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# To What Extent Should Government Ensure Citizen Well-Being?

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The extent to which government should be involved in the provision of goods and services that promote citizen well-being is a perennial debate in public policies worldwide. While the academic literature on the welfare state has concentrated significantly on Europe, recently attention has been placed on Latin America (Segura-Urbierto 2007). This *AmericasBarometer Insights Series* report looks at citizens' preferences regarding the role of government in welfare provision. In prior *Insights* reports (I0801 and I0808) we examined opinion over the role of the government in creating jobs and over government ownership of key businesses.<sup>1</sup> In this new paper we again query the 2008 round of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) surveys.<sup>2</sup> In this survey 38,053 respondents from 23 nations

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<sup>1</sup> Prior issues in the Insight 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 2008 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), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

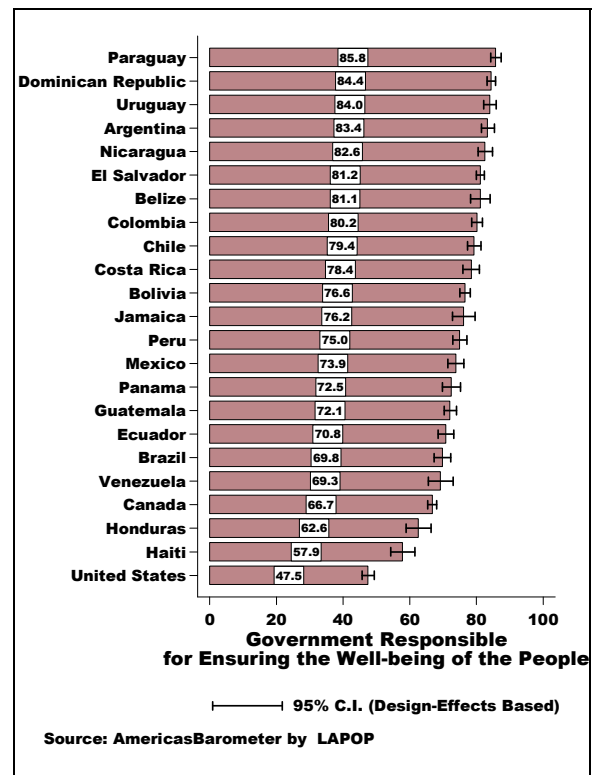
in North, Central, South America, and the Caribbean were asked the same question:

**ROS2.** The (nationality) government, more than individuals, is the most responsible for ensuring the well-being of the people. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Responses were given based on a 1-7 scale, where '1' meant "strongly disagree" and '7' meant "strongly agree."

These responses were then recalibrated on a 0-100 basis to conform to the LAPOP standard, which facilitates comparability across questions and survey waves.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 displays national averages and shows that, despite some cross-national variance, there is overall very high support in the Americas for the notion that the government ensure citizen well-being.

**Figure 1.** Average Support for Government Ensuring Well-Being of the People in the Americas, 2008



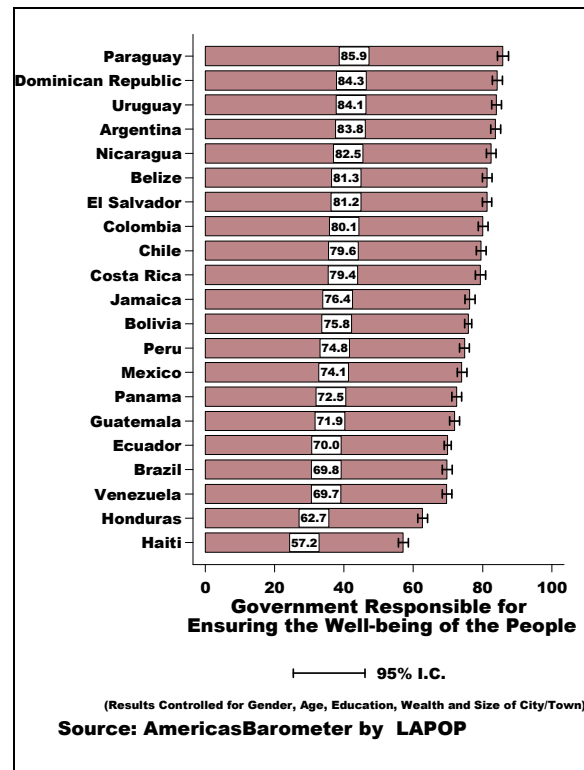
<sup>3</sup> Non-response was 3.86% for the sample as a whole.

In eight countries the average response rises above 80 points on our 0-100 scale. At the top of this group we find Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Argentina, countries in which individuals display the highest levels of support for notion that government<sup>4</sup> is principally responsible for ensuring individuals' well-being. At the other extreme, we find Honduras, Haiti, and the United States, countries where the average score falls below 50 points. Comparatively speaking, support is especially low in the U.S. (47.5 points), a country long noted for its preference for a limited role for government and its emphasis, instead, on the individual as primarily responsible for ensuring his/her own well-being.

How much of this variation across countries emerges from differences in individuals' socio-economic and demographic characteristics? In order to assess the effect of these characteristics we control for education gender, age, wealth, and city/town size. Given that the United States and Canada hold sharply higher levels on socioeconomic characteristics we exclude these countries from the analysis.

Figure 2 shows how the results remain remarkably consistent with Figure 1: the averages remain almost the same<sup>5</sup>. Support levels are 57.2 and above in every country in Latin America or the Caribbean and, as well, the same cross-national differences remain evident. Therefore, there must be other factors that help to explain variation across countries.

**Figure 2.**  
Average Support for Government Ensuring Well-Being of the People after Taking into Account Individual Characteristics in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



## Do Contextual Factors Matter?

While, for the most part, citizens' socio-economic and demographic characteristics do not have a large impact on variation across countries in views on the government's role in ensuring well-being, perhaps key characteristics of the nation do. Some studies in industrialized nations have shown that public attitudes toward welfare state policies depend on both individual and national level variables (Blekesaune and Quadagno 2003). In Figure 3, both the individual characteristics of respondents and the wealth of the nation, measured by GDP per capita, are analyzed.<sup>6</sup>

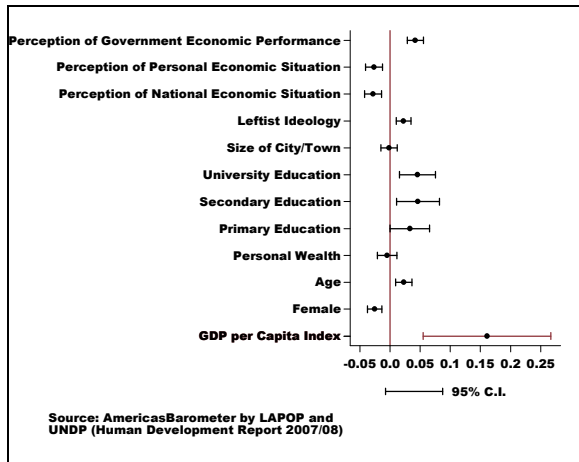
<sup>4</sup> In the Spanish-language version of the questionnaire, the word "el estado" (the state) is used since the term "el gobierno" (the government) refers to the incumbent administration rather than the state apparatus.

<sup>5</sup> An analysis of variance model was employed, with the socio-economic and demographic variables used as covariates.

<sup>6</sup> This analysis is carried out using multi-level regression techniques (Raudenbush, et al. 2004), as implemented by LAPOP on STATA 10. The model simultaneously takes into account both individual and country-level (i.e., contextual) factors, and produces correct regression estimates that are impossible with standard OLS regression.

**Figure 3.**

A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Average Support for the Primary Role of the Government Ensuring the Well-being of the People in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of Economic Development, 2008



The impact of each variable is shown graphically by a dot, which if to the right of the vertical “0” line implies a positive contribution and if to the left of the “0” line a negative impact. Only when the confidence intervals (the horizontal lines) do not overlap the vertical “0” line is the variable statistically significant (at .05 or better). The relative strength of each variable is indicated by standardized coefficients (i.e., “beta weights”).

Figure 3 shows that national per capita wealth (as reported by the United Nations Development Program in its Human Development Report 2007/2008 for each nation as a whole) has a strong statistically significant impact on individual support for the notion that government is principally responsible for ensuring citizens’ well-being. The wealthier the country in per capita terms<sup>7</sup>, the stronger the desire for government to take on this role.

<sup>7</sup> National wealth is measuring using the UNDP’s GDP index. This index is based on gross domestic product per capita in purchasing power parity terms in US dollars. The index can take values between 0 and 1. For details on how this index was constructed see UNDP’s Human Development Report 2007/2008.

Apart from national-level characteristics we included individual-level variables regarding views on the economy and politics as well as socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Specifically, we included a measure of ideology with the expectation that the more left-leaning an individual, the greater would be his or her preference for government involvement. Figure 3 confirms this expectation<sup>8</sup>. We further considered whether perceptions of the government’s economic performance would have a positive effect, as a belief that the government is effective presumably gives it credibility and legitimacy in a broad sphere of policy areas, including welfare. Again, we see in Figure 3 that this variable is significant and positive<sup>9</sup>.

At the same time, we suspected that perceptions of the prevailing economic conditions in a country may matter, though here our *a priori* expectations were less clear given that need could drive a preference for government-provided welfare while need may also signal poor government performance, simultaneously reducing confidence in government and demand for it to assume an expanded role in welfare. Contrary to the national level of wealth, perceptions of the national and personal economic situation have a negative statistically significant effect. *Ceteris paribus*, the greater the perception of the personal and national economic situation, the lower the support for the government ensuring citizen well-being.

Regarding socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, holding constant the rest of variables, citizens with university and secondary levels of education, older individuals, and males are more supportive of the proper role of the government ensuring their well-being. Interestingly, while perceptions of the economic situation matter, personal wealth does

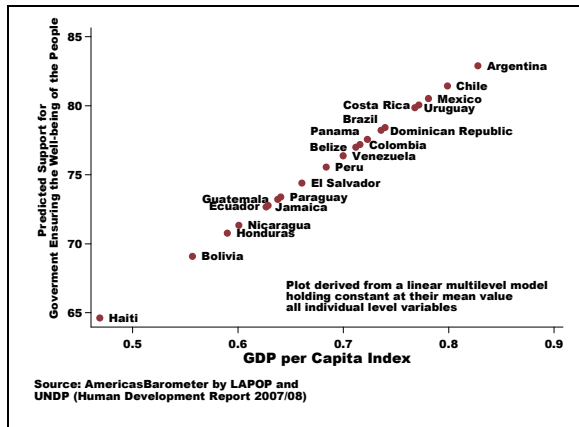
<sup>8</sup> The scale used here is the classic 1-10 measurement, in which the poles of “left” (1) and “right” (10) are placed on a continuum, and the respondent self-locates on this scale.

<sup>9</sup> The Perception of the Government Economic Performance Index was constructed from two items that asked to what extent people thought that the current administration fights poverty and unemployment.

not have a statistically significant impact, as Figure 3 depicts.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 4.**

The Impact of Economic Development on Support for the Primary Role of the Government Ensuring the Well-being of the People in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008

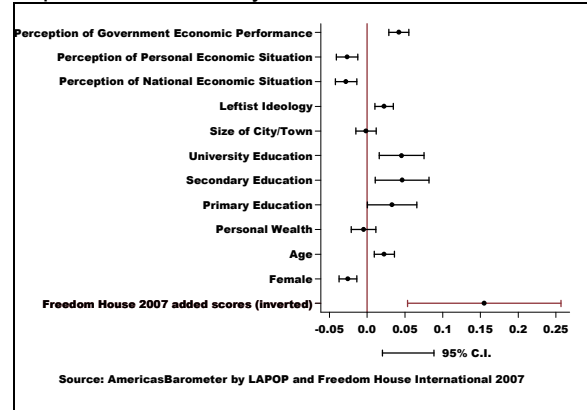


That national context matters is highlighted in Figure 4. This figure shows the fitted line from the multi-level regression analysis. The predicted line fits the countries' predicted support for government ensuring the well-being of the people according to the level of national wealth measured by GDP per capita. The higher the levels of wealth, the higher the support for government playing a strong role to ensure well-being.

While the analyses so far focus significantly on economic factors, we also examined and found evidence for an effect of regime type. Specifically, figure 5 shows that not only does the *level* of GDP increase support for the role of the state in welfare provision, but the level of democracy does as well<sup>11</sup>. Citizens who live in countries with higher levels of democracy tend to be more supportive on average of the notion that government should play a strong role in ensuring citizen well-being.

**Figure 5.**

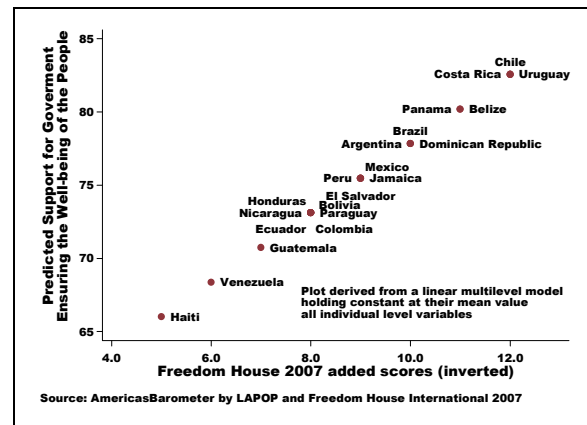
A Multilevel Analysis of the Determinants of Average Support for the Primary Role of the Government Ensuring the Well-being of the People in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Impact of Democracy, 2008



This finding is shown graphically in Figure 6, where we see the relationship between levels of democracy measured by Freedom House scores and support for government ensuring well-being. The higher the levels of democracy, the higher the support for an active government role in this regard.

**Figure 6.**

The Impact of Democracy on Support for the Primary Role of the Government Ensuring the Well-being of the People in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



<sup>10</sup> This null finding holds even if economic perceptions are removed from the model.

<sup>11</sup> Level of democracy is measured using Freedom House scores for 2007. The original scale is inverted, so that higher values indicate higher levels of democracy.

## Policy and Program Implications

The findings of this report suggest that citizens in the region, on average, believe that government should actively promote individuals' well-being. However, this opinion is directly conditioned by personal evaluations of the efficacy of the state in handling the economy, as well as by levels of education, age, gender, and ideology. Furthermore, this opinion is also affected by contextual factors such as the level of national wealth and democracy.

If citizens live in contexts where the economy and democracy have achieved relatively high *levels*, they tend to prefer that governments play a strong role in the provision of social welfare.

Consistent with the above and with previous *Insights* reports, citizens who have positive perceptions of government performance prefer that it play a stronger role in the economy (in this case, social welfare provision). In short, where supply is perceived in a good light, demand is higher. Where governments have failed to deliver on the principal problems of the day, citizens are skeptical about the ability of the state to perform well providing welfare to its people.

Apart from confidence in the economic performance of governments, higher levels of education also seem to be important. Well-educated people tend to be more supportive of a strong role for government in ensuring citizen well-being.

In upcoming AmericasBarometer *Insights* reports we will look at additional issues regarding the role of the government, a role that seems to depend on different circumstances.

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