frequency of using the internet, from never to daily use.

Figure 2 presents the results of this full model. The significance of the variables in the model is graphically represented in the following figures (the fixed country effects and intercept are excluded from the graph, but available in the report appendix). The dot represents the predicted impact of each variable. When it falls to the right of the vertical "0" line, it implies a positive relationship; when it falls to the left, it indicates a negative contribution. Statistical significance is captured by a confidence interval that does not overlap the vertical "0" line (at 0.05 or better).

I find that *belonging* alone is not a statistically significant predictor of correct answers about political facts, except just marginally for non-Christian respondents, as shown in Figure 2. In addition, church attendance is negatively related to political knowledge, as expected according to the withdrawal hypothesis, perhaps because

**Figure 2. The Effect of Religious Factors on Political Knowledge in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010**



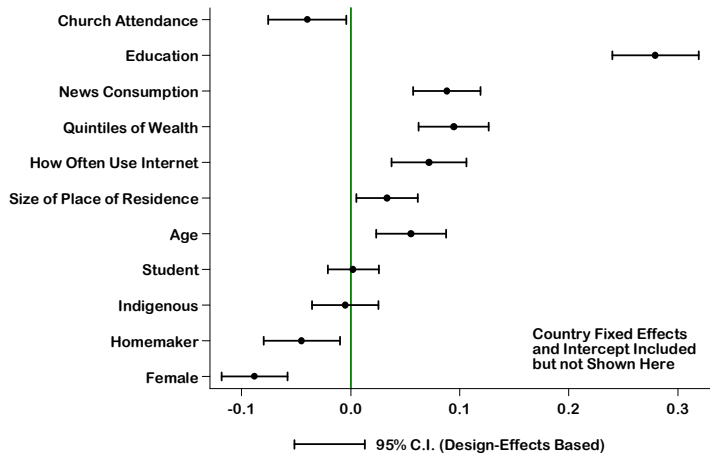
knowledge of political facts is not emphasized within churches.

Other channels of socialization such as current school attendance and levels of education have the expected positive effects. In addition, the lack of exposure to channels of socialization among indigenous people, women, and specifically among female homemakers has a negative effect on political knowledge in these groups. Finally, variables such as news consumption, frequent internet use, wealth, and urban residence increase levels of political knowledge, as expected.<sup>7</sup>

I estimated the same model (minus religious affiliation) for Evangelicals, Catholics, and Protestants respectively, as shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5. Figures 3 and 4 show that, consistent with the withdrawal hypothesis, the relationship between church attendance and political knowledge is negative for both Evangelicals and Catholics (though for the latter it does not reach the  $p < 0.05$  threshold of statistical significance). In contrast, for Mainline Protestants, as shown

<sup>7</sup> The substantive results remain when ordered probit or logit models are employed, but for the sake of simplicity, I estimated least squares models. This strategy may be inefficient, but it is not biased (Kosuke, King and Lau 2007).

**Figure 3. The Effect of Church Attendance on Political Knowledge among Evangelicals in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010**



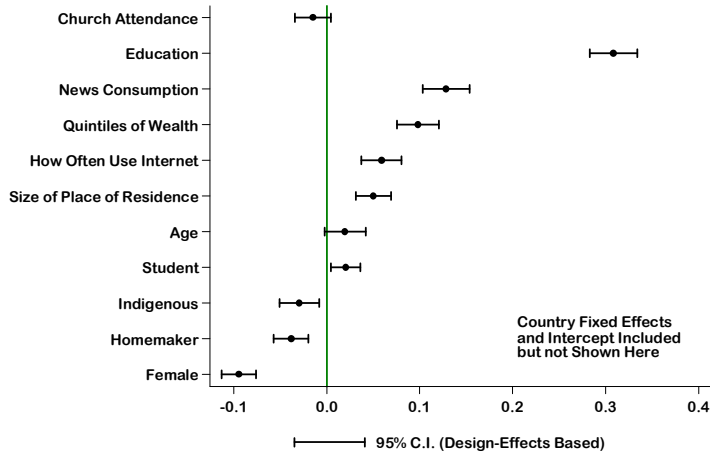
Source: 2010 AmericasBarometer by LAPOP; 15 countries  
R-sq=0.325; F=60.1; 3,984 Respondents

Mainline Protestants are less likely to fall prey to the withdrawal effect than are Evangelicals and Catholics. However, more theoretical work is required in order to explain how and why the withdrawal effect appears to operate differently across religious denominations.<sup>8</sup>

## Discussion

This *Insights* report suggests that religious *belonging* and *behaving* may influence an individual's knowledge of political facts. In combined analysis, I find no differences across Christian traditions, and church attendance operates as a negative channel of socialization. Additional differences emerge when Christian traditions are analyzed separately; the results suggest that those Evangelicals and Catholics who attend church more regularly withdraw from the political world, but the reverse may be the case for Protestants.

**Figure 4. The Effect of Church Attendance on Political Knowledge among Catholics in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010**



Source: 2010 AmericasBarometer by LAPOP; 15 countries  
R-sq=0.334; F=90.3; 16,086 Respondents

Although the effect of religious variables on political knowledge appears to be fairly small, the relevance of these findings lies in testing the withdrawal hypothesis. Additionally, this report has gone beyond traditional analysis of *belonging* or affiliation with religious denominations (Bartels 1996). It has added a measure of *behaving* in order to explore how religion affects political knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

It is likely that church services typically are not used to communicate messages conveying political facts, given that this specific information is not always relevant to churches' agenda at the mass level. Nevertheless, through small scale socialization processes within some religious groups, there may be opportunities for those who frequently attend church to gain, or become more motivated to gain, political knowledge. Such an interpretation of church processes is consistent with the evidence found

in Figure 5, the effect of church attendance on political knowledge is positive.

In sum, this preliminary analysis suggests that there are different effects of church attendance across different religious denominations. In fact, this initial evidence could suggest that perhaps

<sup>8</sup> For the other religious groups, I find that church attendance is not a significant predictor of political knowledge ( $p < 0.22$  for LDS and Witnesses and  $p < 0.49$  for non-Christians).

<sup>9</sup> In this way, the report speaks to Hagopian's (2009) suggestion that the potential effects of church attendance on different political attitudes be placed on the research agenda among those who study Latin American political behavior.

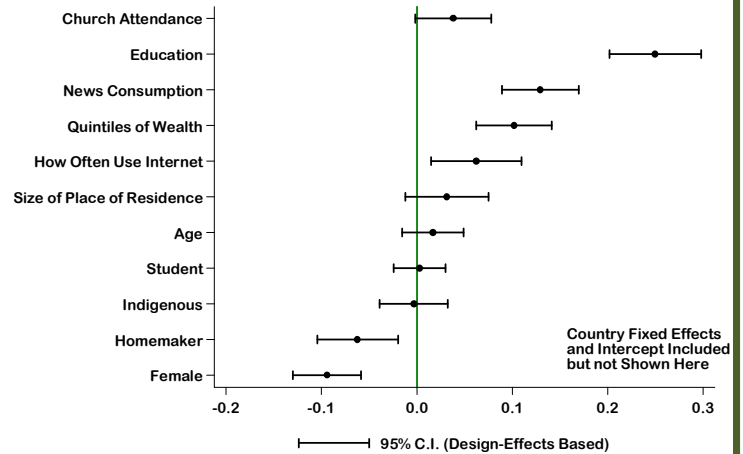
here regarding Mainline Protestant churches, in which there is a positive relationship between attendance and political knowledge, although this effect is fairly small in substantive significance.

As religious competition increases in Latin America, church attendance remains robust, and in fact higher than in many other regions in the world (Cleary 2009). How does religious involvement affect citizens' political attitudes and dispositions? In a previous report in this *Insights* series, I showed that participation in religious groups may facilitate citizens' attachments to electoral politics and in particular to the party system (Díaz-Domínguez 2010). Here, however, I find that religious groups may have a somewhat less beneficial impact on mass politics, to the extent that for some individuals attendance of religious services may lead to a deprioritizing of political information and for some others neither *belonging* nor *behaving* positively affect political knowledge. Nonetheless, the fact that attendance among those belonging to Mainline Protestant churches is positively related to political knowledge suggests that under some specific conditions, churches might play a positive role in this form of political socialization.

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**Figure 5. The Effect of Church Attendance on Political Knowledge among Mainline Protestants in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010**



Source: 2010 AmericasBarometer by LAPOP; 15 countries  
R-sq=0.332; F=33.1; 2,223 Respondents

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**Appendix. Political Knowledge in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2010**

	Full Sample			Evangelicals			Catholics			Protestants		
	Coef.	Std.Err.		Coef.	Std.Err.		Coef.	Std.Err.		Coef.	Std.Err.	
Female	-0.091	0.006	***	-0.088	0.015	***	-0.095	0.009	***	-0.094	0.018	***
Homemaker	-0.035	0.007	***	-0.045	0.018	***	-0.038	0.009	***	-0.062	0.021	***
Indigenous	-0.019	0.009	**	-0.005	0.015		-0.028	0.011	***	-0.003	0.018	
Student	0.019	0.005	***	0.002	0.012		0.020	0.008	***	0.003	0.014	
Age	0.030	0.007	***	0.055	0.016	***	0.019	0.011	*	0.017	0.016	
Place of residence	0.043	0.008	***	0.033	0.014	**	0.049	0.009	**	0.032	0.022	*
Use internet	0.053	0.008	***	0.072	0.017	***	0.059	0.011	***	0.062	0.024	***
Quintiles of Wealth	0.106	0.007	***	0.094	0.016	***	0.097	0.011	***	0.102	0.020	***
News consumption	0.119	0.008	***	0.088	0.016	***	0.128	0.013	***	0.129	0.020	***
Education	0.299	0.009	***	0.280	0.020	***	0.308	0.013	***	0.250	0.024	***
LDS and Witnesses	0.010	0.006	*									
Non-Christian rel.	-0.017	0.008	**									
Protestant	-0.008	0.009										
Catholic	0.002	0.011										
Evangelical	0.010	0.010										
<b>Church attendance</b>	<b>-0.020</b>	<b>0.008</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>-0.040</b>	<b>0.018</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>-0.014</b>	<b>0.010</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>0.038</b>	<b>0.020</b>	<b>*</b>
Mexico	-0.174	0.011	***	-0.139	0.015	***	-0.186	0.022	***	-0.140	0.024	***
Guatemala	-0.132	0.011	***	-0.223	0.019	***	-0.105	0.019	***	-0.111	0.028	***
El Salvador	-0.063	0.010	***	-0.058	0.015	***	-0.058	0.019	***	-0.040	0.020	***
Costa Rica	-0.044	0.011	***	-0.042	0.016	***	-0.038	0.019	**	-0.034	0.021	*
Colombia	-0.228	0.010	***	-0.144	0.016	***	-0.238	0.022	***	-0.212	0.017	***
Ecuador	-0.331	0.014	***	-0.286	0.017	***	-0.360	0.029	***	-0.303	0.037	***
Bolivia	-0.173	0.015	***	-0.125	0.020	***	-0.172	0.035	***	-0.140	0.027	***
Peru	-0.173	0.011	***	-0.159	0.016	***	-0.182	0.023	***	-0.101	0.032	***
Paraguay	-0.232	0.011	***	-0.161	0.018	***	-0.260	0.025	***	-0.132	0.030	***
Brazil	-0.286	0.015	***	-0.286	0.018	***	-0.264	0.029	***	-0.336	0.033	***
Venezuela	-0.299	0.014	***	-0.162	0.019	***	-0.309	0.023	***	-0.251	0.030	***
Argentina	-0.168	0.012	***	-0.147	0.019	***	-0.170	0.022	***	-0.109	0.032	***
Dominican Rep.	-0.221	0.010	***	-0.216	0.014	***	-0.210	0.019	***	-0.184	0.017	***
Guyana	-0.065	0.012	***	-0.076	0.018	***	-0.024	0.016	***	-0.117	0.041	***
Intercept	0.023	0.008	***	0.035	0.014	***	0.026	0.013	**	0.036	0.024	*

Respondents	23,346	3,984	16,086	2,223
F statistic	209.7	60.1	90.3	33.1
R-squared	0.326	0.325	0.334	0.332

Note: \* 90%, \*\* 95%, \*\*\* 99%

Source: 2010 AmericasBarometer by LAPOP; author's estimations based on survey least squares regressions.

Country of reference: Honduras.