

# To Know or Not To Know? Realist and Liberal Theories on Foreign Affairs and Public Opinion in Latin America

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We contrast the central theoretical claims of the realist and liberal traditions of international relations concerning the importance of public opinion in foreign affairs, providing sufficient empirical evidence to uphold the liberal view and refute the realist hypothesis. Using data collected over the last decade by *The Americas and The World Project* in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, we show that, even if Latin Americans have important limitations in terms of knowledge of international affairs, a strong system of political beliefs endows them with the conceptual tools to face the complexity of global issues, permitting them to hold coherent and consistent preferences on international issues.

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El artículo contrasta los postulados teóricos centrales de las escuelas realistas y liberales de las relaciones internacionales sobre la importancia de la opinión pública en los asuntos exteriores, proporcionando evidencia empírica suficiente para defender los axiomas liberales y refutar las hipótesis realistas. Utilizando los datos acumulados en la última década por el proyecto *Las Américas y el Mundo* en Brasil, Colombia, Ecuador, México y Perú, se demuestra que, a pesar de las limitaciones de conocimiento sobre asuntos internacionales por parte de los latinoamericanos, existe un fuerte sistema de creencias políticas que los dota de herramientas conceptuales para afrontar la complejidad de los problemas mundiales, permitiéndoles mantener preferencias coherentes y consistentes.

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**Key words:** public opinion, foreign affairs, foreign policy, Latin America, *The Americas and The World*, realist theory, liberal theory, knowledge, ideology, shortcuts

## Introduction

Are the nature and complexity of international affairs obstacles to people making judgments well enough informed to allow them to form coherent attitudes on global affairs, as the realists believe? Or rather, as the liberals assert, are such judgments possible even with a lack of information and knowledge? Until very recently—before the 1990s—it was very difficult to answer this question in Latin America because of the lack of solid, accurate, and systematic

information about public opinion on international affairs. Over the last decade, *The Americas and The World Project* (LAYEM, for its acronym in Spanish) of the *Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas* has carried out surveys on public opinion and foreign policy, rectifying the dearth of information on the matter.

With the information derived from this project, this article contrasts the principal theoretical postulates of realist and liberal theories with respect to public opinion and the importance of public opinion in international affairs. Using a logistic regression model, we endeavor to provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate the validity of the liberal hypotheses and the invalidity of those of the realists. We argue that the high level of ignorance on global issues notwithstanding, there is a strong system of political beliefs that gives Latin Americans the conceptual tools to deal with the complexity of global issues, making it possible for them to hold coherent and consistent views in this area.

### The Realist–Liberal Debate

The debate about the link between public opinion and foreign policy—other focuses aside—can be reduced to two theoretical currents in international relations, realism, and liberalism. This debate has two dimensions. The theories diverge theoretically on the importance of public opinion for articulating an effective foreign policy, and empirically on the structure and nature of public opinion. In brief, the realists regard public opinion as impassioned and short-sighted, thus complicating the effective search for the national interest by introducing elements of instability and incoherence to foreign affairs (Foyle, 1999; Holsti, 1992, 2007, pp. 1–24; Schiavon, 2013; Schiavon & Velázquez Flores, 2010). International issues are seen as so complex and distant for the majority of people that it is impossible for the average citizen to have opinions that are fairly well informed and in harmony with the national interest. Realists argue that lack of knowledge and distance from such citizens' immediate concerns result in perceptions and attitudes on international affairs arising from ignorance and lack of interest, producing incoherent and inconsistent views. As Hans J. Morgenthau (1985, p. 147) put it, "The rational requirements of good foreign policy cannot from the outset count on the support of a public opinion whose preferences are emotional rather than rational." Consequently, for the realists, public opinion should receive little or no consideration when foreign policy is determined. The lack of understanding of the world makes necessary a dynamic "top-down" continuum whereby the elites and communications media direct and shape a public opinion that is dispassionate and that converges as much as possible with national interest (Baum & Potter, 2008; Drezner, 2008; Foyle, 1999; Holsti, 1992, 2007; Lipset, 1966; Risse-Kappen, 1991).

For their part, the liberals reject the notion that foreign policy should be segregated from public opinion (Baum & Potter, 2008; Foyle, 1999; Holsti, 1992; Holsti, 2007, chapter 1; Schiavon, 2013; Schiavon & Velázquez Flores, 2010). They argue that the relationship between the two is not only fundamental but is also necessary and desirable, that public opinion can serve as a source of legitimacy and balanced interests in foreign policy. In a democracy, foreign policy like all other public policy should be under public scrutiny to be representative, legitimate, and effective. Moreover, the liberals view public opinion as playing a

constructive role in placing limits on the personal interests of leaders, serving as a factor that promotes prudence, peace, and cooperation by establishing the limits of what is permissible in international action (Foyle, 1999, p. 7; Schiavon & Velázquez Flores, 2010; Sobel, 2001).

In empirical terms, the debate focuses on the structure and nature of public opinion. Studies of public opinion not only show results and general tendencies but also discern the stability or volatility of perceptions, the level of knowledge, and the coherence of belief structures (Holsti, 1992). The realist focus is based on what Ole R. Holsti (1992) has termed the "Almond-Lippmann consensus." According to Lippmann (1922), one must be careful with the "false" premise that there are responsible and informed citizens committed to a democratic system, when in reality they cannot make reasonable decisions because they have interests and immediate needs that "distract" them from the role of good citizens. In international affairs, this idea is made more acute by complexity and by the general public's distance from the immediate reality. Decades later, Almond (1950) claimed that public opinion was capricious, uninformed, and volatile about global affairs, and therefore should not influence an area of public policy so sophisticated as the international (Holsti, 1992, p. 22).

This consensus is based on three general axioms about the structure and nature of public opinion. First, people's opinions about world affairs are *volatile*, providing inadequate bases for a stable, effective foreign policy (Almond, 1950; Bailey, 1948; Kennan, 1951; Lippmann, 1922; Morgenthau, 1985; Rosenau, 1961). Second, public attitudes on international issues lack an *ideological structure* capable of providing some coherence to their opinions (Converse, 1964; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987). Finally, public opinion has a limited effect on foreign policy (Baum & Potter, 2008; Cohen, 1972; Holsti, 1992, 2007; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Rosenau, 1961).

The Vietnam War challenged this realist consensus, giving rise to more vigorous research on the influence of public opinion on foreign policy. Page and Shapiro (1982, 1988), and Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) refuted practically all the propositions of the Lippmann-Almond consensus. If those empirical studies did not deny that the public was poorly informed, they did prove wrong the suppositions about the volatility of opinions, the reflex of "no opinion," and the marginal importance of public opinion in decision making. They further demonstrated that people are capable of holding coherent and consistent opinions on issues of foreign policy that do not necessarily reflect the views of leaders or what is presented in communications media. The liberals place public opinion as a central element of the democratic life of a country, concluding that there are more continuities than divergences in people's opinions on foreign affairs and that, when there are divergences, they occur in the same proportion as in domestic affairs (Holsti, 1989, 2007; Isernia, Juhász, & Rattinge, 2002, p. 222; Page & Shapiro, 1982; Risse-Kappen, 1991).

How is it possible that, given a high level of ignorance, people can have coherence, structure, and consistency in their opinions and attitudes on international issues? The realists assert that people have neither an intellectual construct nor substantive factual knowledge about international issues, and therefore, it cannot be said that there is a set system of political beliefs on the subject (Foyle, 1999; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987). Meanwhile, liberals such as Hurwitz and Peffley

(1987, 1992) maintain that, despite being so complex and remote for individuals, a system of political beliefs with multiple dimensions can be identified that helps organize attitudes and perceptions. Lack of knowledge *per se* is not an obstacle to people's having an opinion that is reasonably coherent, structured, and consistent because their opinions are based on more general and abstract beliefs (Holsti, 1992, 2007; Lupia, 1994).

There are two mechanisms through which ordinary individuals without much knowledge can form their opinions on the international sphere (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987). The first is the core of fundamental values grounded in their moral beliefs and ethnicity. These are the culturally accepted beliefs that, to a certain extent, are the source of the attitudes of individuals. The second is their general stances or normative beliefs. Given a lack of "encyclopedic" knowledge, common citizens decide to use more accessible, less costly sources of information—or *shortcuts*—behaving rationally in their political decisions. In other words, thanks to shortcuts, a low-informed citizen could behave politically similar to a well-informed citizen. They use a sort of low-information rationality, "a method of combining, in an economical way, learning and information from past experiences, daily life, the media, and political campaign" (Popkin, 1991, p. 7). Citizens who are not fully informed behave in a rational manner using informational shortcuts in any situation. "Most behavior is adaptive and intendedly rational but limits on adaptive behavior, imposed by human cognitive/emotional architecture, may be detected in even the most stable of environments" (Jones, 1999, p. 298). This sort of reasoning describes and explains how individuals first obtain and then evaluate information to simplify the difficult process of choosing a political option.

Academic literature about *shortcuts* or *heuristics*—as they have been defined as "problem-solving strategies (often employed automatically or unconsciously) that serve to keep the information processing demands of the task within bounds" (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, p. 952)—has emphasized that citizens are rational individuals who use these tools as effective sources of political information. In addition, what the most important and most used heuristics are has been established, such as party identification, political ideology, candidate appearance, issue position, and many others. Many people do not invest the time and effort necessary to become informed, but through "clues," people can make inferences in an efficient way that enables them to reach opinions close to the opinions and attitudes of the informed public (Jones, 1999). People are capable of developing and retaining coherent views about the foreign policy of their countries and, therefore, should not be excluded from the decision-making process (Aldrich, Feaver, Gelpi, Reifler, & Thompson Sharp, 2006; Baum & Potter, 2008; Page & Shapiro, 1992).

Which is right, the realist or liberal hypothesis? Does the consistency of public opinion depend on the level of knowledge about international issues (Hypothesis 1), or does it depend on the possession or not of shortcuts that can help people to have a stable and consistent opinion (Hypothesis 2)?

Based on information from *The Americas and The World Project*, we conclude that, as established in the liberal literature, preferences of Latin Americans on international themes are stable and consistent. Additionally, even when a high level of ignorance about international issues is noted, the differences of opinion among Latin Americans cannot be explained by their level of knowledge but rather as a result of the values reflected in their political ideology. We argue that

a solid system of political beliefs endows Latin Americans with the cognitive tools (the “shortcuts”) to untangle the complexity of global affairs, enabling them to have coherent, consistent, and stable preferences.

The study of public opinion on foreign policy topics serves to debunk myths rooted in conventional thought and to affirm the value of public opinion as a component that should be incorporated into the dynamics of decision making on international issues. In a democratic country, this implies adopting a more liberal focus that eclipses the elitist view of foreign policy held by the realists. This article underpins the liberal focus by means of empirical analysis of Latin American public opinion in recent years.

### Data, Variables, and First Results

In contrast to other countries (especially the United States), academic research in Latin America has been scarce on the link between public opinion and foreign policy. The LAYEM is the most systematic, noteworthy effort to rectify this situation, but to date, its reach has been limited, unable to achieve full coverage of the region. Mexico is the only country in which it has been possible to carry out the survey every two years since the project’s inception in 2004 (González, Schiavon, Maldonado, Morales Castillo, & Crow, 2013). See Table A1 in the Appendix.

As a purely practical matter, and for the ends of our objective in this article, we have decided to work with the 2010 edition, which contains the greatest number of observations (Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru). Even though our analysis explains the individual level, emphasizing its particularities, our research question has a holistic character. On what does consistency in opinions on international issues depend in five countries in Latin America?

In the realist–liberal debate, realists find a determinative relationship between knowledge of the world and consistency of opinions, whereas for liberals, consistency can also be explained by the use of heuristic mechanisms and not simply in cognitive terms. We put these propositions to the test with a logistic regression model, in which the dependent variable is the consistency of the responses of those surveyed, and the independent variables are their knowledge and ideological alignment. Five control variables were used: (1) education, (2) age, (3) income, (4) interest in news about their country’s relations with other countries, and (5) contact abroad.

### Consistency of Opinions

To construct our dependent variable, we compressed two questions that refer to Latin Americans’ attitudes toward the United States (Baker & Cupery, 2013; Chiozza, 2009; Katzenstein & Keohane, 2007; Morales Castillo, 2014; Smith, 2008),<sup>1</sup> yielding 16 possible combinations or blocks of responses. Specifically, people were asked, *which of the following words best describes your feelings toward the United States?* The first possible responses were *trust, distrust, indifference, and don’t know or no answer (DK/NA)*; and the second, *admiration, disdain, indifference, or DK/NA*. Represented here are positive feelings (trust and admiration), negative sentiments (distrust and disdain), indifferent reactions (indifference in both

sets of responses), those who cannot form an opinion (DK/NA), and 12 blocks of responses that do not have a pattern and consequently can be considered inconsistent opinions.

Table 1 shows the distribution of consistent and inconsistent opinions overall and by country. There are three blocks of consistent responses, positive feelings, negative feelings, and indifferent feelings. People in the DK/NA group cannot be taken as consistent because of their inability to form an opinion with respect to the matter. We found that 61.7% of those surveyed hold consistent opinions (62.9% in Brazil, 72.7% in Colombia, 61.6% in Ecuador, 57.0% in Mexico, and 56.9% in Peru), and 38.3% hold inconsistent ones (37.1% in Brazil, 27.3% in Colombia, 38.4% in Ecuador, 43.0% in Mexico, and 43.1% in Peru). For our analytical ends, we created a dummy variable in which consistent opinions were assigned a value of "1" and inconsistent ones a "0."

## Knowledge

For the realists, ignorance about international affairs is continually noted in studies of public opinion. Figure 1 shows the widespread ignorance of people in the five countries studied with respect to acronyms associated with international tasks. Those surveyed were asked the meaning of the acronyms ONU (acronym of the United Nations in Spanish), OEA (Organization of American States), FIFA (International Federation of Association Football [Soccer]), and MRE (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). To register the levels of knowledge, we segmented the sample into four categories, creating the following variable: *none*, those who could identify none, were assigned a value of 0; *low*, those who identified one correctly, were assigned a value of 1; *intermediate*, who correctly identified two, were assigned a value of 2; and *high*, those who answered correctly about three or four, were assigned a value of 3.

There is a high level of ignorance among the surveyed populations, especially in Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico; 43.2%, 42.3%, and 31.6%, respectively, did not know the meaning of a single acronym. The only atypical case was Colombia, where 55.9% had a *high* knowledge level, trailed distantly by Peru (37.4%).

Cognitive elements do not condition the distribution of consistency of opinions. The bivariate analysis presented in Table 2 shows that, in general terms and regardless of whether people are consistent or inconsistent, knowledge levels within the two groups are similar. To determine if there is an association between the "consistency" and "knowledge level" variables, we also did a chi-squared test. Overall, the test is statistically significant, and thus, there is a dependency between the variables, but for Ecuador (Pr = .662) and Mexico (Pr = .519), the analysis found independence between these variables.<sup>2</sup>

The shaded blocks indicate significant differences ( $\pm 5\%$ ) between the consistent and the inconsistent, with Colombia and Peru showing the most important changes. For example, among those with a knowledge level of *none* in Colombia and Peru, the difference between consistent and inconsistent is  $-9.5$  and  $-10.3$  percentage points, respectively. Still, in overall terms, the sharp variations are minor. We see the same percentages of consistent and inconsistent with a *high* knowledge level, and even of those with knowledge classified as *none*. This first analytical examination demonstrates that the realist proposition about the

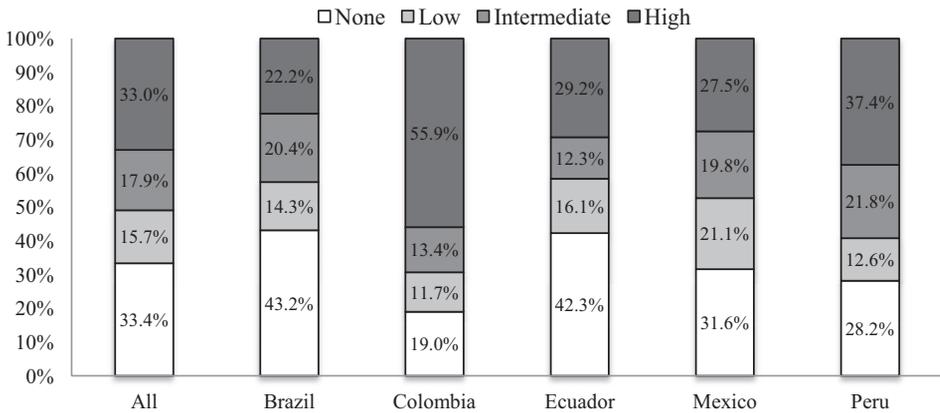
Table 1. Consistent vs. Inconsistent Opinions

	Admiration (%)			Distrust (%)			Indifference (%)			DK/NA (%)		
Trust	All 37.4	Bra. 35.7	Col. 49.2	All 1.1	Bra. 1.8	Col. 1	All 4.7	Bra. 2.7	Col. 4.3	All 1.1	Bra. .7	Col. .7
	Ecu. 44.2	Mex. 27.8	Per. 36.1	Ecu. 1.0	Mex. 1.4	Per. 1.0	Ecu. 4.7	Mex. 7.0	Per. 4.2	Ecu. .8	Mex. 1.1	Per. 2.1
Disdain	All 9.4	Bra. 6.5	Col. 5.6	All 13.0	Bra. 15.5	Col. 6.2	All 11.1	Bra. 10.2	Col. 9.9	All 1.7	Bra. 2.3	Col. .3
	Ecu. 11.4	Mex. 11.9	Per. 11.2	Ecu. 8.4	Mex. 19.2	Per. 11.4	Ecu. 13.7	Mex. 12.0	Per. 9.6	Ecu. .8	Mex. 2.3	Per. 2.3
Indifference	All 2.1	Bra. 2.1	Col. 1.4	All .6	Bra. 1.0	Col. 1	All 11.3	Bra. 11.7	Col. 17.3	All .4	Bra. .2	Col. .3
	Ecu. 2.4	Mex. 2.2	Per. 2.3	Ecu. .4	Mex. 1.0	Per. .3	Ecu. 9.0	Mex. 9.9	Per. 9.4	Ecu. .1	Mex. .6	Per. .5
DK/NA	All .6	Bra. .5	Col. .1	All .1	Bra. .3	Col. .0	All .2	Bra. .0	Col. .1	All 5.1	Bra. 9.1	Col. 4.4
	Ecu. .6	Mex. .6	Per. 1.5	Ecu. .0	Mex. .1	Per. 2	Ecu. .8	Mex. .1	Per. .3	Ecu. 1.9	Mex. 2.8	Per. 7.8
<b>Consistent (%)</b>	<b>Inconsistent (%)</b>											
All 61.7	Bra. 62.9	Col. 72.7	Ecu. 61.6	Mex. 57.0	Per. 56.9	All 38.3	Bra. 37.1	Col. 27.3	Ecu. 38.4	Mex. 43.0	Per. 43.1	

Source: Authors' calculations with data from Las Américas y el Mundo, 2010.

Bra., Brazil; Col., Colombia; Ecu., Ecuador; Mex., Mexico; Per., Peru.

Note. The values in bold indicate the three blocks of consistent responses, positive feelings, negative feelings, and indifferent feelings.

**Note:**

Acronyms queried: ONU, OEA, FIFA and SRE/MRE

High: Know meaning of 3 or 4 acronyms.

Intermediate: Know meaning of 2 acronyms.

Low: Know meaning of 1 acronym.

None: Know meaning of none of acronyms.

**Figure 1. Knowledge of International Themes**Source. Authors' calculations with data from *Las Américas y el Mundo*, 2010.**Table 2. Bivariate Analysis: Consistency and Knowledge**

		None (%)	Low (%)	Intermediate (%)	High (%)	Pearson $\chi^2$
All	Consistent	<b>31.3</b>	15.6	18.9	34.2	$\chi^2 (3) = 35.4916$ Pr = .000
	Inconsistent	<b>36.7</b>	15.8	16.3	31.2	
Brazil	Consistent	<b>40.7</b>	14.1	<b>22.6</b>	22.7	$\chi^2 (3) = 13.5538$ Pr = .004
	Inconsistent	<b>47.4</b>	14.6	<b>16.6</b>	21.4	
Colombia	Consistent	<b>16.4</b>	12.2	13.8	<b>57.6</b>	$\chi^2 (3) = 17.3322$ Pr = .001
	Inconsistent	<b>25.9</b>	10.2	12.4	<b>51.5</b>	
Ecuador	Consistent	42.5	16.4	12.9	28.3	$\chi^2 (3) = 1.5897$ Pr = .662
	Inconsistent	42.1	15.7	11.4	30.8	
Mexico	Consistent	31.6	20.5	20.3	27.6	$\chi^2 (3) = 2.2665$ Pr = .519
	Inconsistent	31.8	21.9	19.1	27.3	
Peru	Consistent	<b>23.7</b>	13.6	<b>24.3</b>	38.4	$\chi^2 (3) = 23.0825$ Pr = .000
	Inconsistent	<b>34.0</b>	11.3	<b>18.6</b>	36.2	

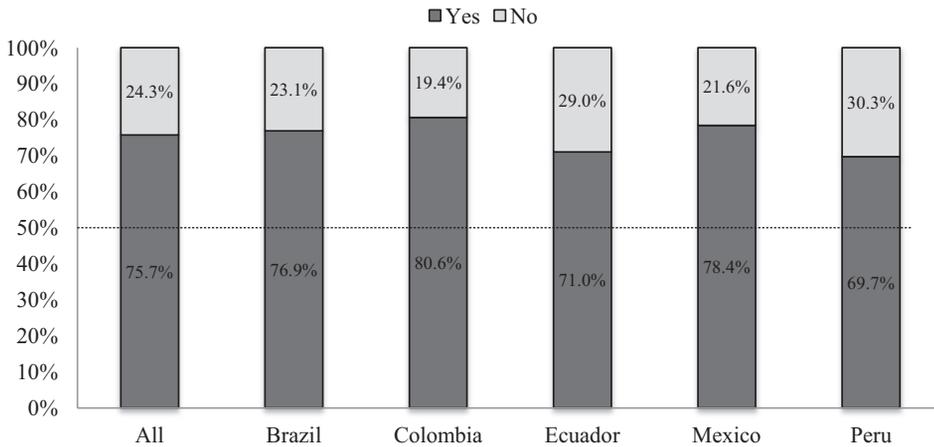
Source: Authors' calculations with data from *Las Américas y el Mundo*, 2010.

Notes. The values in bold indicate significant differences (+/- 5%) between the consistent and the inconsistent blocks. The values in bold in the Pearson chi-squared test indicate independency between the variables "consistency" and "ideology".

positive relationship between knowledge and consistency does not have fully empirical verification.

**Possession of Heuristics**

If the knowledge variable does not explain consistency in opinions, what does? Possession of knowledge is not an indispensable requisite for people to have an



**Figure 2. Ideological Self-Placement, with or without an Ideology**  
 Source. Authors' calculations with data from *Las Américas y el Mundo*, 2010.

opinion on or attitude toward international themes, given that people form these on the basis of how they conceive and interpret the world and on some general stances. They use heuristic mechanisms in an effective way to mitigate their lack of knowledge.

One of these relevant mechanisms is ideology, which is the analytical lens that guides opinions. According to the liberal argument, we would expect that people who said they had an ideology would have had more consistent opinions than those who said they did not have one. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents in the five countries who declare an ideological position, that is to say, who placed themselves on a scale of 0–10, with 0 being most “left” and 10, most “right.”<sup>3</sup>

Absolute majorities could place themselves on this scale, thus reporting at least one heuristic element for considering complex themes such as international ones. We constructed a dummy variable in which people who did not place themselves on the scale were assigned the value 0, and those who did were designated a 1.

The bivariate analysis yields an association—statistically significant with 95% confidence—between the variables consistency and ideology. The analysis shows that for Ecuador (.149) and Mexico (.680), there is independence between the variables.

Lastly, the variation between blocks of consistent and inconsistent is much more accentuated than the variation with the knowledge variable. There are people more consistent than inconsistent with an ideology, and people more inconsistent than consistent without an ideology, with Colombia showing the most significant variation, of  $\pm 11.9$  percentage points. See Table 3.

## Analysis and Results

Having presented how our dependent variable and independent variables work, as well as the first-take of an analysis of the association between them, in

**Table 3. Consistency and Ideological Framework**

		Yes (%)	No (%)	Pearson $\chi^2$
All	Consistent	<b>78.0</b>	<b>22.0</b>	$\chi^2 (1) = 47.2062$
	Inconsistent	<b>72.0</b>	<b>28.0</b>	Pr = .000
Brazil	Consistent	<b>80.3</b>	<b>19.7</b>	$\chi^2 (1) = 21.8870$
	Inconsistent	<b>71.2</b>	<b>28.8</b>	Pr = .000
Colombia	Consistent	<b>83.9</b>	<b>16.1</b>	$\chi^2 (1) = 26.9912$
	Inconsistent	<b>72.0</b>	<b>28.0</b>	Pr = .000
Ecuador	Consistent	72.3	27.7	<b><math>\chi^2 (1) = 2.0808</math></b>
	Inconsistent	68.9	31.1	<b>Pr = .149</b>
Mexico	Consistent	78.3	21.7	<b><math>\chi^2 (1) = .1703</math></b>
	Inconsistent	78.7	21.3	<b>Pr = .680</b>
Peru	Consistent	<b>73.0</b>	<b>27.0</b>	$\chi^2 (1) = 11.0624$
	Inconsistent	<b>65.4</b>	<b>34.6</b>	Pr = .001

Source: Authors' calculations with data from *Las Américas y el Mundo*, 2010.

Notes. The values in bold indicate significant differences (+/- 5%) between the consistent and the inconsistent blocks. The values in bold in the Pearson chi-squared test indicate independency between the variables "consistency" and "ideology".

this section, we develop a multivariate model to learn with more precision the possible causal relationship between these variables. Our purpose is to test whether the consistency of citizens' opinions effectively depends on the level of knowledge in the international sphere (in line with Hypothesis 1), or on the availability of informational shortcuts—in this case, the ability to place oneself on the left–right ideological spectrum (in line with Hypothesis 2).

To have a better estimation of these effects, we have developed a model that includes some control variables relevant to explaining citizens' consistency of opinions, besides knowledge and heuristics. First, we include the *education* level of the individual, measured in highest number of years of study completed. We also take into consideration the *age* of survey respondents. Third is *income* level, based on respondents' subjective evaluation of the economic situation of their household.<sup>4</sup> These first three variables are important because they could lead to the expectation that better-educated individuals, who are older and of higher income, have the necessary resources for developing a consistent opinion about international affairs, especially with respect to the United States. Additionally, these three control variables are necessary for the model to determine whether there is a significant correlation with the principal explanatory variables.

We also incorporate into the model a pair of variables concerning interest and foreign contact, as it could be reasonable to expect that individuals interested in what goes on in the world or who have experienced traveling abroad would be more coherent in their international opinions. We include level of *interest in foreign news* for those surveyed,<sup>5</sup> and the number of *foreign trips* made. We coded the responses on the latter variable in three categories (never traveled outside the country, 1–10 trips, and 11 trips or more) with the aim of learning if there is a difference between individuals with a moderate number of trips outside their country and those who are frequent travelers.

**Table 4. Models for Predicting Coherence in Opinions about the United States**

	Coefficient	Standard error	Coefficient	Standard error
Knowledge	.027	.022	.026	.022
Ideology	.244***	.057	.563***	.116
Education	-.009	.006	-.009	.006
Age	.0006	.002	.0008	.001
Income	-.035	.029	-.036	.030
News interest	.042*	.025	.043*	.025
Foreign trips				
0 trips	Ref.	—	Ref.	—
1–10 trips	.239***	.063	.236***	.063
11 or more trips	.212	.206	.227	.205
Country fixed effects				
Brazil	Ref.	—	Ref.	—
Colombia	.505***	.092	.492***	.172
Ecuador	-.084	.077	.258*	.142
Mexico	-.221***	.074	.253*	.142
Peru	-.109	.090	.130	.153
Interaction effects				
Ideology × Brazil	—	—	Ref.	—
Ideology × Colombia	—	—	-.002	.189
Ideology × Ecuador	—	—	-.460***	.165
Ideology × Mexico	—	—	-.615***	.159
Ideology × Peru	—	—	-.317*	.172
Constant	.243**	.127	-.009	.150
Observations	8,310	—	8,310	—
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	.027	—	.030	—

Source: Authors' calculations with data from *Las Américas y el Mundo*, 2010.

Notes. Coefficients of binomial logistic regression models. Levels of statistical significance: \* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ . The em dashes denote no data available.

Finally, we also included in the model an estimation of fixed effects of the differences between countries. The aim is to assess whether there are variations attributable to countries besides the variations among individuals. Put differently by way of example, we also controlled for the possible effect of being a respondent in Colombia (where, in general, there is a high level of knowledge) as opposed to one in Brazil or Ecuador (where there is a lower level of knowledge).

The results of the binomial logistic regression model (with maximum likelihood estimation) are presented in Table 4. We note first that the level of knowledge does not have a statistically significant effect on the consistency of opinions about the United States. In other words, being coherent does not depend on having more or less knowledge about international matters. This data fails to confirm Hypothesis 1. By contrast, we must say that Hypothesis 2 is confirmed; the availability of informational shortcuts (ideology in this case) has a positive and statistically significant effect on the coherence of citizen opinions. In other

words, having an ideological position, whether of the left or the right, increases the probability that individuals will be consistent in their feelings toward the United States.

In addition to these findings, there are at least three other interesting results. First, none of the socio-demographic variables had significant effect. Neither age, nor education, nor income by itself facilitates or limits the consistency of individuals' opinions in the international sphere. Second, the variables news interest and foreign contact are determinants of coherence in the opinions of individuals.

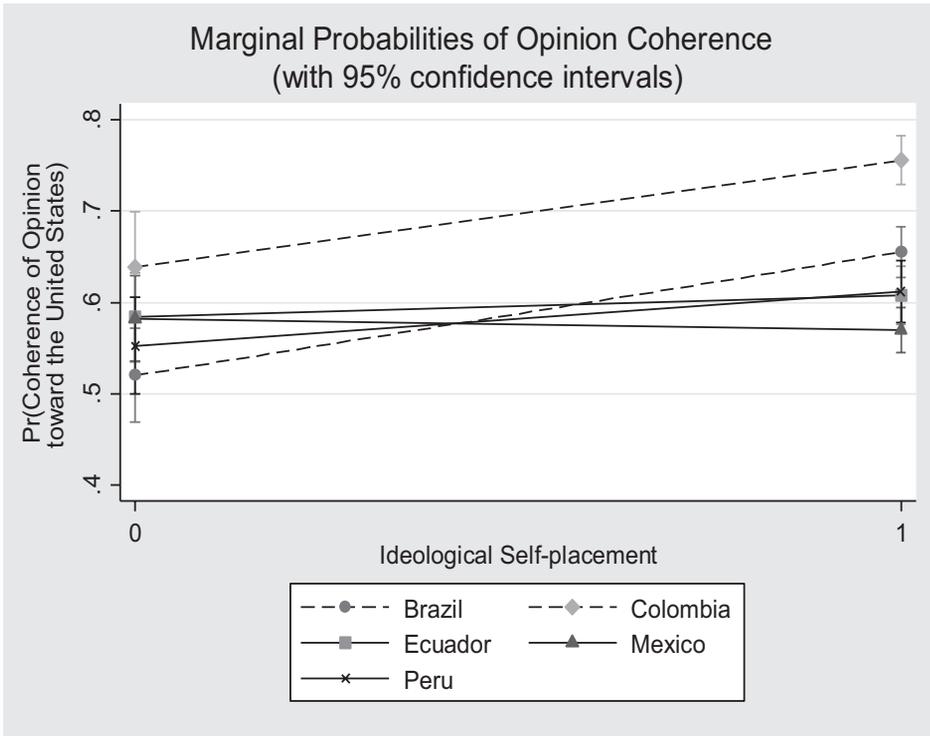
Meanwhile, although the coefficient is not great, the results also show that the greater the interest of individuals in their country's relations with other countries, the higher the probability that their feelings toward the United States are consistent. Also, having made between 1 and 10 trips abroad—compared with having never left the country, the category of reference—makes the opinions of such people more consistent, but there appears to be no statistically significant difference between having never traveled abroad and having done so 11 or more times. This data means that the effect of foreign contact diminishes in importance once the individuals become frequent travelers.

Another interesting result is the difference between countries. There are no significant differences between Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, but being a survey respondent in Colombia or Mexico—in comparison with Brazil, the reference category—yielded differences in the coherence of opinions. Specifically, the results show that Colombians in general are far more consistent citizens, whereas Mexicans seem to be the least consistent in their opinions toward the United States.

This last result is important because it clearly indicates that there is a factor (attributable to countries) that produces greater or lesser coherence in the opinions of its citizens. Taking this into account, we have developed a similar model that further includes the interaction effect between ideological positioning (shortcut) and country. With these estimations, we are able additionally to assess the effect of context—in this case, the country in which the individual is located—on consistency in having an ideological position. The results of this additional model are also presented in Table 4. As it can be seen, these new interactions do not modify in an important way the main findings of the previous model; the knowledge coefficient remains without significance, and the ideological-positioning coefficient is greater than in the premodified model (and also significant).

As was to be expected, the noteworthy variations are in the differences between countries. In this model, all the coefficients of fixed country effects are now positive, although in the case of Peru, without statistical significance. The interaction effects also show relevant results. First, both being Colombian and having an ideological position have no significant effect distinct from being Brazilian (or from another country). That is to say, the effect of being in Colombia is irrelevant regardless of whether the individuals hold an ideological position. By contrast, being in Mexico and having an ideological position show up as relevant. The combination of both conditions reduces the probability of being coherent in opinions (note the negative coefficient). This seems to be the case with Ecuadorans and Peruvians, although to a lesser degree.

Lastly, to show with greater clarity the differences between countries, we have calculated and graphed the marginal probabilities of being an individual consis-



**Figure 3. Marginal Probabilities of Being an Individual with Consistent Opinions**  
 Source. Authors' calculations with data from *Las Américas y el Mundo*, 2010.

tent in opinions toward the United States, with or without ideological positioning, among the five countries studied here. Figure 3 shows the results. If one observes the vertical axis to the left, it confirms, in principle, that Colombians have a greater probability of being consistent, in comparison to other Latin Americans surveyed, and especially to Brazilians, who show the lowest probability. At the same time, the vertical axis to the right shows that citizens in these two countries exhibit the most pronounced variations in probability. Being in Brazil or Colombia raises the probabilities of being consistent in opinions when one holds an ideological position. To wit, an individual in Colombia has a 63% probability of being coherent when without an ideological position, but the probability increases to 75% if an ideological position is held. A Brazilian has a 52% probability of consistency without an ideology, and a probability of 65% with one.

This difference is not so important among individuals in other countries. The case of Mexicans is particularly relevant. Individuals in Mexico who do not self-ascribe an ideological position have a 58% probability of being coherent, whereas such probability declines to 57% among those with an ideology. This figure in truth is not outside the confidence intervals, and therefore, among Mexicans, it does not appear to be statistically important whether one has or does not have an informational shortcut to be consistent in one's opinions.

## Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, we questioned in general terms whether there is empirical evidence to prove the realist or the liberal postulates in the academic discussion of public opinion and foreign policy. We asked whether the complexity of international affairs makes it impossible for ordinary people to have consistent opinions about global themes, as the realists believe, or, as the liberals maintain, if ordinary people can hold consistent opinions in such matters even when they have a lack of knowledge.

Our answer is that the empirical evidence better sustains the liberal stance; citizens are able to make and hold on to opinions in the international sphere even without the knowledge presumably necessary to process the complexity of international phenomena. The findings of our analysis confirm the view that Latin Americans with a set system of political beliefs, which are the majority, have the heuristic tools to organize information and give consistency to their attitudes or opinions on international themes. On this point, we do not find empirical evidence that sustains the realist view. The data do not demonstrate that citizens are incapable of forming coherent opinions in the international sphere. To the contrary, a majority of Latin Americans have attitudes in this area and keep them consistently.

We did not find evidence that only citizens with a high level of knowledge about international affairs are capable of consistency in their opinions. In fact, an important result of our analysis is that knowledge is not a determinant of coherence in opinions. That said, we conclude that there is empirical evidence for the liberal posture. Individuals have consistency in their opinions about international issues, and that depends on something so simple as having an ideological position and using it as an informational shortcut.

Our findings have two additional possible implications. First, the fact that ideological positioning is a key element to predict that there is consistency in international opinions shows the importance of political parties and the party system, and the capability of these to stabilize, anchor, and inform citizens' public opinion. The percentage of individuals who place or do not place themselves on the left-right political spectrum depends on the agency of the parties and the institutionalization of the party system. The more stable the political competition, the more capable citizens are of acquiring and using this heuristic tool. As a result, they will be better prepared to deal with international events.

Second, the finding of differences between countries requires more extensive future research, and this research should be carried out in more countries. It is very important to learn why citizens are more consistent in some countries (such as Colombia) and generally more inconsistent in others (such as Mexico). What are the precise factors of each country's context that facilitate or make more difficult the formation of and consistency in their citizens' opinions on international affairs? In cases like Mexico or Ecuador, consistency of opinions could be more related to other individual identities or attitudes, such as nationalism or cosmopolitanism.

Our results are incipient, and to strengthen our findings, it is necessary to conduct the survey in more countries; more research is also needed using other variables that will allow us to understand better what other factors can determine the consistency of opinions on international affairs.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>There are two reasons we chose these questions. First, part of Latin American identity is rooted in an historic anti-Americanism. Second, the United States continues to have relevance in the region in economic, social, and cultural terms. For these reasons, opinion on the United States is one of the broad themes that tend to polarize in Latin America, at intrastate and interstate levels.

<sup>2</sup>The chi-squared test lets us define whether there is dependency between variables, but not causation. To assess causative effect, we use a logistic regression model.

<sup>3</sup>The question was asked as follows: “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means left and 10 means right, where do you place yourself?” and the answers were coded from 0 to 10. See Figure A1 in the Appendix.

<sup>4</sup>We have coded the question and responses in the following manner: “With all your household income, would you say that . . .” 1 = “Our income does not meet our needs, and things are very difficult”; 2 = “Our income does not meet our needs, and things are difficult”; 3 = “Our income just meets our needs, but it is not a big problem”; and 4 = “Our income meets our needs just fine, and we can save.”

<sup>5</sup>We used the question “How much does news about relations between [COUNTRY] and other countries interest you?” and coded the responses as: 1 = none, 2 = little, 3 = somewhat, and 4 = a lot.

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Appendix

Table A1. The Americas and the World

		2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	Total		
Brazil	N				2,000			2,000	
	Error				+/-2%				
Chile	N				1,574			1,574	
	Error				+/-2.9%				
Colombia	N				1,500	1,500	1,699	4,699	
	Error				+/-3%	+/-3%	+/-3%		
Ecuador	N				1,574	1,503			3,077
	Error				+/-2.5%	+/-5%			
Mexico	N	1,500	1,499	2,400	2,400	2,398			10,197
	Error	+/-4%	+/-4%	+/-2%	+/-2%	+/-2%			
Peru	N				1,235	1,516			2,751
	Error				+/-2.8%	+/-2.5%			
Total		1,500	1,499	6,709	8,990	5,600			24,298

Source: Las Américas y el Mundo, 2004–2012.

Note. The shaded denotes no data available.

Table A1 summarizes the current database of LAYEM (countries, sample size, and sampling errors).<sup>8</sup>

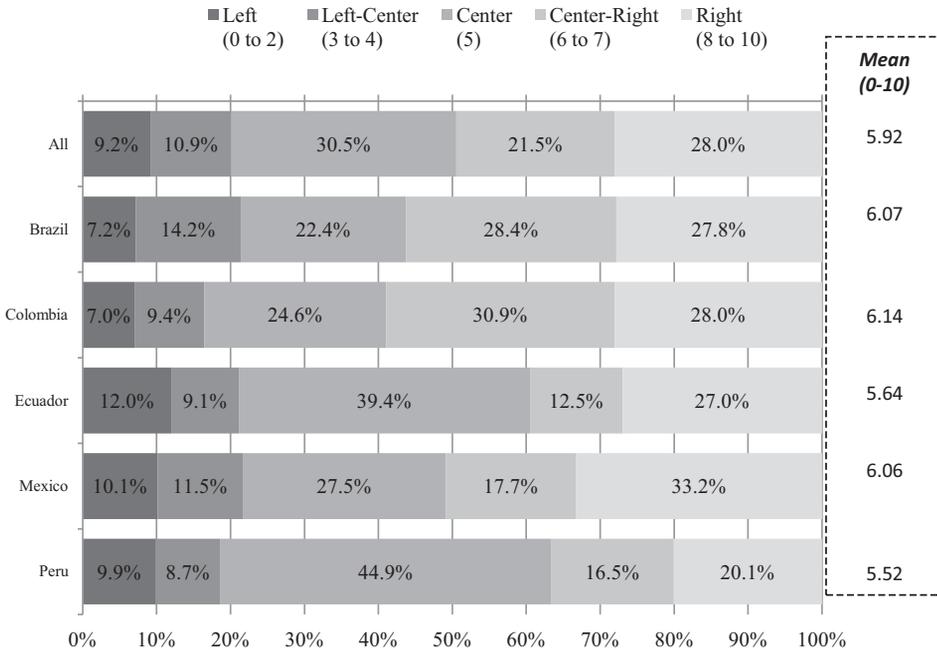


Figure A1. Distribution of Ideology by Country

Source. Authors' calculations with data from Las Américas y el Mundo, 2010. On a scale of 0–10, with 0 being most "left" and 10, most "right." Figure A1 shows the distribution of ideology by country. In all countries, the majority of the people are on the "center" and "center-right" of the ideological scale. Meanwhile, few people see themselves as on the "left."