The Trump Election and Anti-American Attitudes in Latin America[1]

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Abstract

How stable are opinions about the United States in Latin America? Previous studies have shown that structural or long-term factors drive anti-Americanism. For example, Latin Americans appear to harbor more anti-American attitudes when they live in countries that have less economic exchange with the United States. In this paper, we study whether contextual factors or short-term events can modify individuals' attitudes toward the US. Exploiting the timing of the field implementation of the 2016 wave of the Americas Barometer in five Latin American countries, we estimate the effect of the election of Donald Trump on respondents' attitudes using a regression discontinuity design. Our results demonstrate that the election of Trump diminished respondents' trust in the US government but did not affect their perceptions of the US as a model for the development of their country.

Introduction

The reasons for rapid shifts in attitudes toward the United States in Latin America remain poorly understood. Recent studies have uncovered some of the key factors explaining cross-national differences in mass anti-Americanism in Latin America. This research has paid significant attention to structural variables, such as the type of economic exchanges with the United States, to explain anti-American attitudes in the region (Azpuru and Boniface 2015; Baker and Cupery 2013). However, we know much less about how short-term shocks or contextual factors affect citizens' perceptions of the United States. How stable are opinions about the regional hegemon? More specifically, do visible political changes in the United States affect attitudes toward the United States in Latin America?

Anti-Americanism in Latin America can have different consequences. Public disapproval of the United States can lead to the diplomatic isolation of the United States in the region (Datta 2014), as Latin American governments and populations reject policies embraced by the US government (Kocher and Minushkin 2007). In addition, citizens who hold anti-American attitudes may become more likely to support leftist populist parties with solid anti-US credentials (Remmer 2012).

To answer our research questions and provide causal evidence, we exploit the unexpected results of the 2016 US presidential election to construct a regression discontinuity design and study the effects of the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency on Latin American citizens' anti-American attitudes.

Multidimensionality and Ambivalence in Anti-American Attitudes

One of the major findings of the literature on anti-Americanism is the multidimensionality and heterogeneity of the phenomenon (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007). Previous research has established that people in other nations might hold a positive opinion about some aspects of the

United States, while simultaneously disliking another dimension of the country. In fact, people in other countries tend to appreciate US popular culture, US science and technology, the United States as a place to live, and the US capitalist economic model (Chiozza 2009; Katzenstein and Keohane 2007). These sets of attitudes are quite crystallized; that is, individuals either like or dislike US popular culture and the US economic model and rarely change their opinions. Hence, we would expect these attitudes to be resilient to political changes in individuals' home countries or in the United States.

We argue, however, that attitudes toward the US government and US political system constitute a different dimension of anti-Americanism, and that people outside the United States tend to have more ambivalent attitudes in this domain. People are ambivalent when their evaluations of the US government involve "strong elements of both attraction and repulsion" (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007, 16). Ambivalence in attitudes toward the US government in Latin America results from the contradiction between the United States' democratic traditions, constitution, and political ideals, on the one hand, and the actual foreign policies adopted by the regional hegemon over the past century, on the other. The latter, including US military interventions and support for dictatorships in the Southern Cone and in Central America, are widely rejected in Latin America (Haugaard 2006). In sum, Latin Americans often perceive the US political system to fall short of its own ideals.

If both positive and negative predispositions coexist in Latin Americans' attitudes toward the US government, we would expect anti-American opinion in this domain to be more volatile and subject to rapid changes, in response to political developments and policy changes. Chiozza (2009) shows that attitudes toward the US government are highly influenced by the media environment, elite discourse, and salient US policies. In other words, since people in other nations tend to be ambivalent about the US political system, they develop attitudes toward the US

government based on available information that they can retrieve quickly: that is, the "availability heuristic" (Tversky and Kahneman 1973; Zaller 1992). A momentous political event in the United States, for example, can produce rapid shifts in evaluations of the US government.

Trump and Anti-Americanism in Latin America

One of the key contextual factors that can shape anti-Americanism in Latin America is the personal traits and rhetoric of US presidents, as well as the foreign policies adopted by a particular administration. A recent study has demonstrated that the news coverage of behaviors and personal characteristics of a foreign leader influences perceptions of that leader's country (Balmas 2018). This effect reflects "a psychological phenomenon whereby people project their emotions and perceptions regarding a leader's personal characteristics onto his or her country and people" (Balmas 2018, 499). For instance, Chiozza (2009) shows that the "Bush factor" is critical for explaining negative attitudes toward the US government in the mid-2000s. In a similar vein, Noya (2003) and Hakim (2006) argue that the foreign policies of the Bush administration led to an increase in anti-Americanism in Latin America and other regions.

American elections are salient events that receive abundant media coverage in Latin America. We argue that the election of Trump generated a rapid decline in trust in the US government in Latin America because it activated negative predispositions toward the regional hegemon. Anti-American attitudes can be associated with feelings that the US behaves in an arrogant, aggressive, and imperialistic way (Datta 2014; Katzenstein and Keohane 2007). This is especially true in Latin America, due to the legacy of repeated US political and military interventions in the region.

During the presidential campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump behaved in ways that may have brought these negative predispositions toward the United States to the forefront of Latin Americans' minds. The Republican candidate often disparaged Latino migrants in the United

States as criminals and even rapists.[2] He also proposed to build a controversial wall along the border with Mexico and stated on numerous occasions that Mexico would pay for it.[3]

Blaydes and Linzer (2012, 225) have shown that anti-Americanism in the Middle East is "predominantly a domestic, elite-led phenomenon" channeled through the media, and we have every reason to believe that the same is true in the Latin American context. Given the aggressive and controversial rhetoric used by Donald Trump during the campaign, it is not surprising that the elite reaction and media coverage in Latin America was lukewarm toward him. For instance, Semetko et al. (2018) show that the tone of the media coverage of Donald Trump in Mexico was very negative during the campaign and after the election. In appendix A, we further discuss how the major newspapers in the five Latin American countries in our sample covered the 2016 US presidential elections.

Hypotheses

Based on the findings and theoretical insights of previous literature, reviewed above, we hypothesize that the Trump election had a negative effect on evaluations of the US government but did not lead to a widespread rejection of the US as a model for the development of Latin American countries. We hold that Donald Trump's election served as a political informational shortcut that produced a rapid shift in attitudes toward the US government. However, we do not expect Latin Americans' perceptions of the US as a model of development to be affected by short-term political changes in Washington, as attitudes in this domain are more crystallized.

Hypothesis 1: The election of Donald Trump had a negative effect on trust in the US government.

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[2] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/16/donald-trump-mexico-presidential-speech-latino-hispanic
[3] Earlier attempts to build a fortified fence on the US-Mexican border had produced widespread criticism by political elites and the media in Latin America (Haugaard 2006).

Hypothesis 2: The election of Donald Trump had no discernible effect on evaluations of the US as a model for the development of Latin American countries.

Research Design

It is not easy to study the causal impact of contextual factors because individuals might be able to anticipate them, and as a consequence, react to these circumstances even before they actually occur. The unexpected results of the 2016 presidential elections in the US provide an opportunity to address this issue, and therefore to study the consequences of the surprising results on how Latin Americans perceive the United States. To do that, we exploit the timing of the field implementation of the Americas Barometer to compare subjects who participated in the study before and after the US presidential election.[4] The election happened when the survey was being implemented in Paraguay, Venezuela, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic.

Though anti-Americanism is a multifaceted phenomenon, the 2016–2017 wave of the Americas Barometer fortunately includes two different items to capture attitudes toward the United States. These items allow us to analyze how the election of Donald Trump to the presidency affected two distinct dimensions of anti-Americanism. The outcomes of interest are a binary indicator of "trust in the US government" and mentioning the "the US as a model for the development of your country" (see appendix B for more details about the data).

We use the survey data and the 2016 US presidential election to construct a regression discontinuity design. Within this strategy, all units have a score; when that number is above a known cutoff the units will be considered as treated, and when it is below the cutoff they will be considered controls. In our RDD the units of analysis are the respondents from the five aforementioned countries. We assigned a score to each survey participant based on the difference between the day the survey was implemented and the 2016 US presidential election (November 9,

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[4] Minkus et al. (forthcoming) also use survey data and the 2016 US presidential election, but they study the impact of Trump's election on the EU's popularity.

2016). We define our cutoff as the night of the US election (November 9). Using the score and the cutoff, we can construct the treatment and control groups, where the former corresponds to positive values of the score (i.e., Trump as president-elect) and the latter to negative values of the score (i.e., Trump as a candidate). Therefore, the day of the election is the last day of the control group (score: -1), and the first post-election day is the first day of the treatment group (score: +1).[5] We estimate the following local-linear RD specification:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 S_i + \beta_3 T * S_i + \sigma_p + \varepsilon_i \qquad (1)$$

Y is the respondent's view about the US ("trust in the US government" or "the US is a model for the development of your country"). T depicts the treatment (units above the cutoff), and S describes the score. The interaction between T and S allows the regression function to differ on both sides of the cutoff point. σ_p corresponds to province fixed effects. We weighted the observations using a triangular kernel, which assigned more importance to respondents closer to the cutoff.

The RDD involves the selection of a bandwidth: values of the score that determine the units to be included in the analysis. Following Bueno and Tuñon (2015), instead of only paying attention to the results obtained from using an optimal bandwidth, we implement equation 1 on 32 different bandwidths starting +/- 6 days from the election and ending +/- 37 days from the election, which allows us to observe the sensitivity of our estimates to a wide range of subsets. A bandwidth of 6 days means that we will implement equation 1 in a subset of respondents that answered the survey up to 6 days before and up to 6 days after the US presidential election. We limited our bandwidths according to two criteria: one, we did not expand the possible bandwidths to more than 37 days since this was the last day for below the cutoff; we did not use less than 6 days to keep a reasonable number of observations on each side of the cutoff.

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[5] There are no reasons to believe that survey respondents sorted their position around the cutoff or that enumerators changed the fieldwork schedule because of the 2016 US presidential elections.

The optimal bandwidth[6] for the first and second outcome is 7 days. Therefore, this is contained in the window of bandwidths used in this paper [6, 37]. In appendix C, we compare the main characteristics of the entire sample and the optimal bandwidth sample, which shows that the findings are not coming from an unusual group of respondents. In appendix D, as a validity check, we show that relevant placebo covariates[7] such as age, education, and gender do not change abruptly around the cutoff. In appendix E, we run a placebo analysis by changing the day of the US presidential election (i.e., modifying the cutoff). In appendix F, as a robustness check, we conduct an interrupted time series analysis using all the units available and including time trends.

Results

As mentioned above, we estimate equation 1 on a battery of different bandwidths. Figure 1 shows the effect of the election of Trump at the cutoff on trust in the US government when using each of these possible bandwidths. The y-axis represents the RDD point estimates and the x-axis the bandwidths in absolute values. We provide 90% and 95% confidence intervals for every point estimate. We marked in red the results when using the optimal bandwidth.

Figure 1: Trust in the US Government

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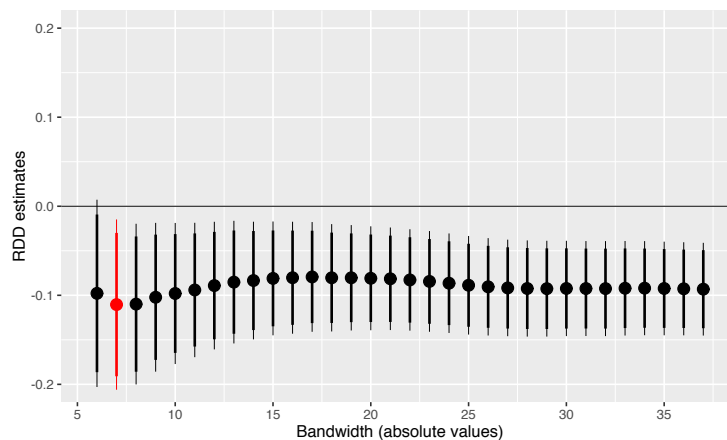
[6] We use the Mean Squared Error (MSE) optimal bandwidth, which optimizes the bias-variance trade-off (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014).

[7] Placebo covariates are individual characteristics that should not be affected by the treatment.

The results are significant at the 0.05 level for all but the first bandwidth, which is also significant, but at the 0.1 level. When using the optimal bandwidth (7 days),[8] respondents who were surveyed after the election of Donald Trump are 11 percentage points less likely to say that they trust the US government (p-value: 0.024, observations: 2446). To put the results in context, when using the entire sample 48% of respondents expressed trust in the US government before the election.

Figure 2 illustrates the results for using "US as a model for the development of your country" as the outcome of interest. The structure of the plot is the same as in figure 1. The coefficients are consistently negative, which can be interpreted as a negative effect of Trump's election on seeing the US as a model. However, contrary to the previous analysis, there is not enough evidence to rule out the null hypothesis of no effect. When using the optimal bandwidth (7 days), respondents who were surveyed after the US election are 6 percentage points less likely to say that the United States is a model for the development of their country; but the uncertainty associated with that point estimate is high enough to not be able to reject the null hypothesis (p-value: 0.206, observations: 2744). To put the results in context, when using the entire sample 40% of respondents mentioned the US as a model for the development of their nations before the 2016 presidential election.[9]

Figure 2: US Model for the Development of Your Country

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[8] Using the optimal bandwidth means that we implement the equation only on respondents who participated in the survey up to 7 days before and up to 7 days after the survey.

[9] Respondents can only provide one country as a model for development. Therefore, 40 percent of respondents only mentioning the US is a high number.
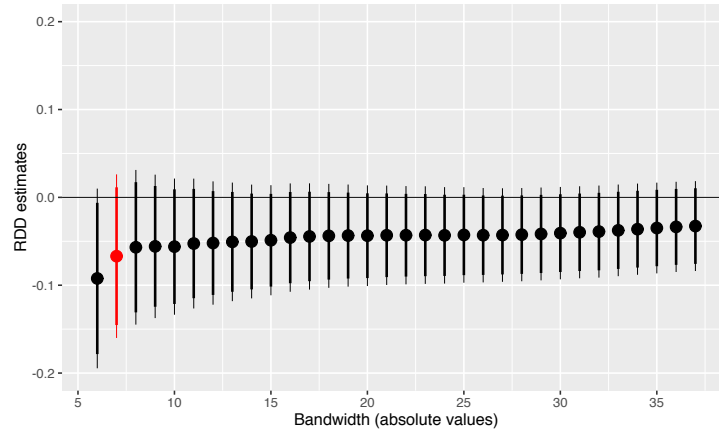
In summary, the findings provide consistent evidence that the 2016 elections reduced trust in the US government but not enough support to claim that it also changed perceptions of the US as a model of development. In fact, the point estimate for the first outcome is almost double the point estimate for the second one. In appendix G, we provide a table with the number of observations, point estimate, standard error, and p-value for each of the possible bandwidths for figures 1 and 2. In appendix H, we explore heterogenous treatment effects by respondent characteristics.

Conclusions

Anti-Americanism in Latin America can have important political implications, such as diminishing the "soft power" of the regional hegemon in the Western hemisphere (Nye 2004). In this paper, we contribute to the effort to understand this phenomenon by analyzing how the election of Donald Trump in the United States produced a rapid shift in anti-American attitudes in Latin America. We argued that Latin Americans have multidimensional attitudes toward the US, and some dimensions can be more ambivalent and less stable. The unexpected results of the 2016 US presidential elections might have activated negative predispositions toward the US government but not necessarily toward seeing the US a model of development.

We leveraged the timing of the field implementation of the Americas Barometer to construct a regression discontinuity design, which allows us to compare subjects who participated

in the study before and after the US election. In line with our expectations, the results show that the election of Donald Trump had an immediate negative effect on trust in the US government in Latin America but do not provide enough evidence to claim that this event modified the image of the US a model of development. While previous scholarship has uncovered the structural factors that explain cross-national differences in anti-Americanism in Latin America (Baker and Cupery 2013), this is the first study that provides causal evidence about how short-term political changes in Washington can generate rapid shifts in attitudes toward the US government in the region.

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