# Predictors of Perceptions of Effective Government-Provided Distance Learning

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Key Findings:

- On average, the more educated citizens are, the less likely they are to feel that the government provided effective distance learning during the pandemic

- Frequency of watching the news is not a significant predictor of perceptions of effective distance learning

- There is a strong and significant negative correlation between the perceived amount of corruption among politicians and the perception of effective distance learning provided by the government

- There is a strong, positive correlation between satisfaction with public schools and the likelihood that the individual will say the government provided effective distance learning

- Trust in the government is a positive predictor of perceptions of effective government-provided distance learning
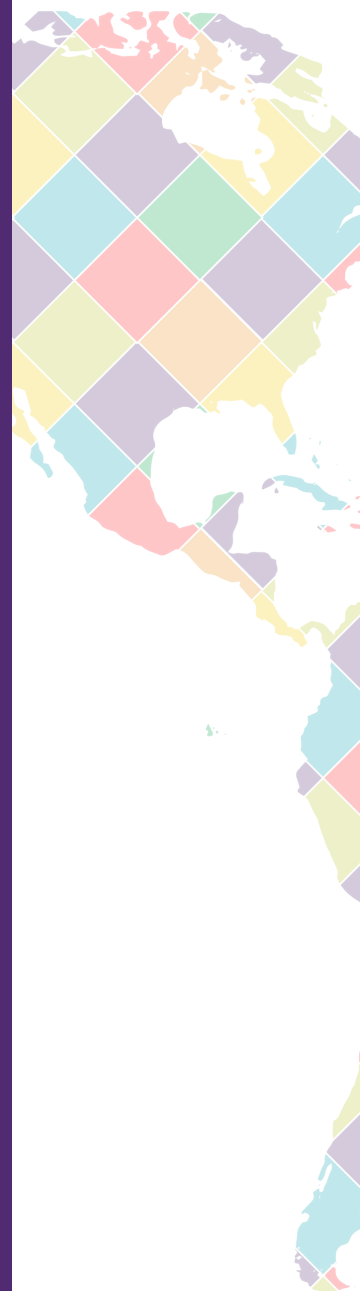
Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 188 countries experienced nationwide school closures, affecting approximately 1.5 billion learners.[1] Governments endeavored to avoid disruption in education by offering remote schooling: a study (conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank) of 149 countries shows that most of them implemented distance learning solutions to address the educational issues raised by the pandemic.[2] However, inequities abound—the most disadvantaged populations are simultaneously at the greatest risk of learning losses and face challenges accessing virtual-learning materials.[3] Globally, at least 60% of countries proposed remote learning options that rely only on online platforms, but approximately 47% of students cannot connect to the internet from their homes.[4] This may have affected people's perception of their children's education, especially in low- or middle-income countries where governments may have less capacity to meet technological and learning needs. Therefore, it is worth asking how the public assessed remote learning during the pandemic.

This *Insights* report analyzes factors affecting perceptions of government-provided distance learning during the pandemic. The 2021 round of LAPOP's AmericasBarometer survey measured views of effective distance learning by asking the following question of individuals with children under 13 in their home who experienced virtual learning:

COVIDEDU2. "Do you think that the government has provided effective distance learning for the people during the school closings?" (yes/no)
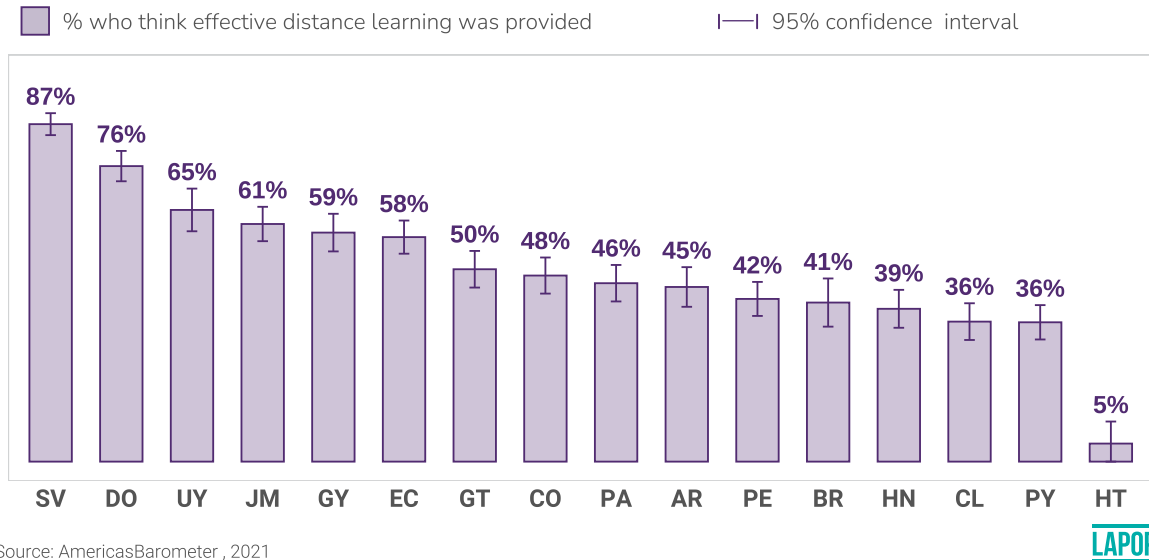
The question was asked across 16 countries, and 8,930 people responded. On average for the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, evaluations are fairly split: 52.2% answer "yes" while 47.8% responded "no."[5]

El Salvador Ranks at the Top in Evaluations of Government-Provided Distance Learning

Figure 1 displays evaluations of distance learning by country. El Salvador has the highest number of people who believe the government provided effective distance learning (87.1%), while Haiti has the lowest (4.1%). Owing to variation in the digital divide as well as disparities in familial and educational resources, remote learning options have not affected people in the LAC region in the same way.[6] Countries like El Salvador and the Dominican Republic adopted hybrid strategies like establishing a nationally available platform with materials that can be taught through different modes of communication, providing teachers, students, and parents with orientation guidelines, creating video tutorials, and making accessible a national call center to support students.[7] Such efforts may have positively influenced perceptions of effectiveness in these countries, but this does not explain comparatively lower mean evaluations in Peru and Paraguay—countries that have also launched programs to facilitate distance learning.

Figure 1.

**Cross-National Variation in Evaluations of
Government Provision of Distance Learning**

◻ % who think effective distance learning was provided   ├─┤ 95% confidence interval

Source: AmericasBarometer , 2021

The level of readiness of each country's government to execute digital learning alternatives prior to the pandemic could also affect perceptions of their effectiveness.[8] Yet while this explanation may justify Uruguay's relatively high ranking, it does not support Colombia and Chile's low placing given they also started with a comparatively strong foundation.[9] The failure of distance learning to replicate the quality of face-to-face learning could also influence perceptions of effectiveness. In a country like Chile where schools have been able to provide distance learning, a study by the World Bank reports that only made up for 12-30% of learning losses due to school closings.[10] More research is needed to understand country-level outcomes in public opinion on government provision of effective distance learning; the remainder of this report, though, turns to analyze variation at the individual level.

Figure 2.

Women and Wealthier Respondents More Likely to Think Effective Distance Learning Was Provided Compared to the More Educated
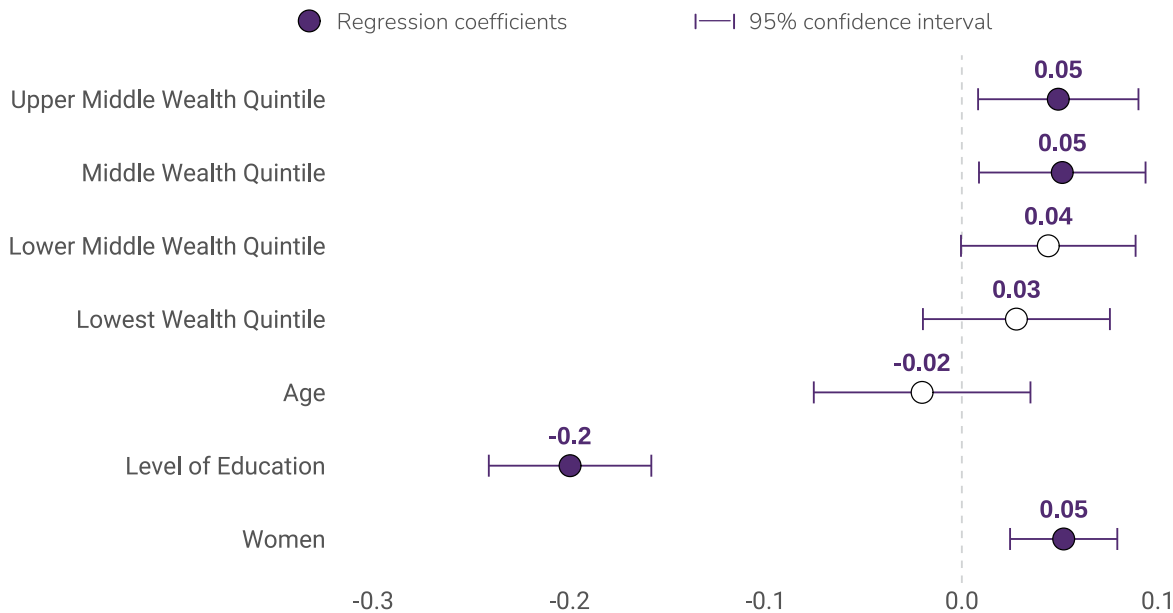
Source: AmericasBarometer , 2021

Those Who Are More Educated Perceive Greater Failings in Government-Provided Distance Learning

In this section, I consider the extent to which four socioeconomic and demographic factors —gender, education, age, and wealth—predict whether individuals feel the government provided effective distance learning during the pandemic. I conducted a logistic regression analysis that includes these four factors and country fixed effects.[11] The dependent variable is coded "1" if the individual says, yes, the government provided effective distance learning, and "0" if not. Figure 2 presents the results of this analysis. In this figure, dots represent the predicted change in probability of reporting a positive evaluation; solid dots are statistically significant, while empty dots are not.

Gender and education are significant predictors of evaluations of government provision of distance learning. Specifically, the analysis predicts that women are five percentage points more likely to respond that the government has provided effective distance learning during the pandemic compared to men in the LAC region. When it comes to level of education, there is a negative correlation: on average, the more educated citizens are, the less likely they are to feel that the government provided effective distance learning during the

pandemic. Scholars have suggested that people with a higher level of education are more inclined to be cognizant of flaws in government organizations, and generally have a stronger response to societal corruption.[12] Therefore, one possible explanation for this negative relationship could be that a greater range of knowledge and experience across various levels of the educational system makes well-educated people more critical of government services.[13]

Age is not a statistically significant predictor; we cannot say with confidence that it influences individuals' perception of government-provided distance learning during the pandemic. The wealth variable has been divided into different cohorts. Compared to the wealthiest (the baseline, or comparison, category), the two least wealthy categories are statistically insignificant. However, the third and fourth wealthiest categories are more likely to perceive effective distance learning compared to the very wealthiest. Studies have shown that economically well-off citizens are more satisfied with education quality than the poor, possibly because the former reside in neighborhoods with schools that are better prepared and properly staffed.[14] This may partially explain the results in Figure 2.

Satisfaction with Public Schools Is the Strongest Predictor of Perceptions of Government-Provided Distance Learning

As Latin American and Caribbean countries faced potentially severe impacts of school closures due to the pandemic, governments took substantial measures to set up distance learning options.[15] The following analysis delves into potential predictors—other than socioeconomic and demographic ones—of perceiving effective distance learning during the pandemic.

In this section, I test the extent to which paying attention to the news, perceptions of political corruption, satisfaction with local schools, and trust in local government shape people's evaluation of distance learning. Figure 3 shows the results of a logistic regression analysis that includes these factors while controlling for the same predictors that were used in the analysis for Figure 2. Owing to survey design, data on some of these variables could only be asked in a few countries. Therefore, the following analysis pertains to four countries: Panama, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. To foreshadow my results, the first variable (frequency of watching news) is not statistically significant while the remaining three (corruption among politicians, satisfaction with public schools, and trust in the local government) are.

Figure 3.

**Those Satisfied with Public Schools and Trust the Government
More Likely to Think Effective Distance Learning Was Provided**
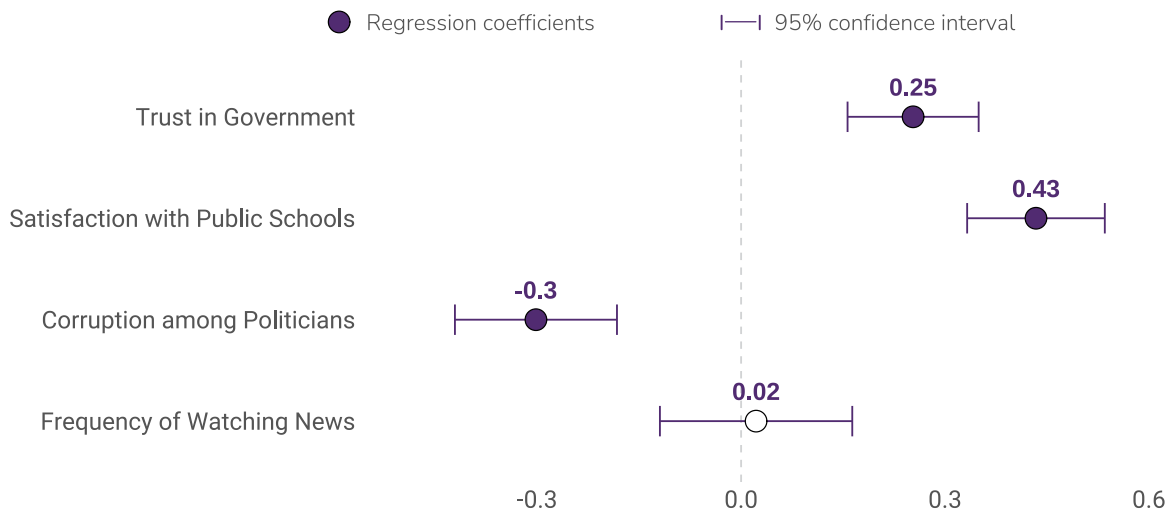
Source: AmericasBarometer , 2021

Citizens receive information about the world through a number of different sources, including the news. Most people pay immediate attention to the needs of their private lives, and rarely participate in political events.[16] Thus, they rely on outside sources like television news for information, which gives media tremendous power to shape public opinion of the political world.[17] Through priming (presenting news in a way that makes only specific pieces of political information accessible to the public) and agenda-setting mechanisms, television news can affect what the public perceives as the most important issues and can influence judgments of political performance.[18] With that in mind, it is worth considering the connection between news consumption and evaluations of the effectiveness of distance learning. However, without knowing whether the news media has painted a positive or negative view of state efforts in this domain, it is impossible to assert an a priori expectation about whether news consumption might be positively, or negatively, connected to the dependent variable. For the analysis, I operationalize the independent variable using a question that asks respondents how often they pay attention to the news, whether on TV, the radio, newspapers, or the internet.[19] Contrary to expectation that there would be some connection, my analysis in Figure 3 shows that the frequency of watching news is not a significant predictor of perceptions of effective distance learning.

Perceptions of government transparency and accountability may positively influence citizens' perceptions of government-provided distance learning. Scholars have suggested that transparency in managing government-provided education leads to higher public expectations for accountability, less corruption, and improved educational performance.[20] Therefore, people ought to have more positive evaluations of the government's education services if they believe schools are open about their use of tax money and respond to reported issues.[21] I operationalize this concept with a question that asks how many politicians the public thinks are involved in corruption.[22] The results in Figure 3 show a strong and significant negative correlation between the amount of perceived corruption among politicians and the perception of effective distance learning provided by the government. A maximum increase in this measure of confidence in politics predicts a 38-percentage point decrease in the likelihood that the individual will perceive effective government-provided distance learning. A strong relationship like this could be influenced by the efforts countries in the region have made to facilitate access to public information and government transparency in light of pressing issues like corruption, government inadequacy, insufficient public involvement, and the absence of accountability;[23] that is, it may be that anti-corruption efforts fuel a tight connection between individuals' general evaluation of political corruption and their views on government provision of services.

My third expectation is that satisfaction with public schools positively affects perceptions of whether the government provided effective distance learning. Since people are sensitive to the quality of basic government services, they may convert (dis)satisfaction into evaluations of specific outcomes, and vice versa.[24] Therefore, satisfaction with public schools may reflect perceptions of effective learning material.[25] Figure 3 shows a strong, positive correlation between the two variables—a maximum increase in satisfaction with public schools predicts a 46-percentage point increase in the likelihood that the individual will say the government provided effective distance learning.

Finally, I expect trust in the government to favorably influence public opinion of government-provided distance learning. Trust implies having positive perceptions of an individual or organization's conduct.[26] It also reflects the amount of faith that people have in the government to "do what is right and perceived to be fair".[27] Therefore, a higher amount of trust in the government may positively skew the public's perception of whether or not the government provided effective distance learning. I operationalize this notion with a question that asks citizens how much they trust the government to do what is right.[28] Figure 3 shows a positive relationship between the two variables: a maximum increase in trust in the government predicts a 25-percentage point increase in the likelihood that the individual will perceive effective government-provided distance learning.

Conclusion

This *Insights* report shows that satisfaction with public schools is a strong positive predictor of the perceived effectiveness of government-provided distance learning. This demonstrates a tight connection that people made under the pandemic between satisfaction with local public education and national efforts to provide distance learning. Further, perceptions of corruption among elected officials are a strong negative predictor of effective distance learning; looked at from the other vantage point, this result can be interpreted as showing how good governance in general may result in positive evaluations of government performance in specific service domains. Education is another strong negative predictor, possibly because high levels of education give citizens the ability to be more critical of the government. Gender is a moderate predictor, with women being only 5 percentage points more likely than men to be satisfied with distance learning. Meanwhile, age, wealth, and frequency of watching the news are not significant predictors.

Traditional models of democratic governance rely on people's abilities to effectively assess government performance. The expansion of publicly available information about service delivery in all policy domains helps people make more accurate evaluations. At the same time, the public's ratings of service delivery ought to factor into governments' efforts to create and refine programs that address to the needs of the public. This report shows significant shortcomings in the public's perception that governments across the LAC region provided effective distance learning, with those deficiencies detected to varying degrees across countries and individuals. While governments did succeed in rolling out programs to provide distance learning, there are important gaps to fill in terms of where and for whom those efforts were comparatively more effective.

Notes

1. Vegas 2020.

2. Aedo, Nahata, Sabarwal 2020.

3. Aedo, Nahata, Sabarwal 2020.

4. Aedo, Nahata, Sabarwal 2020.

5. Another 316 individuals were asked the question but responded "don't know" or gave no answer, for a total item non-response rate of 3.42%. All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: 2021 v.1.2.

6. Rodríguez 2021.

7. Cobo 2020.

8. Rodríguez 2021.

9. Rodríguez 2021.

10. Gropello 2020.

11. All independent variables were re-coded from 0 to 1. Age (**EDAD**) is a measure of the respondent's age in cohorts. Movement from 0 to 1 in age is from the youngest category to the oldest category. Wealth (**WEALTH**) is measured based on a factor analysis of household possessions, such as a car, TV, refrigerator, etc. A series of new wealth variables were created to represent each quantile, with the wealthiest category acting as the baseline for comparison. Education (**EDR**) is categorical by the highest level of education obtained by the individual. In this report, the lowest category is no or primary education while the highest is post-secondary education. Data for no education and primary education were coded together because the percentage of people surveyed with no education is very small. Therefore, movement from 0 to 1 in education is from primary or no education to post-secondary education. For gender (**GENDER**), women and non-binary individuals are represented by a 1, while men are represented by 0.

12. Agerberg 2019.

13. Krönke and Olan'g 2020.

14. Krönke and Olan'g 2020.

15. Gropello 2020.

16. Iyengar and Kinder 2010.

17. Iyengar and Kinder 2010.

18. Iyengar and Kinder 2010.

19. This variable (**GI0N**) is on 5-point scale that is coded in terms of a minimum (never, scored as 0) to maximum (daily, scored as 1).

20. Krönke and Olan'g 2020.

21. Krönke and Olan'g 2020.

22. This variable (**EXC7NEW**) is on a 5-point scale that is coded in terms of a minimum (none, scored as 0) to maximum (all, scored as 1).

23. ELLA Network 2012.

24. Bland et al. 2021.

25. This variable (**SD3NEW2**) is on a 4-point scale that is coded in terms of a minimum (very dissatisfied, scored as 0) to maximum (very satisfied, scored as 1).

26. OECD 2013.

27. OECD 2013; note that OECD report attributes the quote to this source: Easton, David. 1965. *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: John Wiley.

28. This variable (**ANESTG**) is on a 4-point scale that is coded in terms of a minimum (not at all, scored as 0) to maximum (a lot, scored as 1).

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