

SURVEY SAYS...

Latin American Public Opinion Project Collects and

Imagine living in a country where participating in a survey could get you killed.

Not long ago, that was reality in some parts of Central and South America, where dictatorships ruled. Then as democracy spread, so did the ability to express political opinions openly. Today citizens of nearly every country in the Western Hemisphere participate in the AmericasBarometer, a regional survey series conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). LAPOP was founded and is directed by Mitchell Seligson, Centennial Professor of Political Science and professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Science.



Through LAPOP, researchers in North, South and Central America and the Caribbean interview thousands of citizens on topics related to democratic values and citizenship. The survey data are made public and mined for insights into the nature and determinants of public opinion. The information is used by scholars, as well as utilized by those who support democracy and good governance to determine policies and programs

The U.S. Agency for International Development uses LAPOP data, as do the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, United Nations Development Programme and numerous other governments and nongovernmental organizations.

Seligson and his colleagues regularly travel presenting the surveys' results. LAPOP scholars and Vanderbilt graduate students also prepare short, targeted analysis of results, which are released biweekly. These AmericasBarometer Insights Series reports provide tightly focused analyses of specific, timely topics ranging from the role of government in job creation to citizen satisfaction with municipal services and even vigilante justice in Mexico.

The most recent AmericasBarometer wave of surveys was completed in 2010, and is focused on the effects of the world economic crisis on attitudes toward democracy.

"Analysis of this data can provide insight not available from other sources," Seligson says, using the overthrow of the Honduran government by the military in 2009 as an example. "Data collected in 2008 were really leading indicators of that event, as they reflected Hondurans' discontent, which eventually boiled over into the breakdown of constitutional democracy."

Credible and Meticulous

LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys are meticulously developed with input from academics, policymakers and others with a stake in democracy. LAPOP's partners are drawn from universities and think tanks located in each country, and the surveys are translated into respondents' languages—currently 15 different languages.

Expansion in scope and sophistication has been a recent hallmark of LAPOP's AmericasBarometer program. "In 2010, we did surveys in Trinidad/Tobago and in Surinam for the first time," says Elizabeth Zechmeister, associate director of LAPOP and associate professor of political science. In all, the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey included 26 countries, representing the largest coherent public opinion project in this hemisphere.

One recent and novel addition to LAPOP's approach is the use of GPS technology underwritten by the National Science Foundation. It was employed in Chile, which experienced a magnitude 8.8 earthquake just prior to the survey there. The technology will support a study of political opinions in the aftermath of a natural disaster. "The GPS units will allow us to tag interviews based on the street block where they were conducted," Zechmeister says. "We'll be able to create a data set reflecting the individual's distance from the hardest hit areas and then analyze how experiences with the earthquake affect attitudes toward democracy."

LAPOP evolved from the two years Seligson and his wife, Susan Berk-Seligson, associate professor of Spanish, spent with the Peace Corps in Costa Rica in the late '60s.

"For years, it was impossible and dangerous to do surveys in many Central and Latin American countries," says Seligson,

Analyzes Democratic Values across the Americas



JOHN RUSSELL

Seligson and Zechmeister

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recalling hearing of people murdered in Paraguay in retaliation for participating in a survey in the 1960s. “The horrific consequences of dictatorship are clear to me. We have to retain a deep commitment to democratic systems, despite their many flaws.”

In 2004, Seligson moved from the University of Pittsburgh, where LAPOP had been based, to Vanderbilt. Today the program covers every major country in mainland North and South America and the Caribbean, and is spreading. Seligson and his team are currently working with the Vanderbilt Institute for Global Health to develop a survey on health and other topics for Mozambique.

Draw for Young Scholars

Seligson says in addition to their value supporting scholarship and policies focused on democracy, LAPOP and AmericasBarometer are strong recruitment tools for the College of Arts and Science. Not only does the program attract graduate students who want to participate in survey development and implementation, but each AmericasBarometer database provides rich fodder for master’s theses and doctoral dissertations.

Zechmeister uses AmericasBarometer survey data in her undergraduate classes and will teach an honors seminar in 2011 on LAPOP. “We want undergraduates to learn more about how high quality public opinion data is collected and to build skills with respect to its analysis,” Zechmeister says. “This can carry forward to their working lives where public opinion may be an important part of their jobs.” She also sees LAPOP as a means of challenging undergrads to broaden their view of the world.

LAPOP funding comes from research institutions such as Princeton, Notre Dame and Vanderbilt, but the majority of its operating costs come from governmental and international entities including the USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme. Such organizations share LAPOP’s passion for democracy and often rely on its findings to guide policy, programs and funding.

An endowment to provide permanent support for their work is Seligson and Zechmeister’s fondest desire and ongoing goal. The potential for return on investment is direct and clear, they say. “I am committed to a democratic Americas,” Seligson says. “But democracy isn’t an end goal, it’s a process. It’s constantly being challenged and constantly changing and our work demonstrates that. . . . The AmericasBarometer helps policymakers understand the strengths and weaknesses of democracy.”