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Education and Risk Assessments Predict Climate Change Concerns in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Experts across fields draw on a wide range of evidence to make the case that climate change poses a critical threat to the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region: extreme weather events and related natural disasters are increasing in number and lethality, rising average temperatures are affecting crops, and changing sea levels are affecting coastlines (see, for example, World Bank Group 2014). But to what extent does the LAC public share this perspective? Is concern higher among certain people or in particular places? Some recent studies have addressed this question by looking at public opinion on climate change in a subset of countries within the region. Pew Research Center (2017), for example, finds high levels of climate change concern in seven countries surveyed in Latin America.[1]

To provide a more complete picture, LAPOP's 2016/17 AmericasBarometer

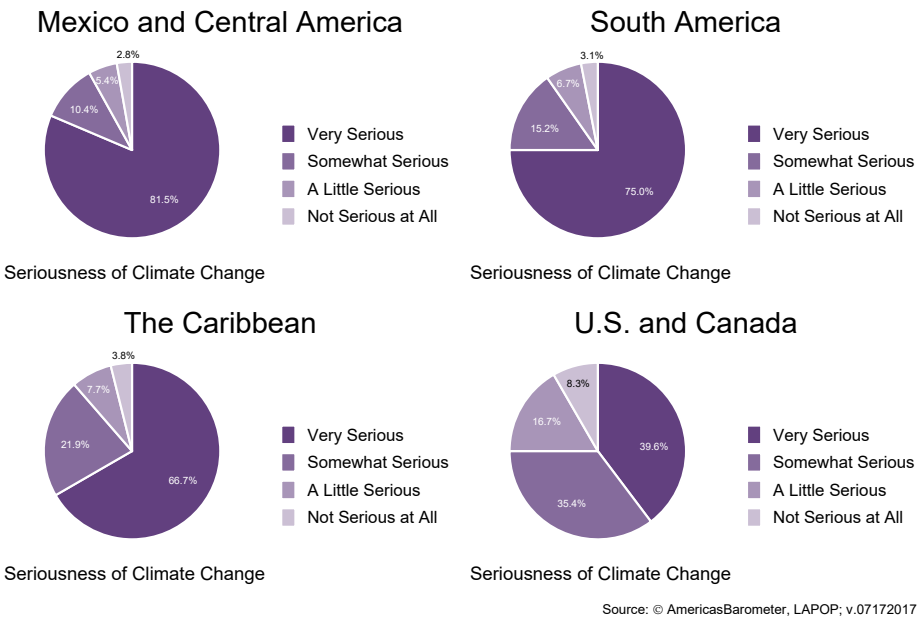

Figure 1: Views on the Seriousness of Climate Change across the Americas, by Region

asked individuals in nationally representative surveys conducted in 29 countries how serious a problem climate change is in their country. The question is worded as follows:

"**ENV2B.** If nothing is done to reduce climate change in the future, how serious of a problem do you think it will be for [country]?"

Figure 1 displays the results by region within the Americas: for each of the four regions[2], the pie chart shows the mean percentage of individuals who believe climate change is a "very serious," a "little serious," "somewhat serious," or "not serious at all" problem.[3]

Concerns about climate change are greatest in Mexico and Central America. Over 80% of adults in the average country in this region express that it is a very serious problem for their country.[4] That rate is more than double the proportion who express high concern in the United States and Canada. Clear majorities in South America and the Caribbean also find climate change to be very problematic. In the average South American

country, three-in-four individuals (75.0%) report that climate change is a very serious problem, while 66.7% of the public in an average Caribbean country reports the same. It is important to note that these data were collected prior to the recent spate of hurricanes that had serious to devastating effects in Central America and several Caribbean islands. Furthermore, it is notable that—except in the U.S. and Canada—only a very small segment of the population views climate change as posing a "not serious at all" or only "a little serious" problem for their country's future.

Understanding the determinants of variation in concerns about climate change is important, as it can provide insight into which subgroups are more or less likely to demand, or support, political action on this issue. There has been considerable attention paid to this topic in the United States and Western Europe, but fewer studies have focused on the Latin America and Caribbean region. To some extent, this has been for lack of comprehensive cross-national data; the question included in the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer provides one remedy to this challenge. This *Insights* report offers a first assessment of individual-level factors that predict public opinion on climate change in the Americas.

Certain Standard Explanations Fall Short in Explaining Attitudes in the LAC Region

Scholarship on climate change attitudes highlights two sets of determinants: socioeconomic status (SES) and ideology or partisanship. One classic socioeconomic argument is that individuals will focus their attention on environmental issues only after attaining economic security (Inglehart 1981). Some research, conducted outside the LAC region,[5] suggests that proxies for economic security—wealth and education—are positively associated with more concern about climate change and other environmental issues (e.g. Franzen and Vogl 2013; Franzen and Meyer 2009). However, it is not clear that SES-based "post-material" theses

travel to the Latin America and Caribbean region. In analyses of 2014 AmericasBarometer data, Evans (2015) finds that education and wealth are not statistically significant predictors of opinions about prioritizing environmental protections over economic growth. This challenge to the notion that SES and post-materialism always matter for environment-relevant attitudes is supported by others (e.g. Eisenstadt and West 2017; Dunlap and Mertig 1997). We include measures of education and wealth in our model in order to shed further light on this open debate.

Another core determinant of climate change attitudes in advanced industrial democracies has been political orientation, measured by partisanship or ideology. Routinely, scholars find that U.S. Republicans, conservatives, and right-leaning individuals express less concern about the environment, while those on the left or the more liberal side of the spectrum hold more environmentally conscious attitudes.[6] These positions have crystalized as polarization on the issue has increased over time in the U.S. (McCright and Dunlap, 2011b). Similar partisan and ideological differences are found in other studies of more developed countries (Kvaloy, Finseraas, and Listhaug 2012; Franzen and Vogl 2013; Tranter 2011). Should we expect ideological placement to matter in the LAC region? Zechmeister and Corral (2013) provide reason to doubt that left-right self-placements are robust indicators of political ideology for many individuals in the Latin American region, but nonetheless suggest that there may be a sufficient degree of shared meaning to these ideological markers that they could map on to attitudes about climate change.

To assess the relevance of socioeconomic status and left-right self-placement to opinions about climate change in the LAC region,[7] we conduct a simple OLS regression analysis.[8] The dependent variable is an individual's response to the climate change question presented in Figure 1. The key independent variables are wealth, education, "left" ideology, "right" ideology, and no ideological self-placement (compared to the baseline of "center" ideological placement).[9] We also include controls for age, gender, urban (versus rural) place of residence, and country.[10] All independent variables have been scaled from 0-1 (via a linear transformation of the original measure); the dependent variable is retained on its

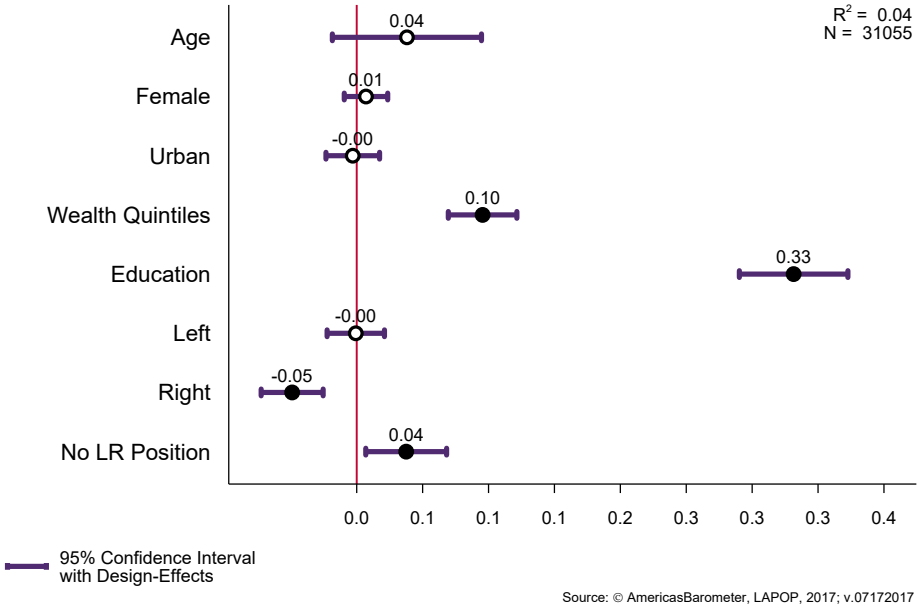

Figure 2: Basic Model Predicting Perceptions of Climate Change as Serious Problem, LAC Region

original scale, 1 to 4, where higher values indicate that the respondent believes climate change is a serious threat to the country.

Figure 2 shows that wealth and education are positively and significantly related to climate change concerns in the Latin America and Caribbean region in 2016/17.[11] Of all measures in the model, education matters most. Moving from no education to a post-secondary degree predicts a 0.33 unit increase in perceived seriousness. Wealth matters as well: moving from the poorest quintile to the richest quintile of wealth increases perceptions of seriousness by 0.1 units on the 1-4 scale. This provides some support for the SES-based "post-material" thesis, though the effect we find for education is greater than the predicted effect of wealth.

With respect to left-right self-placement, Figure 2 shows that having rightist political leanings is associated with a small but statistically significant decrease in perceptions of climate change seriousness relative to centrists (the excluded comparison category in the model), while those

on the left are no different in their attitudes than those in the center. Those who did not place themselves on the left-right scale are more concerned about climate change than those who placed themselves in the center, but substantively this difference is negligible. With respect to the individual-level controls, neither age, gender, nor urban (vs. rural) place of residence is a statistically significant predictor of climate change attitudes.[12]

For the sake of comparison, we ran a similar model to the one shown in Figure 2 with the AmericasBarometer data from the U.S (see Table 1).[13] Two key differences stand out. First, this model performs far better in the U.S. than in the LAC region: the difference in variation explained, as captured by the R-squared statistic, is large (0.04 for the LAC region versus 0.24 for the U.S.). Second, in the U.S. case, placing oneself on the liberal side of the scale is associated with a 0.5 unit increase in the dependent variable, while conservative leanings decrease perceptions of seriousness by nearly three-fourths a point relative to centrists. In short, political orientations captured via an ideological self-placement scale are more useful predictors of climate change in the U.S. than in the average Latin America and Caribbean country.

Figure 2 shows that socioeconomic status matters, yet generally speaking we find that the conventional explanations for attitudes toward the environment fall short of providing a compellingly comprehensive answer to the question: who in the LAC region is more likely to see climate change as a very serious threat to the country?

Assessments of Natural Disaster Risk Predict Climate Change Evaluations

Political orientation and socio-economic status aside, a key predictor of concern about climate change ought to be an individual's assessment of the risk posed by natural disasters in the near future. Climate change has already begun to affect numerous LAC countries, and the region

is destined to be further affected as global temperatures continue to increase (Inter-American Development Bank 2012). For example, in 2017, many areas have experienced serious and fatal flooding.[14] These events could become more severe as water temperatures rise (Cai et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2017). A changing climate is also identified as a culprit in the destruction caused by a series of devastating hurricanes that have recently ripped through the Central America and Caribbean region.[15] Given these connections, it is reasonable to think that natural disaster risks or perceptions of risk influence individuals' climate change concern. In fact, empirically, some evidence in the United States suggests that experiences with natural disasters can shape beliefs about climate change (Borick and Rabe 2010).

Research linking natural disasters or environmental degradation to climate change and environmental attitudes often focuses on objective experiences, where a "true" past experience is expected to shape current attitudes (Brody et al. 2008; Brooks et al. 2014). At the same time, perceptions can be important determinants of attitudes and policy preferences (Slovic 2000).[16] We take inspiration from this latter line of scholarship, and focus our attention on testing the link between individuals' perceived personal risk from natural disasters and their concern about climate change.

Figure 3 presents our second regression analysis. To the prior model (Figure 2), we now add a measure of individuals' assessment of their risk of experiencing harm due to a natural disaster. This risk perception variable is coded to range from it being "not likely at all" to "very likely" that the respondent or someone they know will be killed or seriously harmed in a natural disaster in the next 25 years.[17] That is, higher values denote greater concern about the potential of experiencing harm from a natural disaster.

Risk assessments of harm from a natural disaster are important predictors of concern about climate change in the Latin America and Caribbean region.[18] The predicted substantive effect is close in magnitude to what we found for education: moving from not believing harm will come from

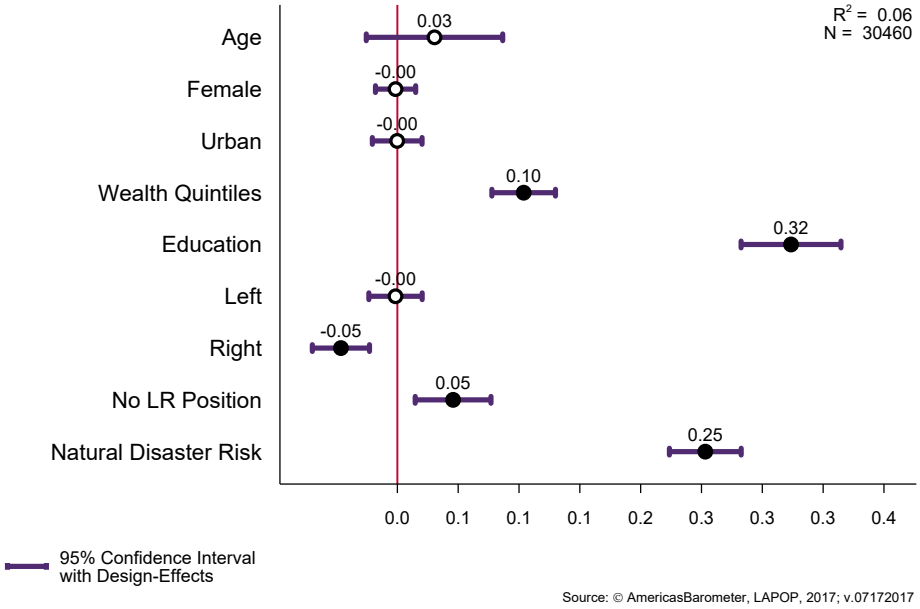

Figure 3: Individual Risk Perceptions and Perceptions of Climate Change Seriousness, LAC Region

a natural disaster to believing it is very likely is associated with a 0.25 unit increase in perceived seriousness of climate change, about one-twelfth of the variable's range.

It is worth noting that adding individual-level risk perception offers only slight improvement in model fit (assessed via the R-squared statistic). Relative to models for the United States, the amount of variation explained remains low for the LAC region. In short, by taking into account risk perceptions we have a better account of factors that predict evaluations of the seriousness of climate change in the Americas, but yet more work on the topic clearly is warranted, as discussed below.

Discussion

We draw two core conclusions. First, those who are more tuned into the risks posed by climate change—via education or via a subjective determination of one's personal risk—are far more likely to take the stance that climate change is a very serious problem. Second, in the Latin America and Caribbean region, the political arena is less appropriate for shaping attitudes about climate change, and instead potentially an arena for finding and implementing solutions to the problems posed by a changing climate.

Attitudes about the seriousness of climate change vary across the Americas. In the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer, we find that concerns are highest in the Mexico and Central American region. Given research (cited above) on the relevance of experiences with disaster to opinion formation and change, we expect that attitudes about climate change may be shifting in the Caribbean in response to experiences with the series of destructive natural disasters that the region has experienced this past fall. That is, additional insights into the factors that shape attitudes toward climate change may be gleaned from continuing to include questions on this topic on future rounds of the AmericasBarometer.

This report also points to the importance of understanding the factors that predict individuals' assessments of the risk that natural disasters pose to them and their families. As this report documents, risk perception is strongly related to individuals' determination about the seriousness of climate change. While this risk assessment is subjective, it is more than likely rooted in objective conditions, such as a person's proximity to areas that are exposed at above-average levels to the risk of natural disaster. Though there are many avenues for future investigation into this topic, we suggest that this should be one place where analysts focus their attention.

Relatedly, we conclude that conventional wisdom on the determinants of climate change attitudes do not provide robust explanations of individual-

level variation in the LAC region. Political orientation does not substantively map onto climate change seriousness, and the predicted effect of wealth is comparatively small. Education is consistently the strongest determinant of climate change seriousness. While this variable has been used as a proxy for economic security by scholars, we posit that it is likely capturing an awareness of general risk about the threats climate change poses for the future. If this assumption is warranted, then two of the most significant factors predicting attitudes toward climate change in the LAC region are awareness of the general risk posed by climate change and concerns about the risk natural disasters pose to oneself and one's family.

Finally, we note that across the Americas there is a high degree of concern about the seriousness of climate change. This suggests that there is a basis to build support for policies and programs that seek to mitigate against the risks associated with a changing climate. Policymakers and others should feel empowered to draw on these concerns in pushing forward on this important topic.

Notes

1. Respondents in Chile, Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela were asked whether an issue was "a major threat to our country." Though there is variation across the seven countries, in each case more than 50% reported that climate change is a major threat.

2. Countries are grouped into these regions as follows. Mexico and Central America equals Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. South America equals Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina. The Caribbean equals Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Guyana, Grenada, St. Lucia, Dominica, Antigua & Barbuda, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis. In the latter six countries, the AmericasBarometer included a randomly assigned question wording experiment in which half of the sample was asked about climate change and the other half was asked about global warming. We found no statistically significant differences to the question across these two conditions, and therefore pool them together in the analyses in this report.

3. In Figure 4, we show the distribution of responses by country.

4. Per the LAPOP standard approach, we weight countries evenly in our analyses rather than by population.

5. Research on this topic often examines global cross-national data. A few Latin American countries may be included in the sample, but usually they represent a small subset of the countries. The Caribbean is almost entirely absent from cross-national investigations.

6. In the United States, some have found that white males with conservative political leanings are the most likely to deny climate change (McCright and Dunlap, 2011a; Kellstedt, Zahran, and Vedlitz 2008). Conversely, individuals on the left or those who identify as Democrats tend toward more environmental friendly beliefs and consciousness (McCright and Dunlap, 2011b).

7. The analysis includes all LAC countries noted in note 2, except the six OECS countries and Guyana because the AmericasBarometer did not ask an ideological self-placement question in those surveys.

8. Our conclusions are robust to ordered logistic regression. We present the OLS results for ease of interpretation.

9. Wealth is measured as quintiles based on a factor analysis of household possessions (see Córdova (2009) for more detail). The education measure is categorical, with the lowest category indicating no education and the highest denoting post-secondary. For ideology, the AmericasBarometer asks individuals to place themselves on a 10-point scale, from left (1) to right (10). We created a series of dummy variables based on responses to this scale, such that individuals who gave a 1-3 response are coded as "left," those who responded 4-7 are "center," those who gave a 8-10 response are "right," and those who gave a "don't know" or "no answer" response are coded as having "no LR position."

10. Age is a continuous measure of the respondent's age in years. Gender is a dichotomous measure: females are represented by a 1 and males are represented by a 0. Urban (versus rural) is measured using the country's official census definition.

11. The black dots denote the effect size and the bars show the 95% confidence intervals. If the confidence interval does not cross the vertical line, placed at zero, the variable has a statistically meaningful effect on responses to the climate change question.

12. Though not shown here, we do find some indication of a non-linear effect for age. Individuals in the 36-45, 46-55, and 56-65 year cohorts express higher levels of concern on climate change than the reference group of 18-25 year olds, while those aged 26-35 and over 65 are not statistically distinct from that reference group.

13. The U.S. survey does not record information about wealth quintiles or urban-rural status. Further, in the U.S., the terms "liberal" and "conservative" are used to mark the end-points of the ideological scale. In the LAC region, the terms used are "left" and "right;" we treat these different operationalizations as semantic differences that capture the same underlying concept.

14. See, e.g., Casey and Zarate (2017) and France-Presse (2017).

15. See, e.g., Drash (2017), McGrath (2017), and Charles (2017).

16. Extant research suggests that objective measures factor into perceptions, but that individuals' risk perceptions can also be influenced by sociodemographic characteristics, worldviews, and other factors (Slovic 2000; Kellstedt, Zahran, and Vedlitz 2008; Brody, Peck, and Highfield 2004). Testing for a mediating set of relationships is outside the scope of this brief report.

17. Variable **DRK1** is worded as follows: "How likely do you think it is that you or someone in your immediate family here in [country] could be killed or seriously injured in a natural disaster, such as floods, earthquakes, or hurricanes, in the next 25 years?" The four answer options range from "not at all likely" to "very likely." As above, all independent variables have been recoded to range from 0 to 1 to illustrate a minimum to maximum change in effect.

18. Risk perceptions are also strong determinants of perceptions of climate change seriousness in the United States sample. See Table 1, column 5 for this analysis on the U.S. sample.

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Appendix

Figure 4 shows, for the Latin America and Caribbean region, the breakdown in responses for each country. The left side of the figure shows the percentage of respondents giving a "not serious at all" response, and on the right side are the percentages of respondents who find climate change to be a "very serious" problem, with "a little serious" and "somewhat serious" as the intermediate categories. In each of the LAC countries, more than 50% of respondents report climate change as very serious, and in the majority of countries the proportion is higher than 70%.

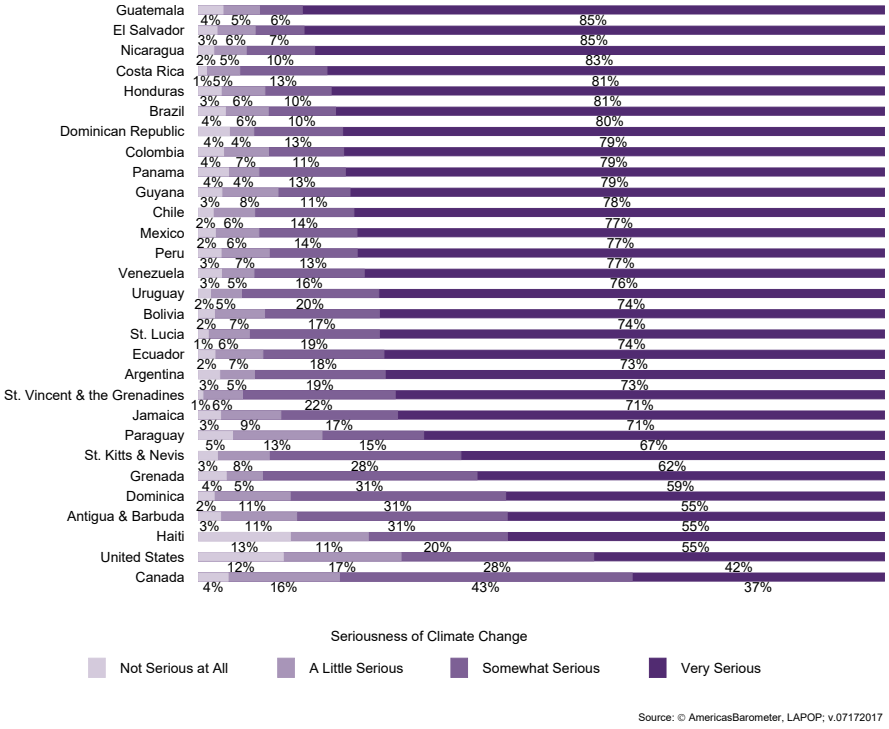

Figure 4: Seriousness of Climate Change by Country, LAC Region

Table 1 provides the results of a series of analyses predicting attitudes on climate change in the Latin America and Caribbean region (data columns 1 and 2) and in the U.S. (data columns 3-5). We are not able to execute

the exact same analyses in the U.S. and LAC samples, since wealth and urban-rural do not exist in the U.S. dataset. We can, however, present results from similar models. The first column of Table 1 displays the results from the model presented in Figure 2 for the LAC region. The second column shows these results when the urban-rural and wealth quintiles variables are excluded. Excluding these variables then makes Column 2 directly comparable to the U.S. model that is shown in Column 3. Column 4 expands on the previous model to include an income measure. Here, income is measured based on the respondents' household monthly income. Respondents are given a scale of 17 categories that range from no monthly income to more than $15,500 per month **(Q10NEW_16)**. Again, all independent variables have been linearly transformed to range from 0 to 1, so that the coefficient denotes a predicted effect change when moving from a minimum to maximum value on the dependent variable.

Column 5 shows the predicted effect of risk perceptions on climate change seriousness in the United States.

Table 1: Seriousness of Climate Change in the United States and LAC Sample (OLS Analyses)

Variables	LAC	LAC (No wealth or urban)	U.S. (No wealth or urban)	U.S. (With income)	U.S. (With risk perception)
Age	0.04	0.04	−0.68*	−0.73*	−0.78*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.19)
Female	0.01	0.00	0.24*	0.24*	0.24*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Urban	0.00				
	(0.01)				
Wealth Quintiles	0.10*				
	(0.01)				
Income, U.S.				0.04	0.11
				(0.12)	(0.11)
Education	0.33*	0.38*	−0.14	−0.19	−0.09
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.18)
Left (Liberal)	0.00	0.00	0.52*	0.52*	0.54*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Right (Conservative)	−0.05*	−0.05*	−0.76*	−0.75*	−0.72*
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
No LR Position	0.04*	0.03*	0.31	0.69*	0.65*
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.49)	(0.23)	(0.27)
Natural Disaster Risk					0.64*
					(0.12)
Constant	3.41*	3.42*	3.35*	3.39*	3.04*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.18)
Observations	31,055	31,543	1,500	1,467	1,464
R-Squared	0.05	0.04	0.24	0.24	0.28

Standard errors in parentheses. * indicates $p \leq .05$

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As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.

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