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## **Explaining Public Attitudes toward Fighting Inequality in Latin America**

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### **Abstract**

This paper uses the 2008 Americas Barometer survey data from 22 countries to explore the factors that shape Latin American attitudes about the role of the state in reducing inequality. Using multilevel analysis to properly model both the individual- and country-level predictors of these attitudes, we find that traditional explanations of public attitudes about government's redistributive role also carry weight in Latin America. Economic evaluations, personal wealth, trust in government, and assessments of government performance are each associated in predictable ways with attitudes about redistribution. But the analysis also identifies factors that have been overlooked in previous research on the state's role in combating inequality, which has been primarily conducted in the context of the developed world. Namely, we find that Latin Americans appropriately view crime and inequality as interrelated, and as their perceptions of crime as a problem increase so does their support for government efforts to reduce inequality. This relationship is particularly important in poorer countries where inequality and poverty are widespread social ills. The analysis suggests that in the Latin American context it is appropriate to view pursuing anticrime and anti-inequality policies as compatible rather than competing goals.

**Keywords:** inequality, public opinion, Latin America, redistribution, role of the state, Americas Barometer

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## Introduction

In order to have a full understanding of how societies address issues of poverty and inequality, it is important to understand public attitudes toward government redistribution. Redistributive policy programs, after all, are one of the central weapons that governments can wield against poverty and inequality. How citizens view these policies and how they assess the appropriateness of state activities to combat these social ills can either constrain or motivate additional public policies that target the reduction of inequality. Societies in which citizens favor state intervention to reduce inequality are more likely to pursue such policies, and if governments have the capacity but do not pursue the pro-poor policies the people favor, they can be appropriately scrutinized for this failure. The goal of this paper is to expand our knowledge of public opinion regarding redistribution in the developing world.

While studies of public opinion toward redistribution generally and welfare programs specifically are prevalent in the developed world, much less is known about such public attitudes in the developing world.<sup>1</sup> This discrepancy is likely driven by the paucity of relevant public opinion data. One could easily argue, however, that it is actually more important to study public opinion about government action to reduce inequality and poverty in middle- and low-income countries, because poverty and inequality are more prevalent there than in richer countries.

In this paper we assess the correlates of attitudes about state efforts to reduce inequality within and across 22 Latin American and Caribbean countries. Using data from the 2008 Americas Barometer, we analyze responses to a question asking respondents the extent to which they agree that “government should take strong action to reduce inequality between the rich and the poor.” Studying public support for pro-poor policies in this context is important not only because of the more widespread prevalence of poverty and inequality in Latin America than in richer countries, but also because the Latin American setting provides an opportunity to examine the role of explanatory factors that are often relegated to the periphery in studies of the developed world. We build on existing theories that point to the

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Feldman and Marco R. Steenbergen, “The Humanitarian Foundation of Public Support for Social Welfare,” *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (3) (2001): 658-677. See also Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); William G. Jacoby, “Public Attitudes toward Government Spending,” *American Journal of Political Science* 38 (2) (1994): 336-361, and Paul Pierson, “The New Politics of the Welfare State,” *World Politics* 48 (2) (1996): 143-179.

explanatory importance of levels of inequality, crime, corruption, and economic security in order to understand attitudes about the role of the state in combating inequality.

At the heart of our theoretical framework is the idea that citizens perceive a connection between their physical and economic security on the one hand and inequality on the other. We argue that, to a much greater extent than in the developed world, people in the developing world see poverty and inequality as inextricably linked to their personal safety and financial survival. We will show that as perceptions of crime as a problem increase and as one's economic security declines, support for government action to reduce inequality increases. In addition, we will demonstrate that these effects are not constant across countries even within Latin America. As a country's wealth increases, physical and economic security decline in relevance when explaining attitudes toward the state's role in reducing inequality.

The remainder of the paper proceeds in three sections. First, we review existing studies that provide insight into attitudes about the state's role in redistributing resources and fighting inequality. We examine public opinion literature about attitudes toward welfare, redistribution, and economic inequality. We pay special attention to what existing studies say about the role of physical and economic security in attitude formation. In the second section, we describe our analytical strategy and the data we will be using, and we report the results of a multilevel analysis of attitudes about state intervention to reduce inequality, accounting for both individual- and country-level variations in these attitudes. In the final section, we discuss the implications of the results and connect the analysis explicitly to previous studies from both the developed and developing world.

## **Explaining Support for Policies that Reduce Inequality**

This paper examines attitudes about the role of the state in reducing economic inequality. In this section we discuss the factors that we argue to be important in understanding these attitudes in the Latin American context. At the individual level, we highlight the potential significance of security-related factors that have received relatively little attention in the existing literature—crime and corruption. We also discuss four sets of factors that have received considerable attention in the literature: economic self-interest and assessments of economic conditions, ideological orientations, trust in government and assessments of government performance, and demographic

factors. Finally, we discuss how country-level factors might influence levels of support for redistribution across countries as well as moderate the influence of certain individual-level factors. Throughout the section we develop specific hypotheses for each of the potential explanations and discuss how they will be incorporated into the analysis.

## Crime

The first potential explanation that we consider for attitudes about the state's role in equalizing distributional outcomes is perceptions of crime, a factor that has received almost no attention in existing studies of attitudes toward redistribution. Our focus on crime is rooted in the notion that citizens see inequality and poverty as leading to increased crime. Because they perceive these social ills to be connected, individuals who perceive crime as a problem would also be more likely to support government action to combat inequality, which by extension should also lead to reductions in violations of the law, including property crime and violent crime.

The existing public opinion literature says little to nothing about whether citizens view inequality as an important cause of crime. However, there is ample evidence that citizens who see inequality as contributing to crime would be largely accurate in their assessments. In numerous studies covering nearly the entire globe, scholars have found a robust relationship between economic inequality and crime. Blau and Blau show that income inequality is a primary determinant of crime in American cities. In fact, they argue that in explaining crime rates economic inequality is more important than poverty, race, or cultural propensities toward violence.<sup>2</sup> Cross-national studies also find support for the thesis that inequality is positively associated with crime rates, particularly the violent crime that is most likely to shape public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Studies focusing on Latin America have reached similar

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<sup>2</sup> Judith R. Blau and Peter M. Blau, "The Cost of Inequality: Metropolitan Structure and Violent Crime," *American Sociological Review* 47 (1) (1982): 114-129.

<sup>3</sup> Irma Arriagada and Lorena Godoy, "Prevention or Repression? The False Dilemma of Citizen Security," *CEPAL Review* 70 (2) (2000): 111-136; Marvin D. Krohn, "Inequality, Unemployment and Crime: A Cross-National Analysis," *The Sociological Quarterly* 17 (3) (1976): 303-313; Gary Lafree, "A Summary and Review of Cross-National Comparative Studies in Homicide," in *Homicide Studies: A Sourcebook of Social Research*, ed. M. Duane Smith and Margaret A. Zahn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999); Gary Lafree and Andromachi Tseloni, "Democracy and Crime: A Multilevel Analysis of Homicide Trends in Forty-Four Countries, 1950-2000," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 605 (2006): 26-49; Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, ed. Robert K. Merton (New York: Free Press, 1968), 185-214; Steven F. Messner and

conclusions. Portes and Hoffman suggest that crime has escalated following the implementation of neoliberal reforms throughout the region because such policies lead to higher levels of inequality. They show that Latin American countries with higher levels of income inequality also have higher crime rates.<sup>4</sup> Numerous other studies examining the determinants of violent crime in Latin America concur that inequality is central to understanding the increasing crime problems confronting the region, with most agreeing that a widening gap between rich and poor is the most important predictor of increased violence.<sup>5</sup>

Economic inequality is even more important than poverty, suggesting that relative deprivation rather than abject need motivates escalations in criminal activity.<sup>6</sup> Simply stated, societies that are more unequal tend to suffer higher levels of crime. This literature linking economic inequality to crime suggests that citizens who perceive the two issues as interrelated are correct. This scholarship, therefore, provides a solid foundation for the idea that support for redistributive action to reduce inequality would increase when people view crime as a problem. Our first hypothesis, then, is:

*H1: As an individual's perception of crime as a problem increases, his or her support for redistribution increases.*

While there is good reason to believe that citizens should perceive linkages between crime and inequality, it is possible that this perceived link varies based on the broader economic context. In general, it seems more

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Richard Rosenfeld, "Political Restraint of the Market and Levels of Criminal Homicide: A Cross-National Application of Institutional-Anomie Theory," *Social Forces* 75 (4) (1997): 1393-1416; Jerome L. Neapolitan, "Cross-National Crime Data: Some Unaddressed Problems," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 19 (1) (1996): 95-112; and Mercer L. Sullivan, *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Alejandro Portes and Kelly Hoffman, "Latin American Class Structures: Their Composition and Change during the Neoliberal Era," *Latin American Research Review* 38 (1) (2003): 41-82.

<sup>5</sup> Francois Bourguignon, "Crime, Violence, and Inequitable Development," Paper prepared for the Annual Conference on Development Economics, The World Bank, 1999. See also Juan Luis Londoño, "Violence, Psyche, and Social Capital," Paper prepared for the second annual World Bank Conference on Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, Bogotá, July 1996. See also Arriagada and Godoy, "Prevention or Repression?"

<sup>6</sup> Portes and Hoffman, 2003 and see also Sullivan, "Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City"

likely that citizens will see inequality as an underlying cause of crime when economic circumstances are generally not good and many people are living in poverty. When these conditions are present, crime essentially becomes a coping mechanism.<sup>7</sup> Crime under these circumstances is not the unreasonable behavior of a social deviant, but a natural reaction to substantial economic hardship. Crime becomes a survival strategy. On the other hand, when economic conditions are generally good, it is more likely that crime is framed as social deviance for which there is no excuse. In this circumstance, crime is viewed less as the result of societal problems and more as a problem with specific individuals. Take the context of the rich United States for example. Despite evidence that inequality and crime are connected,<sup>8</sup> discussions of crime as well as attitudes toward welfare programs are strongly tied to race and perceptions of individual responsibility.<sup>9</sup> The focus is on problems with individuals rather than systemic problems in society.

This discussion suggests that citizens of more prosperous countries might be less likely to connect crime to societal problems than are citizens of poorer countries. In rich countries where poverty affects a smaller segment of the population, it is much easier to focus on problems with individuals when thinking about societal ills like poverty and crime. In poor countries where inequality is high and poverty is widespread, it is more likely that crime is viewed as a legitimate coping mechanism. In essence, this suggests that the perceived linkage between societal problems such as inequality and crime is likely to be stronger in poorer countries. Given that our earlier hypothesis regarding the connection between perceptions of crime and support for redistribution relies on a perceived link between inequality and crime, this discussion suggests that the link theorized earlier in H1 is conditioned by the level of prosperity in a country. Specifically, we hypothesize:

*H2: The correlation between perceptions of crime and support for redistribution will be weaker in countries with higher levels of overall prosperity.*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Blau & Blau, "The Cost of Inequality."

<sup>9</sup> Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*; Miles D. Harer and Darrell Steffensmeier, "The Differing Effects of Economic Inequality on Black and White Rates of Violence," *Social Forces* 70 (4) (1992): 1035-1054; and Edward S. Shihadeh and Darrell J. Steffensmeier, "Economic Inequality, Family Disruption, and Urban Black Violence: Cities as Units of Stratification and Social Control," *Social Forces* 73 (2) (1994): 729-751.

## **Corruption**

Scholarship about the effects of corruption, which we define as the use of public resources for private gain,<sup>10</sup> on attitudes about government has typically argued that corruption undermines trust in government and weakens perceptions of government efficacy.<sup>11</sup> Where government corruption is prevalent, people may be more reluctant to have the state tackle pressing national problems like inequality because government is perceived as particularistic and perhaps incapable or uninterested in resolving society-wide concerns through universal policies, such as efforts at redistribution. This scholarship suggests our third hypothesis:

*H3: As an individual's perception that corruption is a problem increases, his or her support for government efforts to combat inequality will decline.*

However, recent literature seeking to explain variation in the level of corruption across countries suggests an alternative view concerning the relationship between corruption and inequality. This literature identifies economic inequality as a key factor that enables corruption to persist and spread.<sup>12</sup> Eric Uslaner argues that the relationship between corruption and inequality generates what he calls an “inequality trap.” In this trap, economic inequalities are seen as creating an environment that encourages corrupt activity. Corruption, in turn, helps to reinforce economic inequality, creating a vicious cycle of sorts.<sup>13</sup> As with the argument outlined above related to

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<sup>10</sup> Jana Morgan and Rosario Espinal, *Cultura política de la democracia en la República Dominicana: El impacto de la gobernabilidad* (Santo Domingo: Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo and USAID, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Democracy and Political Support in Eight Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Alan Doig and Robin Theobald, eds., *Corruption and Democratization* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Susan Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences and Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Mitchell A. Seligson, “The Impact of Corruption on Regime Legitimacy: A Comparative Study of Four Latin American Countries,” *The Journal of Politics* 64 (2) (2002): 408-433.

<sup>12</sup> Edward L. Glaeser, Jose Scheinkman, and Andrei Shleifer, “The Injustice of Inequality,” *Journal of Monetary Economics* 50 (2003): 199-222; Eric M. Uslaner, *Corruption, Inequality, and the Rule of Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Uslaner, *Corruption*.

crime, the empirical link between inequality and corruption suggests that people might be cognizant of this connection and might, therefore, favor efforts to fight inequality when they view corruption as a problem.

In fact, there is some empirical evidence that people do believe there is a link between inequality and corruption. Looking at a variety of surveys conducted in several different countries, Uslaner shows that there is a widespread belief that economic inequality is part of the explanation for the existence of corruption.<sup>14</sup> These theories and evidence suggest a logic that parallels the discussion of crime above, motivating an alternative hypothesis:

*H3a: As an individual's perception that corruption is a problem increases, his or her support for redistribution will also increase.*<sup>15</sup>

### **Self-Interest and Economic Evaluations**

Discussions of attitudes toward redistributive policies often begin with economic self-interest. Meltzer and Richard's classic model of the size of government has at its core a model of individual behavior that connects individual well-being to support for redistribution.<sup>16</sup> Simply stated, their model asserts that there is a negative correlation between income and support for increased taxes and redistributive spending. Those with higher incomes are expected to oppose redistributive programs because they do not gain from such programs. More recent models of redistribution that reach different conclusions about the determinants of social spending, nevertheless, share the underlying premise that the poor will be more supportive of such programs than the rich.<sup>17</sup> This idea is not controversial, and it explains why income and/or measures of economic class are almost uniformly incorporated into existing studies of attitudes about welfare and other redistributive programs. The results from existing studies are consistent in their support for the conclusion that higher income and class

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> In the analysis below, we also examine the direct effects of trust in government and evaluations of government efficacy. Controlling for these variables allows us to assess the effect of corruption net of perceptions of government performance.

<sup>16</sup> Alan H. Meltzer and Scott F. Richard, "A Rational Theory of the Size of Government," *Journal of Political Economy* 89 (4) (1981): 914-927.

<sup>17</sup> Roland Benabou, "Unequal Societies: Income Distribution and the Social Contract," *American Economic Review* 90 (1) (2000): 96-129. See also Karl Ove Moene and Michael Wallerstein, "Earnings Inequality and Welfare Spending: A Disaggregated Analysis," *World Politics* 55 (4) (2003): 485-516.

status are associated with less support for welfare and related programs.<sup>18</sup> This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H4: Individuals with higher levels of economic well-being are less supportive of redistribution.*

Economic evaluations are another factor closely associated with self-interest explanations of attitudes about redistribution. While income is an objective measure of one's well-being, subjective perceptions of the economy are also important in shaping attitudes.<sup>19</sup> Just as higher income individuals are less likely to support government redistribution, it is also likely that those with positive evaluations of the economy will be less supportive of government action to reduce inequality. The logic here is a simple extension of the discussion above related to income. Those who positively evaluate their economic situation and/or the conditions of the nation as a whole are likely to see little need for redistribution. However, if people believe that the economy is not performing well, then they are more likely to believe that state intervention is needed.<sup>20</sup> Our next hypothesis, then, is:

*H5: Individuals with more positive evaluations of the economy will be less supportive of redistribution.*

It is certainly important to account for individual-level variation in economic circumstances and evaluations of the economy when explaining attitudes about government's role in combating inequality. But it is also important to examine the broader economic context within which individuals reside. We expect country-level variation in economic conditions to matter in two ways. First, there is a substantial literature showing that the size of the

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<sup>18</sup> Yehekel Hasenfeld and Jane A. Rafferty, "The Determinants of Public Attitudes toward the Welfare State," *Social Forces* 67 (4) (1989): 1027-1048. See also Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*; Sandra K. Schneider and William G. Jacoby, "A Culture of Dependence? The Relationship between Public Assistance and Public Opinion," *British Journal of Political Science* 33 (2) (2003): 213-231; and Nicholas J.G. Winter, "Beyond Welfare: Framing and the Racialization of White Opinion on Social Security," *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2) (2006): 400-420.

<sup>19</sup> H. Robert Durr, "What Moves Policy Sentiment?" *American Political Science Review* 87 (1) (1993): 158-170. See also Michael B. MacKuen, Robert S. Erikson, and James A. Stimson, "Peasants or Bankers? The American Electorate and the U.S. Economy," *American Political Science Review* 86 (3) (1993): 597-611.

<sup>20</sup> Winter, "Beyond Welfare."

welfare state generally grows as a country becomes more developed.<sup>21</sup> This may be driven to some extent by public preferences regarding the welfare state. In richer countries, it is “easier” to support redistribution simply because there are more resources to go around. When incomes are higher and poverty is lower, it may be more likely that the average person is willing to share, holding their personal income constant. This suggests the following hypothesis:

*H6: Individuals in countries with higher levels of economic well-being will be more supportive of redistribution.*

It is also quite possible that the level of economic well-being in the country in which one resides conditions the effects of economic evaluations. When poverty levels are relatively low and incomes are comparatively high, evaluations of the economy may be less important in determining attitudes toward redistribution. If the general level of prosperity is low in a country, those evaluating the economy negatively are more likely to see both their personal financial outlook and the country’s circumstances as tied to overarching economic problems. But if the level of prosperity in a country is high, then it is easier to attribute economic difficulties to individual shortcomings. In the former context of national economic distress, a connection between negative economic evaluations and support for redistribution should be strong and positive, whereas this connection should be weaker in the latter context of general prosperity. Therefore, we hypothesize the following effect for economic evaluations, conditioned on the overall status of the national economy:

*H7: The correlation between economic evaluations and support for redistribution will be diminished in countries with higher levels of prosperity.*

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<sup>21</sup> See David Bradley et al., “Distribution and Redistribution in Post-Industrial Democracies,” *World Politics* 55 (2) (2003): 193-228. See also Alexander M. Hicks, *Social Democracy and Welfare Capitalism: A Century of Income Security Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Evelyne Huber and John D. Stephens, *Development and Crisis of the Welfare State: Parties and Policies in Global Markets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Evelyne Huber, Charles Ragin, and John D. Stephens, “Social Democracy, Christian Democracy, Constitutional Structure and the Welfare State,” *American Journal of Political Science* 38 (2) (2001): 336-361; and Duane Swank *Global Capital, Political Institutions, and Policy Change in Developed Welfare States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

## **Ideological Orientations**

Self-interest and assessments of economic conditions are an important part of any discussion about attitudes toward redistribution. Much of politics, however, is about symbolism as much as substance. This is why existing studies seeking to explain welfare attitudes place considerable emphasis on ideological orientations, perhaps even more than they stress indicators of objective self-interest such as income, class, and economic assessments.

There is no shortage of evidence that ideological orientations and political values shape attitudes about redistribution. Values such as egalitarianism,<sup>22</sup> individualism,<sup>23</sup> humanitarianism,<sup>24</sup> and post-materialism<sup>25</sup> have been associated with attitudes toward various aspects of the welfare state. Egalitarians tend to support general social programs while humanitarians tend to limit their support to poverty relief.<sup>26</sup> Those who value individualism are not likely to support welfare programs of any type.<sup>27</sup>

The studies cited above contain a great deal of theoretical nuance regarding the specific effects of different values. The generalized finding is that those holding values associated with left ideologies are more supportive of the welfare state generally and redistribution specifically. In nearly every study cited above and many others, ideological self-identification is utilized as an explanation for welfare attitudes. The results are clear—those who self-identify on the left portion of the ideological scale are more supportive of redistribution. In this paper, in part due to limitations on data availability, we set aside some of the theoretical nuances associated with specific value

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<sup>22</sup> See Lawrence Bobo and James R. Kluegel, “Opposition to Race-Targeting: Self-Interest, Stratification Ideology, or Racial Attitudes?” *American Sociological Review* 58 (4) (1993): 443-464. Also see Stanley Feldman and John Zaller, “The Political Culture of Ambivalence: Ideological Responses to the Welfare State,” *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (1) (1992): 268-307; Stanley Feldman, “Structure and Consistency in Public Opinion: The Role of Core Beliefs and Values,” *American Journal of Political Science* 32 (2) (1988): 416-440; and James R. Kluegel and Elliot R. Smith, eds., *Beliefs About Inequality: Americans’ Views About What Is and What Ought to Be* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> Herbert McClosky and John Zaller, *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes Toward Capitalism and Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>24</sup> Feldman and Steenbergen, “Humanitarian Foundation.”

<sup>25</sup> John Gellissen, “Popular Support for Institutionalised Solidarity: A Comparison Between European Welfare States,” *International Journal of Social Welfare* 8 (4) (2000): 285-300.

<sup>26</sup> Feldman and Steenbergen, “Humanitarian Foundation.”

<sup>27</sup> McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*.

orientations to focus on the general effect of ideology. In line with previous studies, our next major hypothesis is as follows:

*H8: Support for redistribution is positively associated with left ideological self-placement.*

### **Institutional Trust and Evaluation of Government Services**

Our examination of the impact of citizens' trust in government on attitudes about redistribution is rooted in theories suggesting that the design of institutions shapes welfare state support. The basic argument coming from this school of thought is that when people trust the institutions of government they are more likely to ask government to do more, but the opposite will be true if people find their government to be inefficient or ineffective.<sup>28</sup> This leads to Hypothesis 9:

*H9: Those who have higher levels of trust in government will be more supportive of a redistributive role for the state.*

Existing evidence in support of this thesis is mixed at best. As Edlund points out, numerous studies attempting to link trust in government to general attitudes about the welfare state have failed to find such a connection.<sup>29</sup> Some support for this idea has been found, however, in studies of attitudes toward more specific programs. While the evidence that trust in government influences general attitudes about the role of government in society is limited, there is evidence that trust influences assessments of

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<sup>28</sup> See Jonas Edlund, "Trust in the Capability of the Welfare State and General Welfare State Support: Sweden 1997–2002," *Acta Sociologica* 49 (4) (2006): 394–417. See also Richard Rose, "Is American Public Policy Exceptional?" in *America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, ed. Byron E. Schafer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); and Sven Steinmo, "Rethinking American Exceptionalism: Culture or Institutions?" in *The Dynamics of American Politics*, ed. Lawrence Dodd and Calvin C. Jillison (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Edlund, "Trust in the Capability of the Welfare State." See also Jonas Edlund, "Trust in Government and Welfare Regimes: Attitudes to Redistribution and Financial Cheating in the United States and Norway," *European Journal of Political Research* 35 (3) (1999): 341–370; and Stefan Svallfors, "Political Trust and Attitudes Towards Redistribution: A Comparison of Sweden and Norway," *European Societies* 1 (2) (1999): 241–268.

specific tax and welfare programs.<sup>30</sup> Given that our dependent variable asks respondents about fairly general attitudes toward the role of the state, previous research appears to be biased against the hypothesis specified above. Existing research has not dealt with this question in the context of the developing world, so this article will determine if this thesis might find support in Latin America, even though it has not found much backing in the analyses of attitudes in Europe and North America, which form the basis of all previous work in this vein.

Finally, we generally expect evaluations of existing government services to have an effect on one's support for redistribution. Generally speaking, we expect individuals who think government is effectively combating a variety of social problems to be more willing to support government intervention to reduce inequality. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*H10: Those who favorably assess government will be more supportive of a redistributive role for the state.*

## **Data and Analysis**

To test these hypotheses we utilize data from the 2008 Americas Barometer.<sup>31</sup> This survey collected data on a variety of political attitudes and behavior based on national samples collected in face-to-face interviews with thousands of individuals across 22 Latin American countries.<sup>32</sup> Interviews were conducted in the native language of the respondents. This is an extraordinarily useful dataset for our purposes because individual-level data are available for all of the theoretically relevant concepts discussed in the section above. Before presenting the analysis, we discuss the specific variables that are included in the analysis and connect them with the hypotheses developed in the previous section.

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<sup>30</sup> Jonas Edlund, "Dimensions of Attitudes Towards Taxation During Times of Welfare Retrenchment: Evidence from Sweden," in *Progress in International Economics Research*, ed. Albert Tavidze (New York: Nova, 2001), 394-417.

<sup>31</sup> LAPOP, "The Americas Barometer," 2008, <http://www.LapopSurveys.org>.

<sup>32</sup> The countries included are Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Guyana, and Belize.

## **Dependent Variable**

*Support for redistribution:* The key dependent variable taps general attitudes toward the role of the state in redistribution. Respondents were asked "...to what extent do you agree or disagree . . . [that] the national government should implement strong policies to reduce inequality between the rich and the poor...?" Responses could range from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 7 indicating strong agreement. In this analysis, we utilize a rescaled version of this variable in which responses range from 0 to 100.

## **Independent Variables**

*Crime:* We have hypothesized that citizens who view crime as a problem will be more inclined to support government interventions that combat inequality. We test this hypothesis by considering respondents' perceptions of crime and their experiences as victims of crime. The first explanatory variable places individuals on a 4-point scale tapping individual views of crime as a problem in their country. Respondents were asked, "...speaking of the country in general, how much do you think that the level of crime that we have now represents a threat to our future well-being?" Response options are very much (3), somewhat (2), little (1), or none (0). A closely related concept is actual experience with crime. To test the effect of crime victimization, we include a variable that indicates whether a respondent reported being the victim of a crime in the past 12 months. Those who were victims are coded 1 and those who were not are coded 0.

*Corruption:* Similarly, we expect that people who consider corruption to be a problem will be more likely to favor redistributive efforts by government. Again, we use both perceptions of and experiences with corruption to assess this hypothesis. To tap perceptions of corruption, we include an item that asked, "Taking into account your own experiences or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is very common, common, uncommon, or very uncommon?" The variable ranges from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating more perceived corruption. We also include a variable indicating whether or not a respondent was a victim of corruption. This variable is based on a series of questions that ask whether a respondent was asked to pay a bribe in a variety of encounters with public officials ranging from interactions with police officers to municipal officials to state hospitals. This variable provides a count of the respondent's experiences with corruption. The variable ranges from 0 to 5.

*Wealth:* Given the hypothesis that individual economic well-being is significantly and negatively associated with support for government redistribution, it is important to include in the analysis a variable that taps this concept. However, measuring well-being is especially difficult in the developing world, and income-based questions are notoriously unreliable because of high non-response rates as well as under- or over-reporting.<sup>33</sup> Measures based on asset-ownership tend to be better predictors of economic well-being.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, to measure well-being here, we include a variable based on the goods present in the respondent's household. Respondents are asked if their house has a television, refrigerator, conventional telephone, cell phone, vehicle, washing machine, microwave oven, motorcycle, indoor plumbing, indoor bathroom, or computer. Based on how many of these capital goods are present in the house, we create a wealth index, which is included as an independent variable. The index ranges from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating the presence of more consumer goods.

*Economic evaluations:* We also expect that those dissatisfied with their personal or collective economic situation will be more supportive of state interventions to reduce inequality. The first variable used to tap economic evaluations is focused on one's personal economic situation. Respondents were asked how they would describe their "overall economic situation," with response options very good, good, fair, bad, or very bad. The variable is coded on a scale from 0 to 4, with higher scores indicating more positive evaluations. A second variable related to economic evaluations examines the country as a whole. Respondents were asked how they would describe "the country's economic situation." Response options and coding are identical to the personal economic evaluation variable.

*Ideology:* Left ideology, which we argue will increase support for redistribution, is measured with a question tapping a respondent's ideological self-placement. Interviewers presented each respondent with a

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<sup>33</sup> Abby Córdova, "Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth Using Household Asset Indicators," *Americas Barometer Insights* No. 6, 2008, <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>. See also Angus Deaton, *The Analysis of Household Surveys: A Macroeconomic Approach to Development Policy* (Baltimore, MD: Published for the World Bank by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> D. Filmer and L.H. Pritchett, "Estimating Wealth Effect without Expenditure Data or Tears: An Application to Educational Enrollments in States of India," *Demography* 38 (2001): 115-132; and David J. McKenzie, "Measuring Inequality with Asset Indicators," *Journal of Population Economics* 18 (2) (2005): 229-260.

card depicting a 1–10 scale where 1 is left and 10 is right and then asked, “Nowadays, when we speak of political leanings, we talk of those who sympathize more with the left and those who sympathize more 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?” This variable has been recoded to a scale from 0 to 9, with higher values indicating left self-placement.

*Trust in institutions:* The survey includes several items tapping trust in various government institutions, which are suitable for testing the hypothesis that trust in government is associated with more support for redistribution. The variable included in the analysis is based on a factor analysis of trust in the justice system, electoral commission, parliament, national government, national police, and the high court. All of these variables load strongly on a single factor. The resulting factor score spans the range from –2.61 to 3.45, with higher scores indicating greater trust in institutions.

*Government performance:* We also include a series of variables tapping assessments of government performance in combating a variety of social problems. We include evaluations of government performance in fighting poverty, crime, corruption, and unemployment. Respondents were asked “to what extent the government fights [societal problem].” Responses could range from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating “not at all” and 7 indicating “a lot.” In addition, we include a measure tapping approval of the current chief executive with an item that ranges from 0 to 4, with higher values indicating more positive assessments.

*GDP per capita:* To tap the level of economic well-being of the country in which the respondent resides, we include a GDP per capita index. This variable is taken from the United National Development Program’s 2007/2008 Development report. It is an index of GDP per capita in U.S. dollars adjusted for purchasing power. The variable can take on values from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating higher GDP per capita.

*Interactions with GDP per capita:* To determine whether the effects of economic evaluations and crime perceptions and victimization vary depending on the level of prosperity as hypothesized, we create a multiplicative interaction term of the individual-level crime variables and economic evaluations with the GDP per capita index.

## **Control Variables**

In addition to the variables of primary theoretical interest, we also include a variety of control variables. These include age, education, gender, church attendance, and the actual redistributive impact of government. Age is measured simply by number of years since birth. Education is measured by years of formal education completed. Gender is coded 1 for female and 0 for male. Church attendance includes the following ordered categories: (0) never, (1) once or twice yearly, (2) once monthly, (3) once per week, and (4) more than once per week. Finally, we control for the redistributive impact of government because the extent to which government is already alleviating inequality through taxes and spending is likely to shape respondents' views about government efforts in this vein. The redistributive impact of government is measured by identifying the percentage by which inequality is reduced through redistributive taxes and programs. It is calculated by determining the percentage difference between the gross Gini coefficient, which measures inequality before government collects taxes or distributes transfers, and the net Gini coefficient, which measures post-tax, post-transfer inequality, as reported by Solt.<sup>35</sup>

## **Method**

Given the hierarchical nature of the data, with information available at both the individual and country level, we make use of multilevel models. This class of models provides the ability to estimate appropriately the effects of both individual and contextual (country-level) variables in a dataset comprised of individuals nested within countries, such as the one used here.

When data are composed of nested levels, here individuals within countries, Steenbergen and Jones have clearly pointed out that ignoring the hierarchical nature of the data can lead to standard error estimates that are too small.<sup>36</sup> This creates the potential for making incorrect inferences about the statistical significance of explanatory factors. In order to substantively account for variation at both the individual and country level and to avoid incorrect statistical inferences, we estimate the following model for individual  $i$  in country  $j$ :

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<sup>35</sup> Frederick Solt, "Standardizing the World Income Inequality Database," *Social Science Quarterly* 90 (2) (2009): 231-242.

<sup>36</sup> Marco R. Steenbergen and Bradford S. Jones, "Modeling Multilevel Data Structures," *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (1) (2002): 218-237.

Support for Redistribution<sub>*ij*</sub>

$$\begin{aligned}
 &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{Crime Perceptions}_{ij} + \gamma_{20}\text{Crime Victim}_{ij} \\
 &+ \gamma_{30}\text{Corruption Perceptions}_{ij} + \gamma_{40}\text{Corruption Victim}_{ij} \\
 &+ \gamma_{50}\text{Wealth}_{ij} + \gamma_{60}\text{Personal Economic Evaluations}_{ij} \\
 &+ \gamma_{70}\text{Sociotropic Economic Evaluations}_{ij} + \gamma_{01}\text{GDP Per Capita}_j \\
 &+ \gamma_{80}\text{Ideology}_{ij} + \gamma_{90}\text{Trust in Institutions}_{ij} + \gamma_{100}\text{Fights Poverty}_{ij} \\
 &+ \gamma_{110}\text{Fights Corruption}_{ij} + \gamma_{120}\text{Fights Crime}_{ij} \\
 &+ \gamma_{130}\text{Fights Unemployment}_{ij} + \gamma_{140}\text{Approval of Executive}_{ij} \\
 &+ \gamma_{150}\text{Age}_{ij} + \gamma_{160}\text{Education}_{ij} + \gamma_{170}\text{Female}_{ij} \\
 &+ \gamma_{180}\text{Church Attendance}_{ij} + \gamma_{02}\text{Redistribution}_j \\
 &+ \gamma_{11}\text{Crime Threat}_{ij} * \text{GDP Per Capita}_j \\
 &+ \gamma_{12}\text{Crime Victim}_{ij} * \text{GDP Per Capita}_j \\
 &+ \gamma_{13}\text{Personal Economic Evaluations}_{ij} * \text{GDP Per Capita}_j \\
 &+ \gamma_{14}\text{Sociotropic Economic Evaluations}_{ij} * \text{GDP Per Capita}_j + \delta_{0j} \\
 &+ \delta X + \varepsilon_{ij}
 \end{aligned}$$

This model seeks to explain attitudes about welfare held by individual *i* in country *j*. Most of the explanatory factors take on values for individuals, subscripted *ij*. Some explanatory factors only evidence cross-national variation, subscripted *j*. Cross-level interactions are also subscripted *ij* because they take on unique values for each individual. Note that there are separate errors for both individuals,  $\varepsilon_{ij}$ , and countries,  $\delta_{0j}$ . Also note that  $\delta X$  indicates that the slope coefficient for each individual-level parameter is allowed to vary across countries, with *X* a vector of individual-level coefficients and  $\delta$  a series of coefficients estimating cross-national variation in the slopes of the individual-level predictors. Essentially, this is a random intercepts and slopes model. This model is estimated using a restricted maximum likelihood estimator implemented with the `xtmixed` command in STATA 11.0.

**Results and Discussion**

The model estimates are presented in Table 1. Beginning with the results related to crime, the effect of crime perceptions is strong and positive. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, as individuals see crime as more of a problem, they also become more supportive of government action to reduce inequality. This suggests that people see inequality and crime as linked and believe government should take action to reduce inequality not only for its own sake but also because reducing inequality has positive spillover effects in reducing crime. Perceptions appear to matter more than reality, however, since actual experiences as a crime victim in the past 12 months have no effect on attitudes toward redistribution.

Table 1: A Model of Preferences for State Intervention to Reduce Inequality

Independent Variables	Coefficient	S.E.
National Crime Threat	14.04***	(4.53)
National Crime Threat X GDP Per Capita	-14.65***	(6.62)
Victim of Crime	6.17	(4.96)
Crime Victim X GDP Per Capita	-8.51***	(7.23)
Perception of Corruption	1.25***	(0.28)
Victim of Corruption	0.05	(0.30)
Wealth	-0.27***	(0.13)
Personal Economic Evaluations	-1.62	(3.23)
Personal Economic Evaluations X GDP Per Capita	0.76	(4.74)
Sociotropic Economic Evaluations	-7.93***	(2.99)
Sociotropic Economic Evaluations X GDP Per Capita	9.53**	(4.37)
GDP Per Capita	59.88	(39.06)
Ideological Liberalism	0.22	(0.18)
Trust in Government Institutions	1.78***	(0.48)
Government Fights Poverty	0.18	(0.33)
Government Fights Corruption	0.08	(0.30)
Government Fights Crime	0.52**	(0.25)
Government Fights Unemployment	-0.53**	(0.23)
Approval of Chief Executive	0.45	(0.42)
Age	-0.13	(0.15)
Years of Education	0.13	(0.08)
Female	-1.06**	(0.45)
Church Attendance	-0.44*	(0.25)
Country-Level Redistribution	-0.83	(0.85)
Constant	33.19	(25.99)
<i>Variance Components</i>		
Country Level	212.66	(77.96)
Individual Level	634.29	(5.99)
Level 1 N	22,778	
Level 2 N	22	
-2 Log Likelihood	212,140	

Note: Entries are REML estimates of a multilevel random coefficients and intercepts model with standard errors in parentheses. All individual effects are permitted to vary across countries, but these variances of level one estimates are not reported.

Two-Tailed Significance Levels: \*  $p \leq .10$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .01$

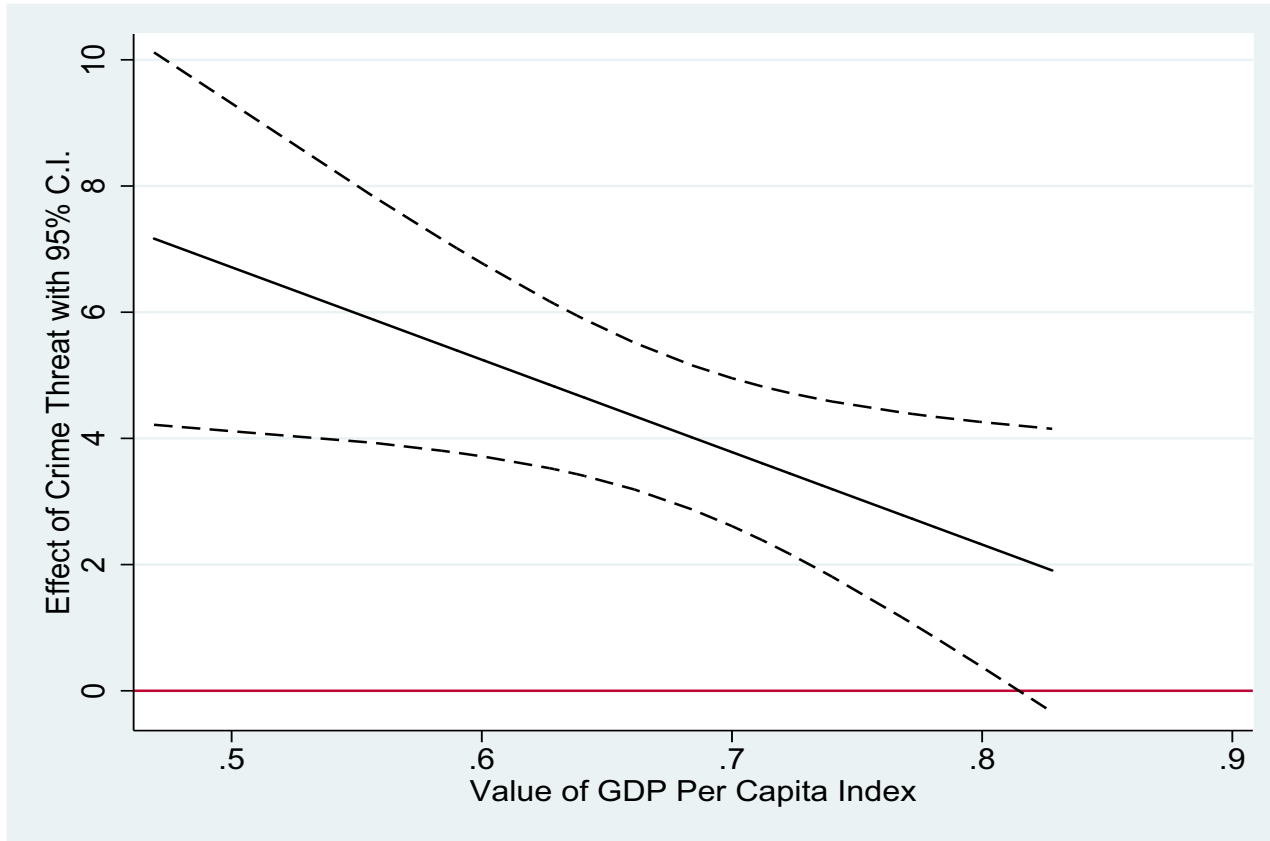


Figure 1: Conditional Effect of Crime Threat by GDP

It is important to note that since crime threat is interacted with GDP per capita, the estimated effect of perceptions of crime is conditioned by the value of GDP per capita. The coefficient, 14.04, estimates the effect of perceived crime threat when GDP per capita is zero. This means that the strong positive effect only applies to individuals in very poor countries. The negative coefficient of  $-14.65$  for the interaction between crime threat and GDP shows that when GDP moves from its theoretical minimum of zero to its maximum of one, the effect of perceptions of crime on attitudes toward redistribution declines. To further explore the nature of the interaction between crime perceptions and GDP per capita, we chart this conditional effect in Figure 1. This chart shows that for the actual values of GDP observed in the countries analyzed here, the effect of crime threat is positive for everyone except individuals in the richest Latin American countries. In fact, the effect of crime threat only becomes insignificant when the GDP index is higher than 0.8, and the only country in the data that has a score higher than this threshold is Argentina. These results suggest that perceptions of crime are important for understanding inequality attitudes across all but the richest countries in Latin America. The clear downward slope of the effect of crime threat, however, is consistent with Hypothesis 2, which suggests that the influence of crime perceptions will decline as overall prosperity increases.

The estimated effects for perceptions of corruption and corruption victimization provide evidence related to Hypotheses 3 and 3a regarding the link between corruption and attitudes toward reducing inequality. The results for perceptions of corruption support the alternative hypothesis, which is based on recent theoretical innovations, because perceived corruption increases demand for government efforts at redistribution. We do not find evidence to support the more conventional viewpoint, which argues that citizens are less likely to seek increased intervention or involvement of any sort from a government that is perceived as corrupt. Rather, the findings suggest that corruption and inequality are seen as linked in the mind of the public. People who see corruption as a problem are more likely to support state action to reduce inequality. This result portrays a public that forms attitudes in a manner consistent with the existence of an inequality trap that makes it difficult to fight corruption.<sup>37</sup> As with the results for crime, perceptions matter, while direct experiences with corruption in the past 12 months do not. This may once again indicate that in attitude formation, perceptions are more important than reality, but it might also simply suggest that experiences with corruption (and with crime) are more difficult to

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<sup>37</sup> Uslander, *Corruption, Inequality, and the Rule of Law*.

measure than perceptions of these problems because some people may be unwilling to report victimization experiences. Also people who were victims of corruption more than a year ago may continue to have their attitudes shaped by this previous experience, which would not be captured in the survey item inquiring about corruption victimization. This time lag would undermine the likelihood of finding a significant relationship.

The next group of estimates deals with the effect of personal and societal economic conditions and individual perceptions of economic conditions. Consistent with expectations, those with higher levels of personal well-being (measured by the presence of capital goods in their home) are less likely to support redistribution. Those at the top stand to lose from such redistribution and those at the bottom stand to gain, so such a result is neither unanticipated nor surprising. With regard to economic evaluations, we see that sociotropic, rather than pocketbook, evaluations are associated with attitudes toward redistribution. Individuals who think the economy is doing worse are more likely to support state intervention to reduce inequality. This is consistent with the idea that individuals are more willing to support government intervention in the economy when they perceive that things are not going well and more people are in need of help. The interaction term of sociotropic evaluations and GDP shows that economic evaluations become less relevant as overall levels of prosperity increase. This is charted in Figure 2. These results are consistent with Hypotheses 5 and 7. We also hypothesized that the level of support for redistribution in a country would increase as the level of prosperity increases. While the estimated coefficient for GDP per capita is large and positive, this hypothesis is not supported due to the fact that the effect is statistically insignificant.

The coefficient for ideological self-placement shows no support for the hypothesis that left ideology is associated with more support for redistribution. This simply indicates that controlling for the other explanations included in this model renders ideology unimportant in explaining distributional attitudes.

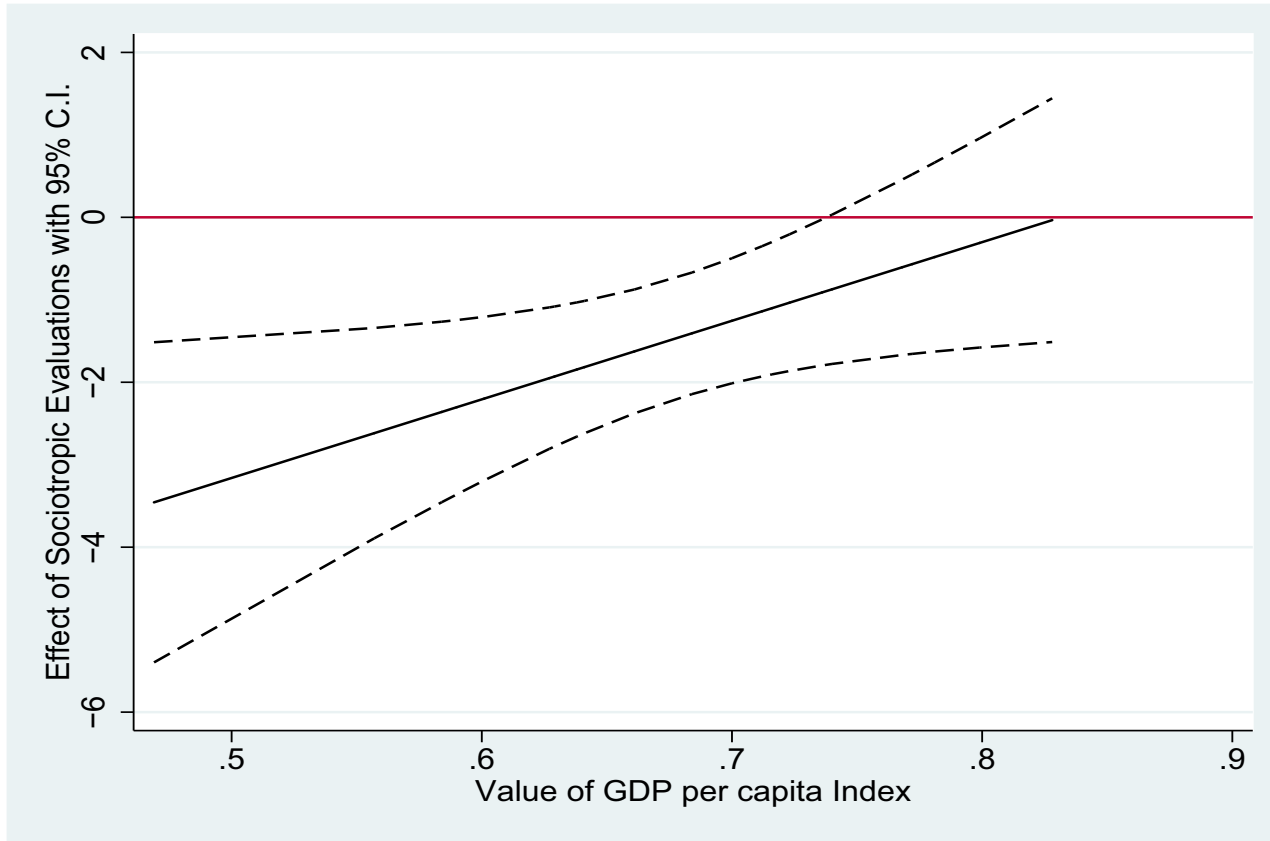


Figure 2: Conditional Effect of Sociotropic Evaluations by GDP

There is mixed support, however, for the hypothesis that institutional trust and evaluation of government services increase support for redistribution. We find that trust in government institutions increases support for redistribution. A one standard deviation increase in the trust factor score increases support for redistribution by 1.43 points. This is a moderate substantive effect, given that the dependent variable is measured on a 100-point scale, but the result is consistent with the theoretical prediction. The only two government performance measures that have an effect on attitudes toward reducing inequality relate to crime and unemployment. People who feel that government is effectively fighting crime are more likely to support efforts at reducing inequality. This is consistent with the general expectation that those who positively evaluate government performance are more likely to support additional government action and with our specific theoretical expectations concerning the interplay between inequality and crime. However, this expectation concerning the relationship between government evaluations and support for government action is not supported by the estimated effect of evaluations of government performance in fighting unemployment. This result appears to be more consistent with a thermostatic view of public opinion.<sup>38</sup> Under this view, as government does more in a particular area of policy, citizens generally react by asking for less. Since fighting unemployment is in the same specific policy domain as fighting inequality, it appears that people who think government is already doing a lot to fight economic ills are less likely to support those efforts. Finally, we also see no support for the idea that citizens who approve of the chief executive are more supportive of efforts to reduce inequality.

Overall, we find evidence for most of the hypothesized relationships discussed above. To this point, however, we have limited the discussion to the existence of an association between explanatory variables and support for redistribution. In Figure 3, we show the effect of a shift from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean for each statistically significant explanatory variable. This provides the ability to focus on the substantive effect of each variable as well as make comparisons regarding the size of each variable's impact.

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher Wlezien, "The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (4) (1995): 981-1000.

*Submission to Poverty & Public Policy*

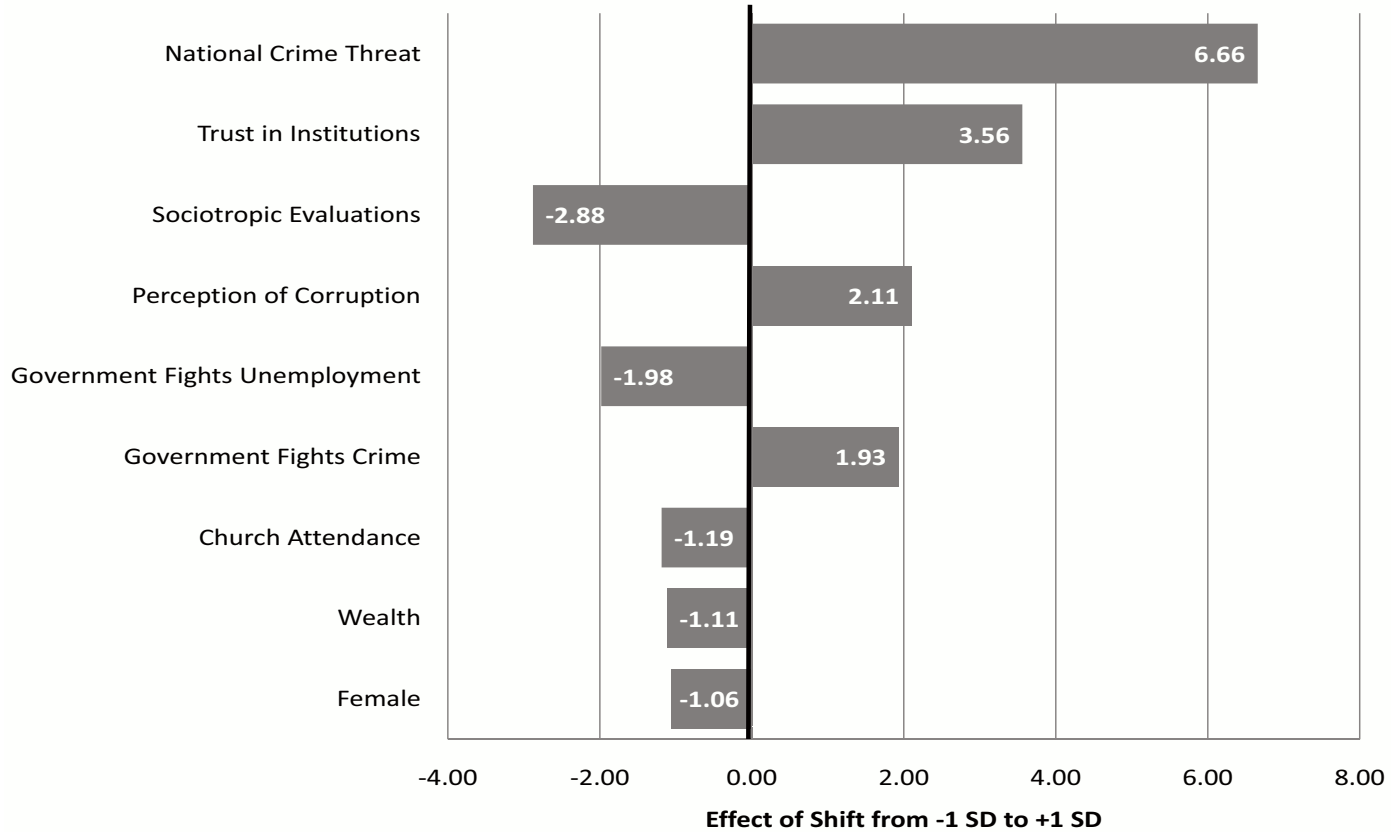


Figure 3: Comparable Effects of Explanatory Variables

<http://www.psocommons.org/ppp>

In this chart, we have arrayed the variables based on the size of their effect. The variables with the largest substantive effect are at the top of the chart. For the variables that were interacted with the GDP per capita index, we calculate their effects under the condition that GDP per capita is at its mean. The chart shows that perceptions of crime are by far the most powerful predictor of attitudes toward redistribution. A 2 standard deviation shift in crime perceptions produces more than a 6.5 point shift in the dependent variable. The next most important explanatory variable is trust in institutions, but the impact of this variable is only 53 percent as strong as perceptions of crime. Sociotropic evaluations have an effect slightly less than half that of crime perceptions. Most of the other independent variables have similar small substantive impacts on attitudes toward redistribution.

These results clearly point to the conclusion that attitudes about redistribution are associated with perceptions of crime in important ways. Previous studies of the developed world have paid little attention to the role of crime in shaping views of welfare and related programs. In the developing world, however, perceptions of crime are more strongly correlated with attitudes toward redistribution than many other variables that are more typically included in models of these attitudes based on data from the developed world. Perceptions of crime are more important than trust in government, economic evaluations and conditions, and even ideology. This is strong evidence that how people view the security situation in their society is a strong predictor of what they think government should do about inequality.

## Conclusion

In this study of 22 Latin American and Caribbean countries, we have found that a variety of explanatory factors are associated with individual attitudes about redistribution, including perceptions of crime and corruption, economic evaluations, trust in institutions, and evaluations of government. Most of these factors have been explored to some extent in previous studies of attitudes toward redistribution, though not in the context of Latin America. One conclusion from the analysis is that many of the factors that have been identified as significant in studies of attitudes about inequality in the developed world are relevant in Latin America as well. Specifically, in line with some recent theoretical innovations<sup>39</sup> concerning the connections between corruption and inequality, we find that Latin Americans see these

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<sup>39</sup> Uslander, *Corruption, Inequality, and the Rule of Law*.

two problems as intertwined. Where corruption is perceived to be a problem, people are more likely to support government efforts to foment redistribution, thereby combating the twin problems of inequality and corruption. This finding does not corroborate more conventional views of the relationship between corruption and demand for government activity, which suggest that corruption creates perceptions of a state that lacks efficacy, thus citizens living under corrupt governments are less likely to seek public policy interventions such as redistribution.

We also show that the correlates of support for redistribution are at least somewhat different in the context of the developing world than in the developed world. Most important, we have shown that perceptions of crime are strongly associated with support for redistribution. This is a factor that has not been examined in other studies of attitudes about redistribution. Our results suggest that in poorer countries, crime perceptions are an important correlate of support for redistribution. In richer countries, however, crime perceptions are not correlated with attitudes toward redistribution. This suggests, then, that crime perceptions may not be central to understanding welfare attitudes in wealthy countries, but they are essential to understanding these attitudes in the developing world.

In addition, our results have important policy implications for those who are concerned with fighting poverty and inequality in the developing world. It is not uncommon for governments to view fighting crime as disconnected from or perhaps even in competition with efforts to combat poverty and inequality. Governments are often ideologically predisposed toward emphasizing crime or inequality, rarely both. In the eyes of the public, however, these two goals of fighting crime and inequality appear to be tightly linked. Not only do those who perceive crime to be a problem more strongly support a state role in reducing inequality, but those who believe government is effectively increasing their security by combating crime are likewise more supportive of redistribution.

This suggests that policymakers who are concerned about reducing inequality in the developing world should also press for effective government policies to increase security. Pursuing anticrime policies should encourage public preferences for additional efforts at reducing inequality as well. Of course, policymakers face budgetary choices, and resources are not unlimited. But it would be a mistake to see anticrime and anti-inequality policies as part of a trade-off. In terms of electoral strategy and in terms of building long-term support for redistributive efforts, the wise path is to view anticrime and redistributive policies as complementary.

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