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# **The State of Democracy in Latin America: A Comparative Analysis of the Attitudes of Elites and Citizens**



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The study of attitudes towards democracy is one of the topics that has sparked the greatest interest in the field of public opinion. Without a doubt, this is due in large part to the importance that these attitudes hold for democratic stability and consolidation, especially in the case of new democracies. In the literature, there is general agreement that “a democratic political system cannot survive for long without the support of a majority of its citizens.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this commitment to democracy should not come solely from the citizenry, but also from political elites. One of the essential elements for the sustainability of any democracy is the existence of a political culture that accepts the basic principles that serve as democracy’s foundation; existing institutions should be considered the most appropriate ones, and the political regime should be recognized as “the only game in town” by elites and citizens.<sup>3</sup>

This brief report presents a description of the responses provided by both citizens and legislators to a group of questions that appear in two surveys, questions on support for democracy, satisfaction with the way it works, and trust in the principal political and social institutions in each country. Thus, analysis of survey data from both the AmericasBarometer and the Project of Parliamentary Elites in Latin America offers a unique opportunity to analyze support for democracy in the region from both perspectives, that of the citizenry and that of elites. Researching citizen opinion is indispensable if the concept of democracy promoted today is democracy of citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

The data on citizens come from the 2008 AmericasBarometer, carried out by Vanderbilt University’s Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).<sup>5</sup> They involve personal surveys of citizens of voting age, based on national probability samples. In the case of political elites, we analyze data from interviews of representatives collected by the University of Salamanca’s Project of Parliamentary Elites in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> In this report, data are analyzed from the seventeen countries covered by both studies<sup>7</sup>. Citizen interviews were carried out in 2008; in the case of elites, interviews were conducted in the legislative period corresponding to that year.<sup>8</sup>

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This report was translated from the Spanish by Hillary Voth, Latin American Public Opinion Project, Vanderbilt University.

<sup>2</sup> Miller (1974: 951).

<sup>3</sup> Linz and Stepan (1996), Alcántara (2006).

<sup>4</sup> OEA-PNUD (2010).

<sup>5</sup> The data analyzed in this document were provided by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), <http://www.LapopSurveys.org>. However, the interpretation of these data is the sole responsibility of the author. Financing for the 2008 round of surveys was mainly provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Other important sources of support were the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

<sup>6</sup> Financing for this project comes from Spain’s Ministry of Science and Innovation, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies (FIIAPP).

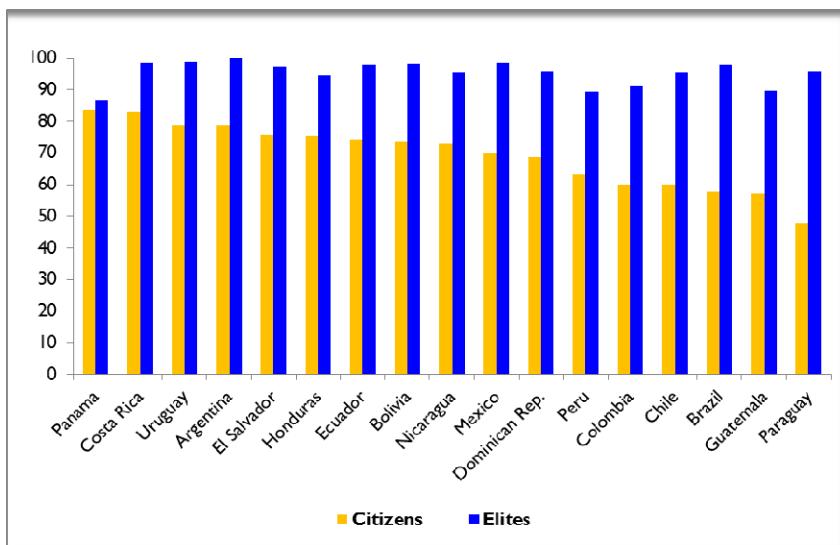
<sup>7</sup> These countries are: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

<sup>8</sup> With the exception of Ecuador, where data from the 2009-2012 legislature are used, and Brazil, where the 2003-2007 period is analyzed.

## Preference for democracy

The first question examined in this report is related to preference for democracy in the region. To what extent do citizens and their representatives believe that democracy is the best possible system? Figure 1 shows the percentage of individuals in each group that prefer democracy to other forms of government. The data indicate that the majority of citizens and representatives in every country opt for democracy as the preferred form of government, a trend that is stronger among elites than among the citizenry, with elite support above 85 percent in every country analyzed here. However, it should be noted that the response options varied from one survey to another. Citizens could choose between three options (it does not matter whether a regime is democratic or not, democracy is preferable to any other form of government, or under some circumstances an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one), while two options were offered to representatives (democracy is preferable or sometimes an authoritarian regime is preferable). This may explain the differences between the two groups. Nonetheless, the percentage of citizens and elites that favor an authoritarian regime is small. The countries in which the proportion of the citizenry preferring this type of government is highest are Paraguay, Guatemala, Brazil and Chile, with percentages around ten percent.

**Figure 1: Support for Democracy in Latin America**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

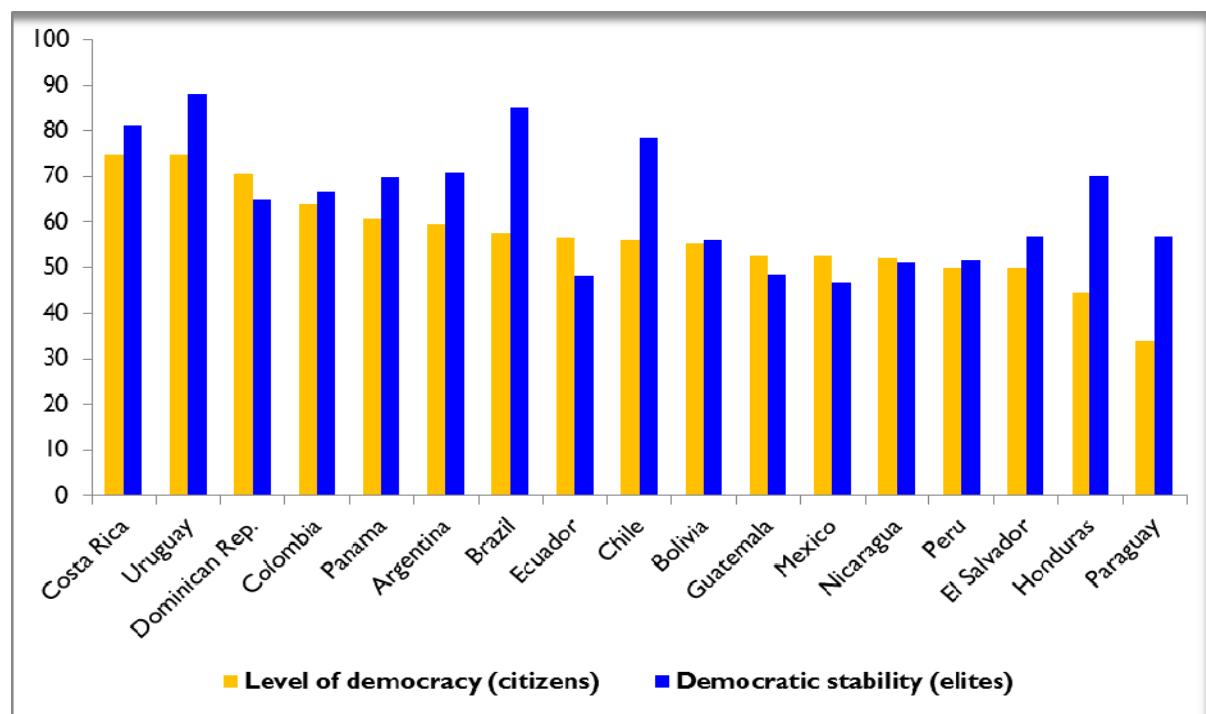
## Stability and levels of democracy

In general terms, it can be said that the idea of democracy enjoys widespread acceptance in the region. Nevertheless, there are many other dimensions of democracy that can be explored and that may offer other, very different nuances. Preference for democracy as an idea is one thing, while satisfaction with the way it works or with the level and stability of democracy is another. These two surveys offer some questions that may help provide a more complete image of the state of democracy in Latin America.

On the one hand, while the AmericasBarometer asks about the level of democracy in the country,<sup>9</sup> the Project of Parliamentary Elites inquires about the stability of democracy.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, both explore levels of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy.

Figure 2 shows the levels of response to these questions on stability and level of democracy. Even though the questions are not identical and refer to different things, both can provide a general idea of the degree to which the citizenry and elites perceive that democracy is deeply rooted in their respective countries. The responses to both questions were recoded on a scale from 0 to 100 to facilitate comparison, with higher values indicating higher levels of democracy and greater stability, respectively.

**Figure 2: Level and Stability of Democracy**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

In spite of the fact that it deals with different questions, the figure shows that levels are very similar in the majority of countries. With reference to democratic stability reported by congressmen and women, the highest levels were found in Uruguay, Brazil, Costa Rica and Chile, while the lowest levels emerged in Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico. In terms of citizens' perceptions, the most elevated levels of democracy were perceived in Costa Rica, Uruguay and the Dominican Republic, with averages around 80 points. Countries such as Paraguay and Honduras appear on the opposite extreme, where averages do not exceed 50 points.

<sup>9</sup> "In your opinion, is your country very democratic, somewhat democratic, not very democratic or not at all democratic?" (LAPOP)

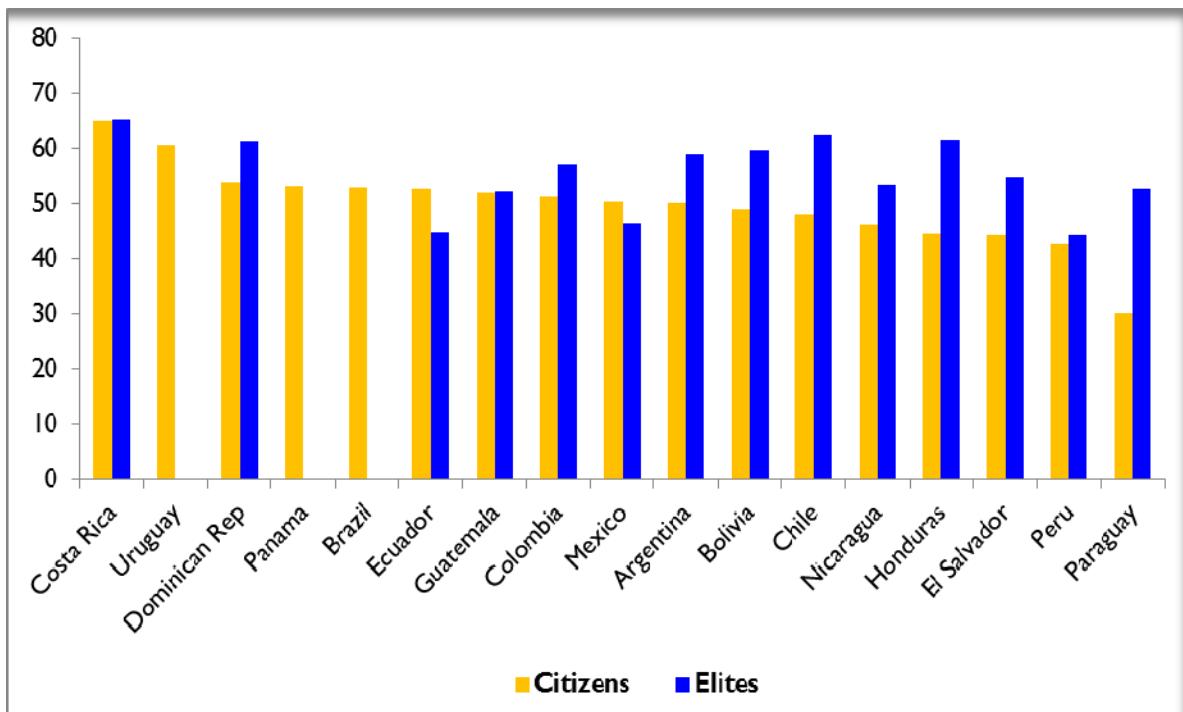
<sup>10</sup> "In your opinion, is democracy in your country today: very stable, somewhat stable, not very stable or not at all stable?" (PELA)

## Satisfaction with democracy

Another indicator frequently used in the literature is satisfaction with democracy. Normally, this index is understood as an indication of the real functioning of democracy beyond support for the idea or abstract notion of democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 3 indicates the degree of satisfaction with the way in which democracy functions according to the citizenry and parliamentary elites in Latin America. Level of satisfaction was recoded on a scale from 0 to 100 points to facilitate comparison. Numbers closer to 100 signify greater satisfaction with democracy.

**Figure 3: Satisfaction with Democracy in Latin America**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

The results that appear in the figure show that, with the exception of Ecuador and Mexico, in every other country legislators are more satisfied than citizens. The country with the highest levels of satisfaction in both groups is Costa Rica, with averages near 65 points. Behind Costa Rica, the elites in Chile, Honduras and the Dominican Republic expressed relatively high satisfaction, all above 60 points on average. On the other hand, the lowest levels of satisfaction among representatives appear in Ecuador, Mexico and Peru, where levels do not exceed 50 points. With respect to the citizenry, besides Costa Ricans, citizens of Uruguay, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Brazil and Ecuador are the most satisfied.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Paraguay, Peru, El Salvador and Honduras have the least satisfied citizens with respect to the way democracy works.

<sup>11</sup> See, among others: Anderson and Guillori (1997); Fuchs, Guidorossi and Sevensson (1995).

<sup>12</sup> In the case of Panama, Uruguay and Brazil, the elite survey did not contain this question.

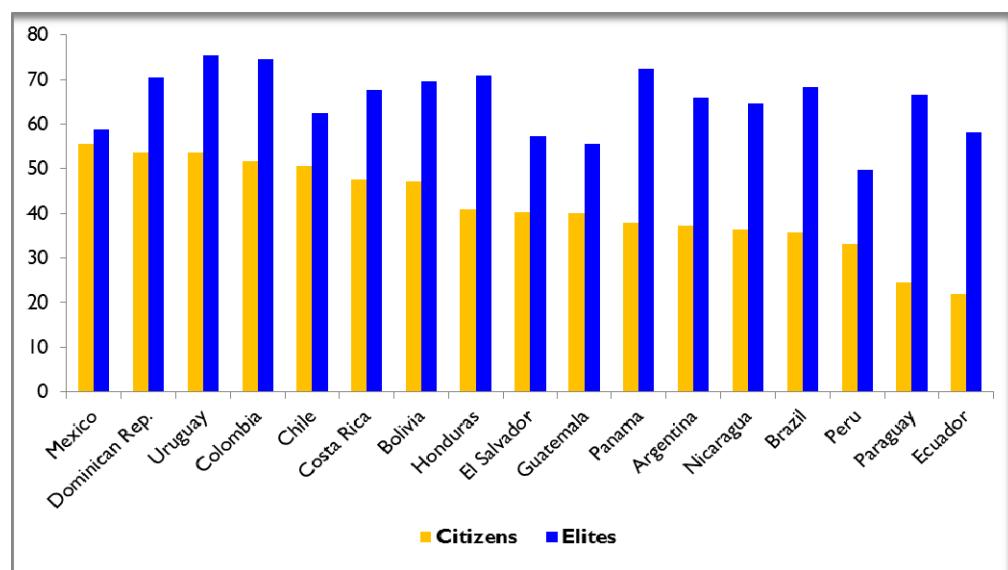
## Trust in basic political institutions

In addition to attitudes towards democracy in general, solid support for the institutions that make up a political system is important.<sup>13</sup> Institutions matter and they are a central element in any democracy since, simply put, they influence “norms, beliefs and actions” and, therefore, determine outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

In this section, we analyze the levels of trust that citizens and their representatives express for each of the principal political institutions. Figures 4 through 6, respectively, show the levels of trust for each of the key institutions of the main branches: legislative, executive and judicial. In addition, Figure 7 demonstrates the degree of trust evoked by political parties, one of the institutions that suffer the greatest disrepute in the region. Finally, Table I captures the levels of trust achieved by other relevant institutions, such as electoral courts, the armed forces, the police, the Catholic Church and the media. Trust in each institution is measured on a scale from 0 to 100 points to facilitate comparisons, with higher scores indicating greater trust.

With respect to trust in the legislature in Latin America (Figure 4), there is a notable discrepancy between the trust that the citizenry and legislators themselves invest in this institution. As might be expected, legislators trust the institution they belong to more than citizens do. The representatives that express greatest trust are those of Uruguay, Colombia, Panama, Honduras and the Dominican Republic, with averages above 70 points. Among citizens, we find the highest levels in Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, the only five countries that exceed an average of 50 points. It is interesting to observe the difference between citizens and elites in Peru, Paraguay and Ecuador, where, in spite of the efforts made in recent years to modify institutions and their performance in these countries, citizens continue to express low levels of trust.

**Figure 4: Trust in the Legislative Branch in Latin America**



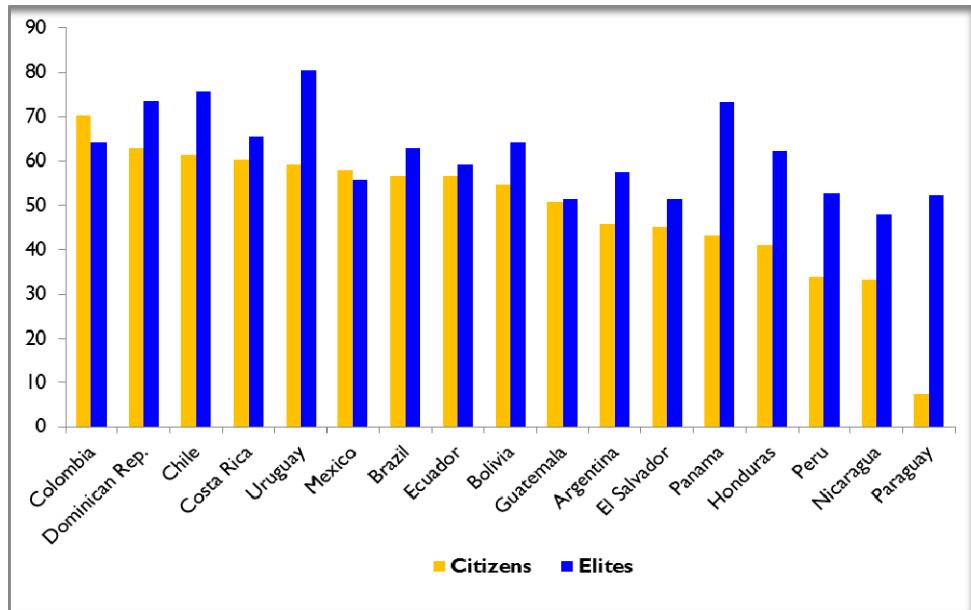
Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

<sup>13</sup> Levi and Stoker (2000)

<sup>14</sup> Przeworski (2004).

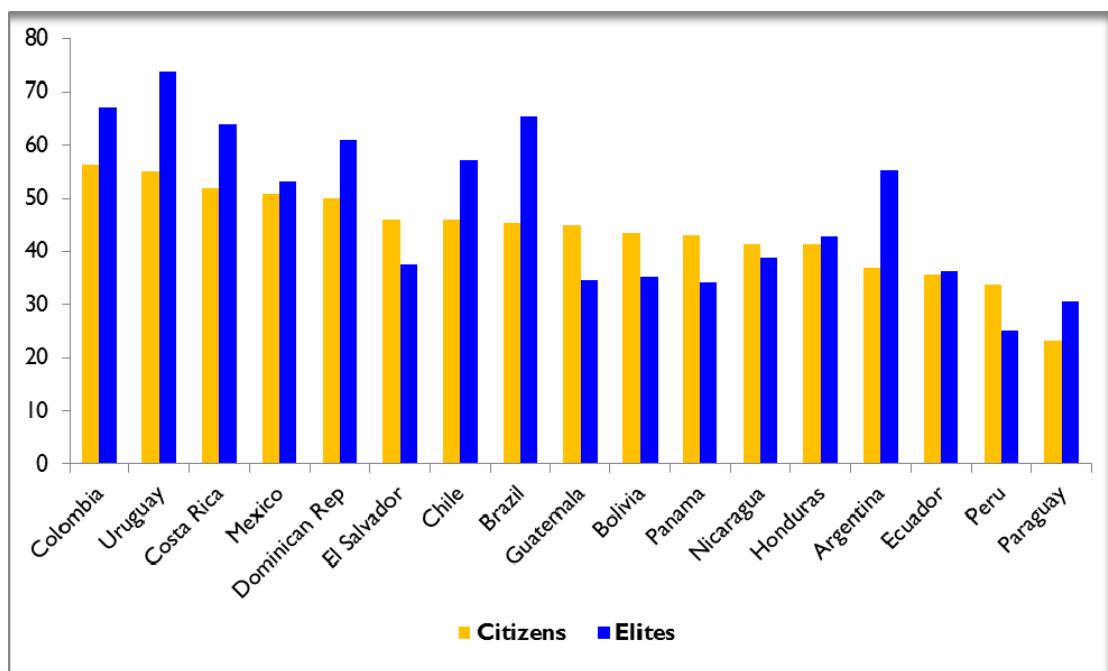
The trust inspired by acting presidents at the moment that the surveys were carried out is relatively low (Figure 5). In this case, the distance between legislators and citizens is not as acute as when considering evaluations of the legislature, except in the case of Paraguay where there is a difference of more than 40 points. This difference is due in large part to the fact that the survey of the citizenry was carried out before the election of President Fernando Lugo, hence their low trust in the president. The countries where both groups expressed the highest levels of trust are Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Chile and Uruguay.

**Figure 5: Trust in the President in Latin America**



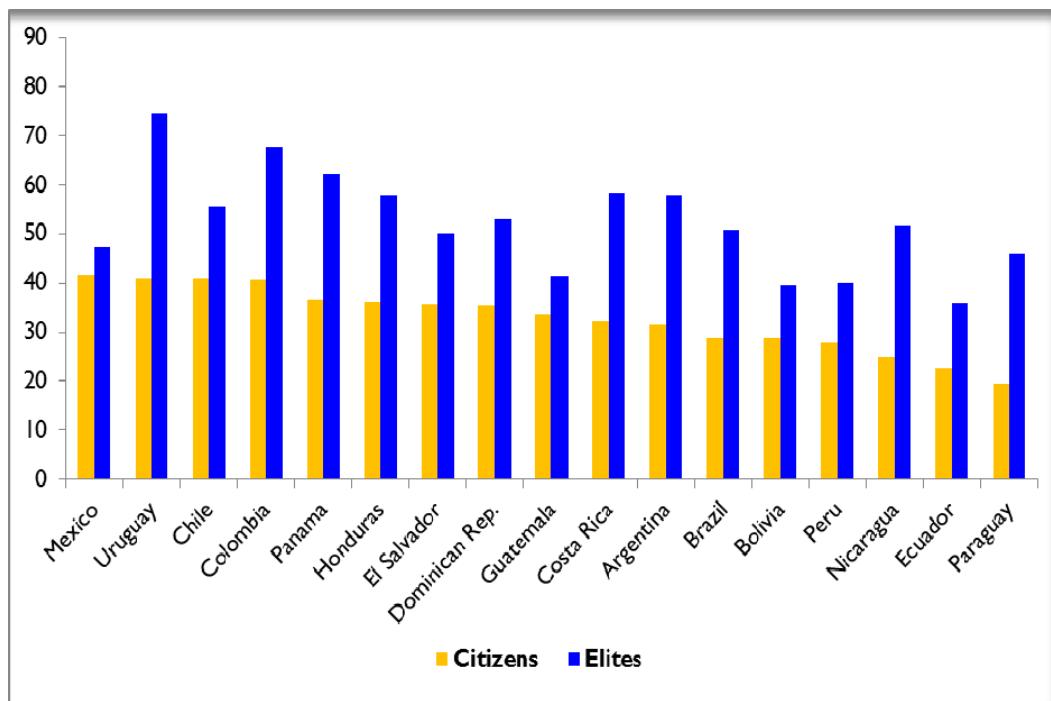
Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

With respect to trust in the judicial system, in contrast to other institutions, in some countries citizens' trust is greater than that of elites (Figure 6). Nevertheless, following the usual pattern, the countries where citizens have greatest trust in the judicial system are also the countries where representatives likewise consider this system to be trustworthy, as is the case in Colombia, Uruguay and Costa Rica. As occurs with other institutions, the same countries appear on the opposite extreme: Paraguay, Peru and Ecuador. In these countries, low levels of trust in the judicial branch coincide with low levels of trust in the legislative branch.

**Figure 6: Trust in the Judicial System**

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

Without a doubt, the institution that exhibits the most worrisome levels of trust is political parties, especially when we consider citizen support (Figure 7). Averages do not exceed 50 points in any country. Mexico, Uruguay, Chile and Colombia are the countries with the highest values, with averages near 40 points. Nicaragua, Ecuador and Paraguay appear on the lower extreme of the trust scale. Looking at the levels of trust expressed by representatives, the outlook is not much more optimistic. Even though elites have higher levels of trust than citizens in all countries, in only three countries do elites' evaluations exceed an average of 60 points.

**Figure 7: Trust in Political Parties in Latin America**

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

If we look at trust in other social and political institutions, a relatively varied scene appears, with citizens and legislative representatives generally trusting the Catholic Church the most (Table I). The regional average of citizen trust in the media is also relatively high (60.9). The Armed Forces reach an average near 50 points in the majority of countries, among the citizenry as well as elites, whereas the police in general receive lower scores.

**Table I: Trust in Institutions in Latin America**

	Electoral Tribunal		Armed Forces		Police		Catholic Church		Media	
	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E	C	E
<b>Argentina</b>	38,0	59,4	36,3	47,9	32,1	44,8	49,6	51,2	54,6	47,9
<b>Bolivia</b>	54,9	61,1	54,9	54,3	40,2	34,4	67,9	60,4	55,9	38,1
<b>Brazil</b>	45,0	49,0	68,4	78,3	48,5	41,4	65,4	69,7	66,1	50,8
<b>Chile</b>	57,2	71,9	65,2	59,6	67,2	65,2	62,8	66,7	63,0	53,0
<b>Colombia</b>	52,8	63,5	65,6	62,5	55,8	60,3	70,1	54,0	65,7	55,3
<b>Costa Rica</b>	62,2	69,0			47,8	55,0	66,0	56,7	64,6	53,8
<b>Dominican Rep.</b>	61,9	46,0	68,1	60,6	46,6	29,4	72,6	66,7	73,1	52,9
<b>Ecuador</b>	38,9	44,7	56,9	56,6	37,6	38,8	67,7	48,2	52,6	41,5
<b>El Salvador</b>	44,6	44,9	56,5	62,5	58,6	48,61	63,6	73,1	55,7	52,1
<b>Guatemala</b>	47,5	62,1	52,9	40,2	40,3	25,4	62,1	58,1	56,2	47,8
<b>Honduras</b>	38,4	39,2	51,9	51,5	44,0	39,9	67,8	71,1	49,6	48,0
<b>Mexico</b>	61,7	54,8	70,8	76,2	43,6	27,2	70,2	51,8	63,1	46,5
<b>Nicaragua</b>	43,8	45,9	61,5	68,1	53,8	70,0	60,5	64,7	65,2	51,2
<b>Panama</b>	51,3	81,4			48,5	63,7	73,9	72,1	61,6	50,5
<b>Paraguay</b>	21,9	41,2	41,5	57,9	29,2	28,7	73,3	68,1	65,9	35,6
<b>Peru</b>	42,4	59,0	52,1	47,2	38,8	39,6	61,2	57,4	53,9	31,5
<b>Uruguay</b>	64,5	74,1	54,4	52,5	54,9	47,1	46,9	47,2	68,2	54,3

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP and PELA.

## Conclusions

This brief report has presented a descriptive view of the democratic situation in Latin America. In general terms, a widespread preference for democracy stands out, on the part of both elites and citizens. Nevertheless, when we observe other dimensions of this concept and measure democratic stability and satisfaction with the way democracy works, we find a much more diverse and less optimistic scene. Furthermore, it seems evident that there is a significant delegitimization of political institutions, which are essential for democracy to fulfill its duties. It is particularly worrisome that this distrust especially affects political parties and the legislative and judicial branches. However, it should be noted that the situation is not homogeneous across the region. There are a number of countries where perceptions are more positive, such as Uruguay, Costa Rica or Chile, which tend to appear on the higher end of the different democratic assessment scales.

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LAPOP Surveys: Technical Information					
	Population	Sample Size	Field Work	Weighted	Estimated Error
Argentina	Citizens older than 18	1,486	January/Feb. 2008	No	± 2.54
Bolivia	Citizens older than 18	3,003	Feb./March 2008	Yes	± 1.79
Brazil	Citizens older than 18	1,497	April/May 2008	No	± 2.53
Chile	Citizens older than 18	1,527	February 2008	No	± 2.51
Colombia	Citizens older than 18	1,503	February 2008	No	± 2.53
Costa Rica	Citizens older than 18	1,500	February 2008	No	± 2.53
Dominican Rep	Citizens older than 18	1,507	March 2008	No	± 2.52
El Salvador	Citizens older than 18	1,549	February 2008	No	± 2.4
Ecuador	Citizens older than 18	3,000	February /March 2008	Yes	± 1.79
Guatemala	Citizens older than 18	1,538	February /March 2008	No	± 2.50
Honduras	Citizens older than 18	1,522	February 2008	No	± 2.51
Mexico	Citizens older than 18	1,560	January/Feb. 2008	No	± 2.5

Nicaragua	Citizens older than 16	1,540	February 2008	No	± 2.5
Panama	Citizens older than 18	1,540	February 2008	No	± 2.5
Paraguay	Citizens older than 18	1,166	February 2008	No	± 2.87
Peru	Citizens older than 18	1,500	February 2008	No	± 2.53
Uruguay	Citizens older than 18	1,500	April/May 2008	No	± 2.53

	PELA surveys: Technical Information				
	Population	Sample Size	Field Work	Weighted	Estimated Error
Argentina	Representatives 2007-2011	110 surveys (43% of the Chamber)	March/June 2008	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 7.59
Bolivia	Representatives 2006-2010	98 surveys (75% of the Chamber)	August/Sept. 2006	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 5.24
Brazil	Representatives 2003-2007	134 surveys (26% of the Congress)	June/Dec. 2005	No	± 7.92
Chile	Representatives 2006-2010	90 surveys (75% of the Chamber)	August/Sept. 2006	No	± 5.52
Colombia	Representatives 2006-2010	107 surveys (64.5% of the Chamber)	August/Sept. 2006	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 5.14
Costa Rica	Representatives 2006-2010	57 surveys (100% of the Assembly)	June 2006	No	± 0.00
Dominican Rep	Representatives 2006-2010	94 surveys (52.8% of the Chamber)	October 2006	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 7.12

El Salvador	Representatives 2006-2009	72 surveys (85% of the Assembly)	August 2006	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 4.61
Ecuador	Representatives 2009-2012	95 surveys (76.7% of the Assembly)	September/Oct. 2009	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 5.49
Guatemala	Representatives 2008-2012	97 surveys (61.4% of the Congress)	April/May 2008	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 6.62
Honduras	Representatives 2006-2010	91 surveys (71.1% of the Congress)	July 2006	No	± 5.78
Mexico	Representatives 2006-2009	128 surveys (25.6% of the Chamber)	September/Dec. 2006	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 7.13
Nicaragua	Representatives 2007-2011	69 surveys (75% of the Assembly)	May/June 2007	No	± 5.89
Panama	Representatives 2004-2009	68 surveys (87.2% of the Chamber)	October 2004	No	± 4.48
Paraguay	Representatives 2003-2008	56 surveys (70.0% of the Chamber)	August/Sept. 2003	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 7.74
Peru	Representatives 2006-2011	96 surveys (80.0% of the Congress)	August/Sept. 2006	No	± 4.70
Uruguay	Representatives 2005-2010	86 surveys (86.9% of the Chamber)	March/April 2005	Yes. According to political parties' size	± 4.03