
The Political Culture of Democracy in El Salvador, 2008

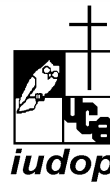
The Impact of Governance

Executive Summary

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Prologue: Background on the Study

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This study makes up part of the AmericasBarometer series of surveys, one of the many and growing activities of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). This project, initiated over two decades ago, is hosted by Vanderbilt University. LAPOP began with the study of democratic values in Costa Rica, a moment in which the majority of Latin American countries was caught in the grip of repressive regimes that prohibited the studies of public opinion (and systematically violated human rights and civil liberties). Today, fortunately, such studies can be carried out openly and freely in almost all of the region's countries. The AmericasBarometer is an attempt by LAPOP to measure values and democratic behavior in the continent, using probabilistic national samples of voting-age adults. In 2004, the first regional round was carried out and eleven countries participated; the second was executed in 2006 and incorporated twenty-two countries. In 2008, the last round was conducted which also spanned twenty-two countries. In El Salvador, however, this effort began in 1991, with the execution of an urban survey about the democratic values of Salvadorians performed by Mitchell Seligson and Ricardo Córdova. This endeavor was repeated again in 1995 and 1999 with national surveys representative of the entire population. Since 1995, the project has relied on the participation of the Dr. Guillermo Manuel Ungo Foundation and since 1999 has been joined by the "José Simeón Cañas" University of Central America's University Institute of Public Opinion. The reports and respective databases are available on the AmericasBarometer webpage: www.AmericasBarometer.org. The U.S. Agency for International Development has provided financial backing for these studies.

We embarked on the AmericasBarometer with the hope that the results would be both of interest and policy relevance to citizens, NGOs, academics, policymakers, and the international aid community. Our aspiration is that this study can be utilized not only to help the advancement of the democratic agenda, but also to serve the academic community that has been involved in working to determine what values most promote stable democracy in Latin America.

The Study in El Salvador

The present report is the result of a research project about Salvadorian political culture carried out by the Dr. Guillermo Manuel Ungo Foundation and the UCA University Institute of Public Opinion, based on a February 2008 public opinion survey under the guidance of Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), supported in great measure by the U.S. Agency for International Development and also by the UNDP and the IDB. This report represents one part of a series of studies on El Salvador, including surveys performed in 1991, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2006, and 2008. The research was carried out with a sample of 1,549 adult Salvadorians representative of the population of El Salvador. This survey was completed with a 95% confidence interval and an error of approximately 2.4%. The survey is part of a larger multinational study of political culture in the Americas, the AmericasBarometer coordinated by LAPOP, and directed by Prof. Mitchell A. Seligson.

Corruption: Effects on Democracy and Challenges

The results of the study indicate that 14.8% of Salvadorians have been victims of acts of corruption or bribery in the past year. The data place El Salvador among countries with medium levels of corruption in comparison to the rest of the countries in the region.

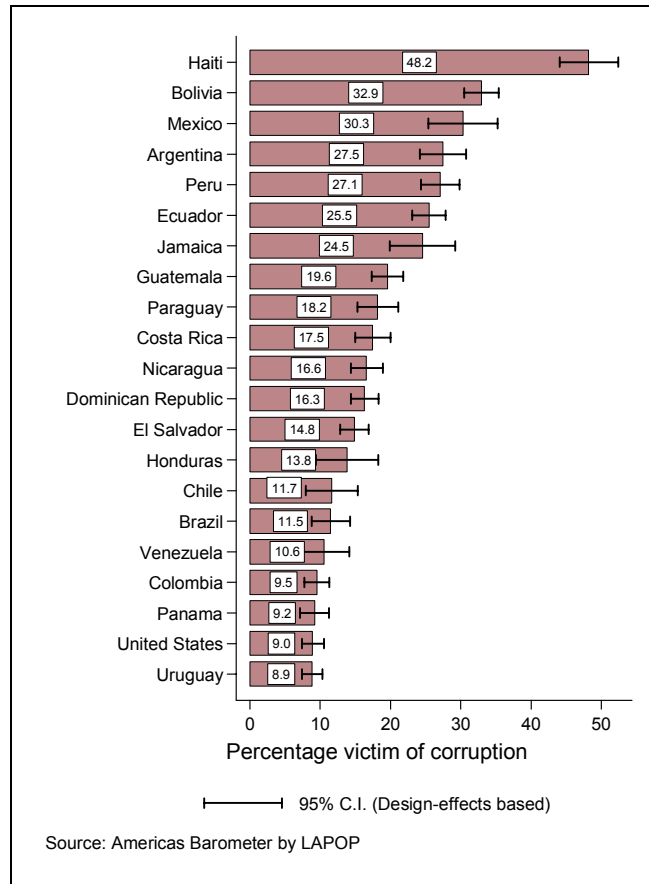


Figure 1. Corruption victimization in comparative perspective, 2008

A comparison of these data with those obtained in the past shows that there have not been substantial changes in terms of incidence of corruption and bribery. The most frequent types of bribery are those that occur at the hands of the police (7.6%), government officials (6.4%), in healthcare (6.3%), and in schools (5.5%).

Nevertheless, when one examines perceptions of corruption, the data indicate that the majority of citizens perceive that corruption is more widespread among public officials. 43.9% of Salvadorians consider corruption very widespread, 30.1% believe that it is “somewhat” widespread, and 26% think that corruption is not widespread at all. Although the level of corruption victimization is not the highest among the region’s countries, the data suggest that the majority of citizens see corruption as being quite widespread.

The probability that one will fall victim to bribes is higher among men, people between the ages of 26 and 45, the more economically affluent, and those who live in big cities and in the San Salvador metropolitan area.

The data show that corruption has a direct impact on trust in institutions and interpersonal trust. People who have been victims of corruption tend to have less trust in

fundamental political institutions and tend to be more distrustful with respect to their own neighbors and fellow citizens as well.

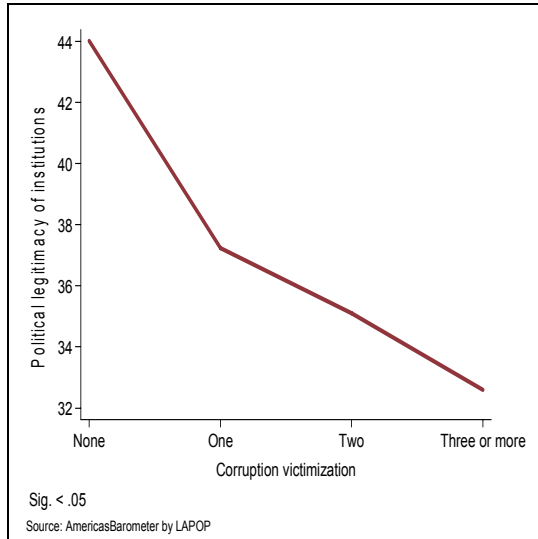


Figure 2. Impact of corruption victimization on legitimacy of institutions, 2008

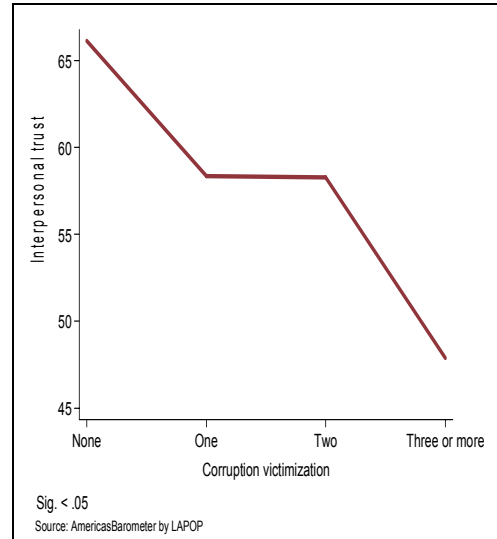


Figure 3. Impact of corruption victimization on interpersonal trust, 2008

Additionally, people who perceive corruption is widespread also tend to show less trust in institutions and in other people. This result is consistent with the results obtained on victimization and suggests that corruption, both objective and perceived, has a powerful impact on the legitimacy of the political system in El Salvador.

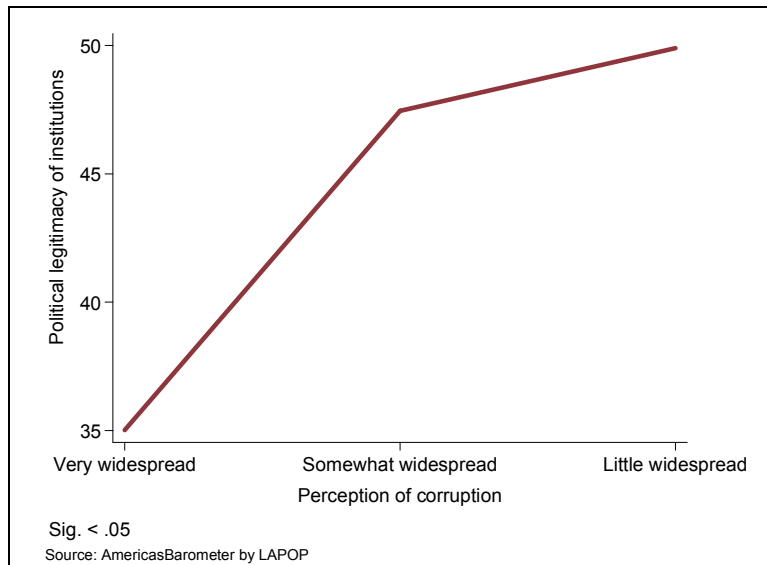


Figure 4. Legitimacy of institutions by perception of corruption, 2008

The report also explores citizen attitudes towards corruption. More than half of those surveyed responded that acts of corruption are not justified, but close to 40% actually justified acts of corruption when obtaining a false document of identification or when using family connections to acquire a job in the public sector.

Crime: Effects on Democracy and Challenges

The data indicate 19% of Salvadorians were victims of a criminal act during the year leading up to the survey. Although these data imply an increase of almost three percentage points with respect to past years, this figure is not statistically significant, leading one to conclude that there has not been a substantial change in levels of common crime victimization. Men, young people, and those who live in the San Salvador metropolitan area show higher levels of probability that they will be victims of crime. The data position El Salvador among the countries that experience medium to high levels of crime victimization in comparison to the rest of the countries in the region.

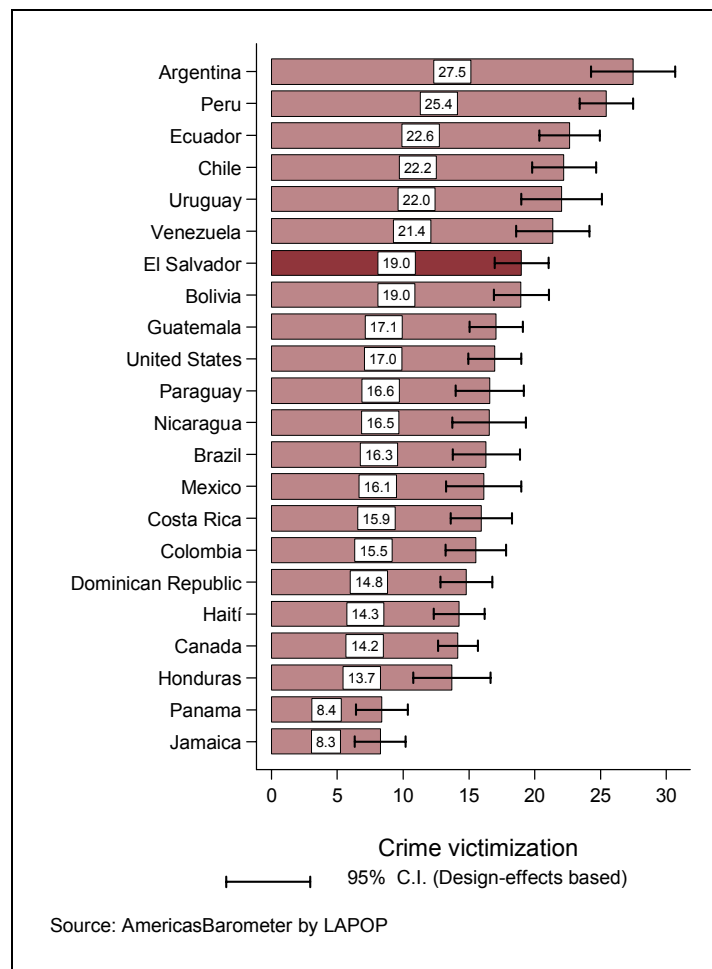


Figure 5. Crime victimization in comparative perspective, 2008

In terms of insecurity because of crime, the data indicate that 41.5% of Salvadorians said they felt unsafe. This locates El Salvador at an intermediate level of insecurity in comparison to the rest of the countries in the region. Nonetheless, the data also indicate a significant reduction in the levels of insecurity in comparison to previous years. In other words, the Salvadorian citizens seem to feel safer in 2008 than they felt in 2004 and 2006. Insecurity seems to be associated with four conditions. First, women tend to feel less safe than men; secondly, having been a victim of violence increases perceptions of insecurity. Two contextual variables show a particularly powerful effect on perception of insecurity: the presence of gangs in the community and the perception that police in that particular locality are involved in crime.

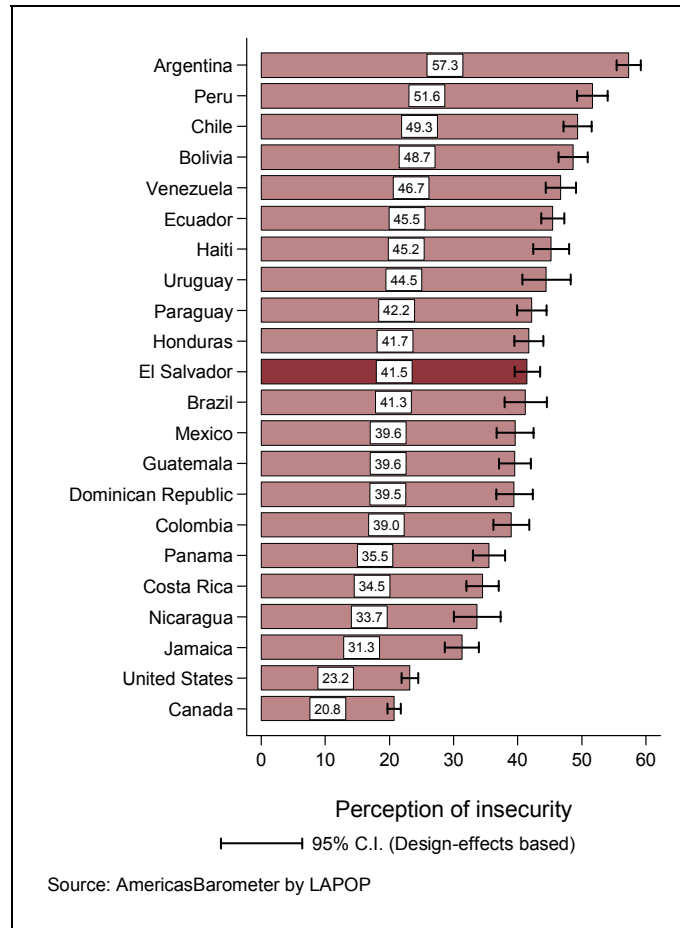


Figure 6. Perception of insecurity in comparative perspective, 2008

Victims of crime show a score of 52.1 on the insecurity scale (a scale from 0-100), in comparison to those that were not victims, who show only a score of 39.

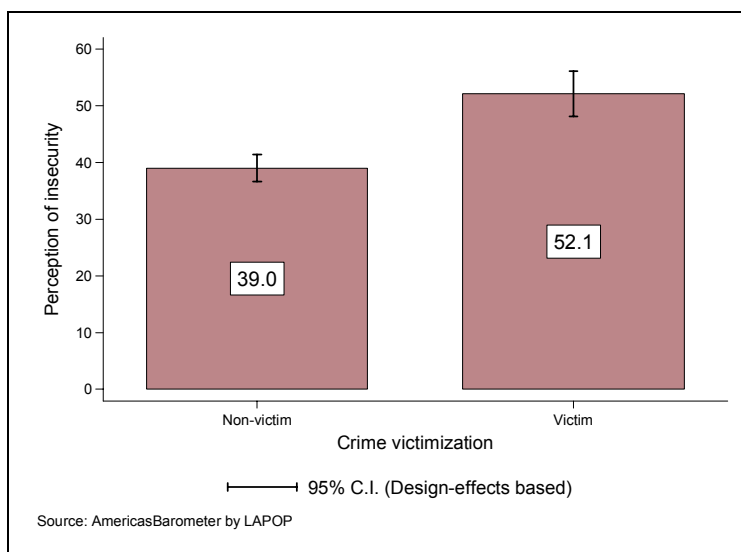


Figure 7. Perception of insecurity by crime victimization, 2008

The data show that the majority of victims of crime in the past year do not report those crimes to authorities. Only 27.2% of people who were victims of a criminal act have come forward to report a crime to public institutions. The belief that reporting a crime will make no difference or might lead to retribution by criminals constitute the two most common reasons that people fail to report crimes. This returns to the trust (or lack thereof) that Salvadorians have in their institutions.

The survey also revealed other particularly worrisome data. Salvadorians who think the police are involved in criminal acts express a higher feeling of insecurity (45.9 on a scale from 0-100), while those that believe that the police protect their communities are lower (36) and those that maintained that the police were not involved in crime but did not protect the community are at an intermediate level (41). The opinions about law enforcement are closely linked with appraisals regarding the legitimacy of the political system: the people who perceive that the police are involved in crime basically have lower levels of trust in national political institutions, not merely the police.

Both victimization and insecurity affect important aspects of the political culture of democracy. People who have been victims of crime and citizen with a heightened sense of insecurity tend to have less trust in institutions and in the people that surround them. More so, people who feel unsafe have less support for democracy as the best form of government.

In the case of legitimacy and institutions, the data indicate that people who have been victims of crime usually have a lower level of trust in political institutions.

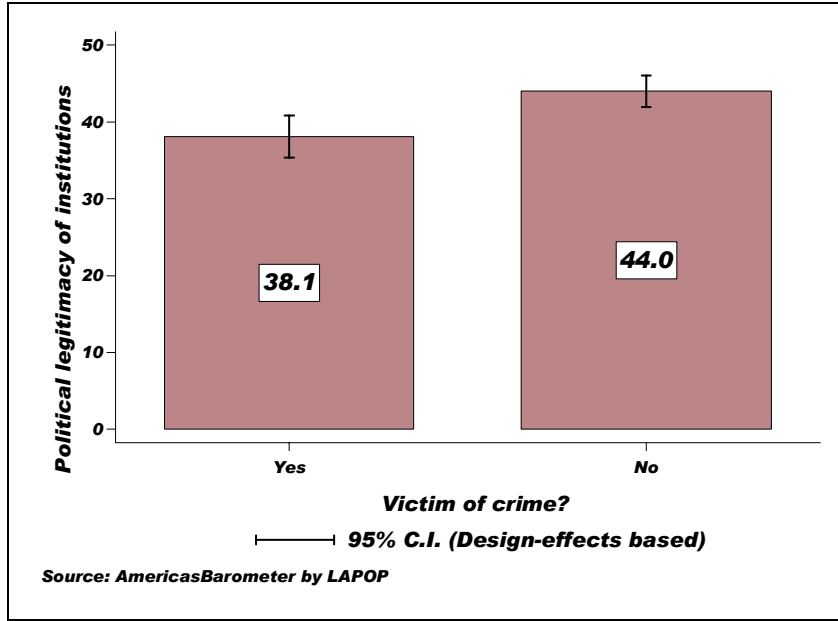


Figure 8. Legitimacy of institutions by crime victimization, 2008

People who feel very unsafe differ a great deal from those who feel safe, both in the measurement of legitimacy and, overall, interpersonal trust. In the case of legitimacy of institutions, the score on the scale (from 0-100) varies from 47 among those that feel very safe and 36.5 among those that feel extremely unsafe.

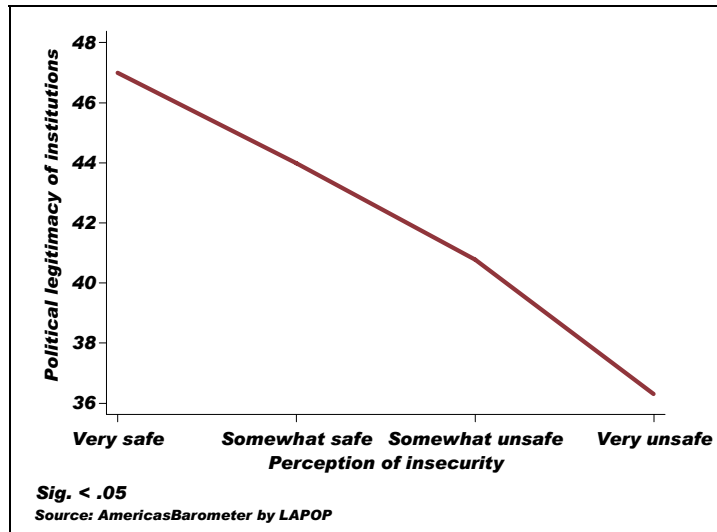


Figure 9. Legitimacy of institutions by perception of insecurity, 2008

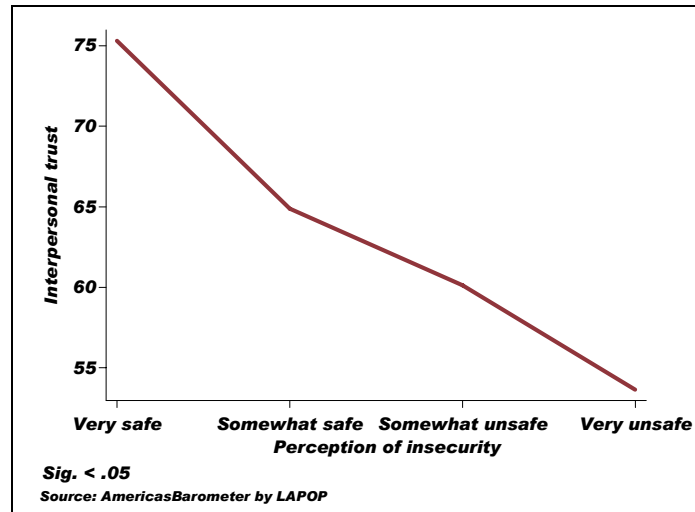


Figure 10. Interpersonal trust by perception of insecurity, 2008

In the case of interpersonal trust, insecurity significantly reduces the attitudes of mutual trust among citizens. In this case, the difference between those who feel very safe and those who feel quite unsafe is more than twenty points: interpersonal trust reduces significantly from 75 points (on a scale of 0-100) among those that feel safe, to 54.5 points among those that feel very unsafe due to criminal violence.

The wave of crime that El Salvador has faced during postwar years is not only affecting the health of the population through increasing mortality by external causes, and not only affecting the possibilities for economic development, diverting a great deal of resources to combat and protect against crime; it is also affecting fundamental aspects of the democratic political culture through diminishing trust in democracy, institutions, and fellow citizens. Supporting and defending a democratic system of government is thus much more difficult in unsafe conditions because citizens stop believing in the advisability of democracy, they stop trusting and turning to the institutions that are fundamental for a functioning democracy, and they even lose faith in their fellow neighbors and citizens at the very moment when they must articulate collective proposals and solutions to resolve these grave problems for society and their own community.

The Performance of Local Governments and their Impact on Democracy

This study identified a close connection between the citizenry and local government, in terms of having solicited help or cooperation from local officials to resolve problems. In 2008, 18.8% solicited help from their municipality, 6.2% from a national government institution, and from 4.7% from representatives. Additionally, one observes (on a scale from 0-100) significant trust in municipal government (57.1) compared to that in national government (46.9). The data position El Salvador among

countries with the highest levels of trust in municipal government in comparison to the rest of the countries in the region.

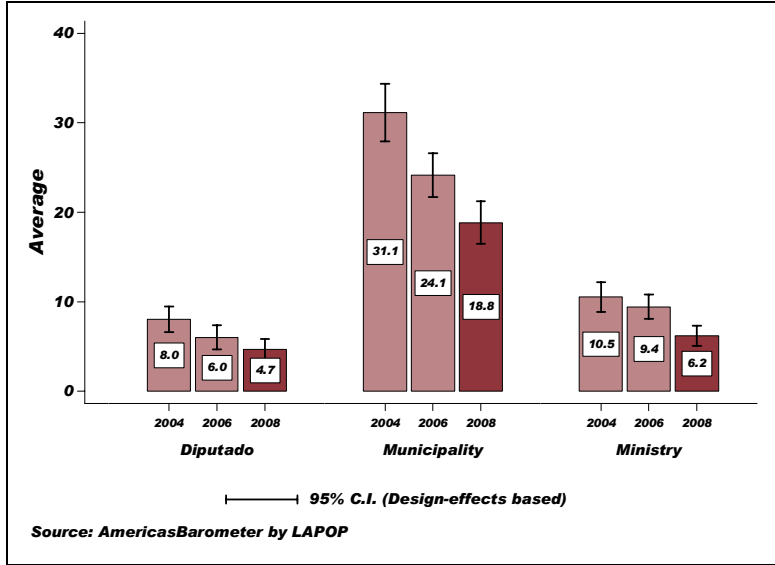


Figure 11. To whom have you requested help or cooperation?

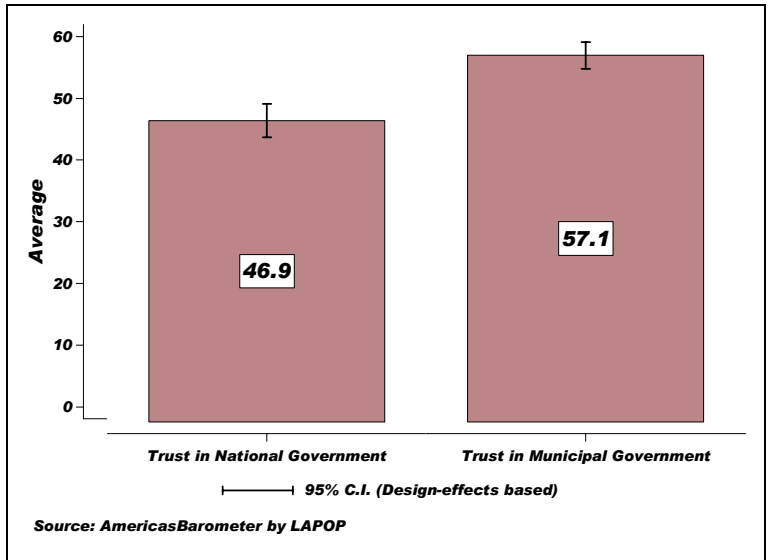


Figure 12. Comparison between trust in municipal government and national government, 2008

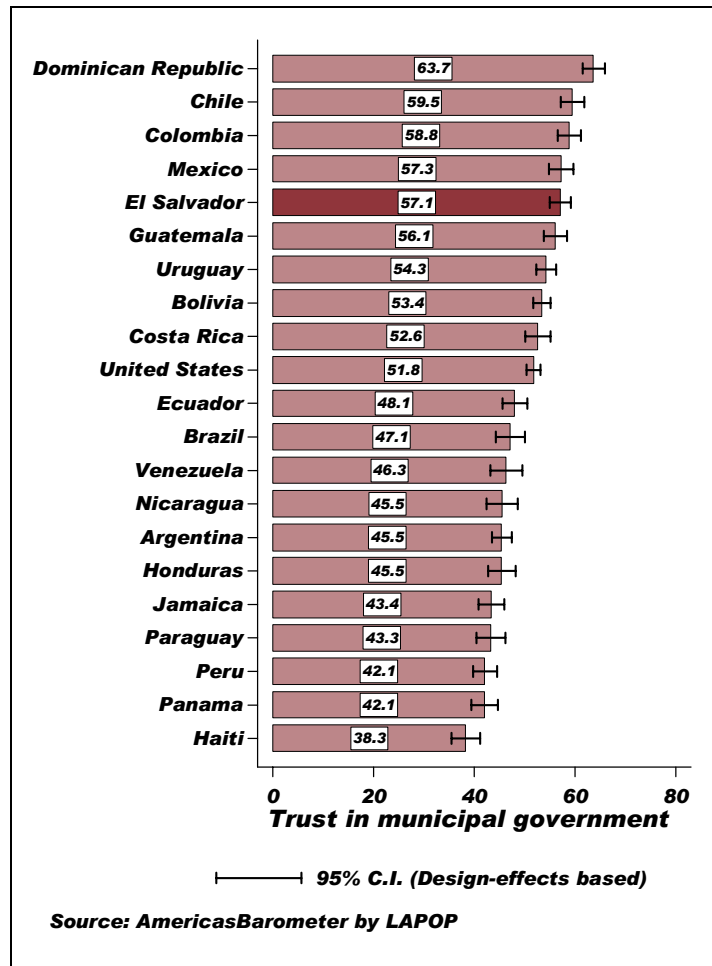


Figure 13. Trust in municipal government in comparative perspective, 2008

According to the opinion of those surveyed, the municipality has best responded to resolve community problems (53.8%), followed by the national government (12.9%), and representatives (2.7%), whereas 29.5% expressed “none of them” and 1.1% “all of them.”

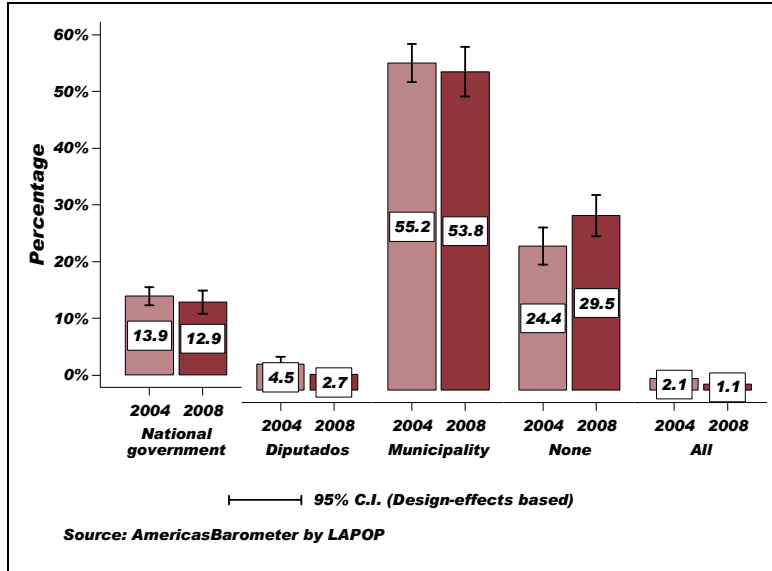


Figure 14. Who has better responded in helping to solve your community problems?

The survey data show relatively low levels of citizen participation in municipal political organizations through two mechanisms: attendance of open town hall meetings or municipal sessions during the last twelve months (12) or by means of a presentation of a request for assistance (15.6). With respect to satisfaction in services provided by municipalities, 4% consider them very good, 32.7% good, 41.4% neither good nor bad, 17.3% bad, and 4.6% very bad. The average satisfaction with municipal services for 2004 (on a 0-100 scale) was 57.3, but has since fallen to 54.5 in 2006 and 53.5 in 2008. Yet, the data position El Salvador among the nations with medium-high levels of satisfaction with municipal services in comparison to the rest of region's countries.

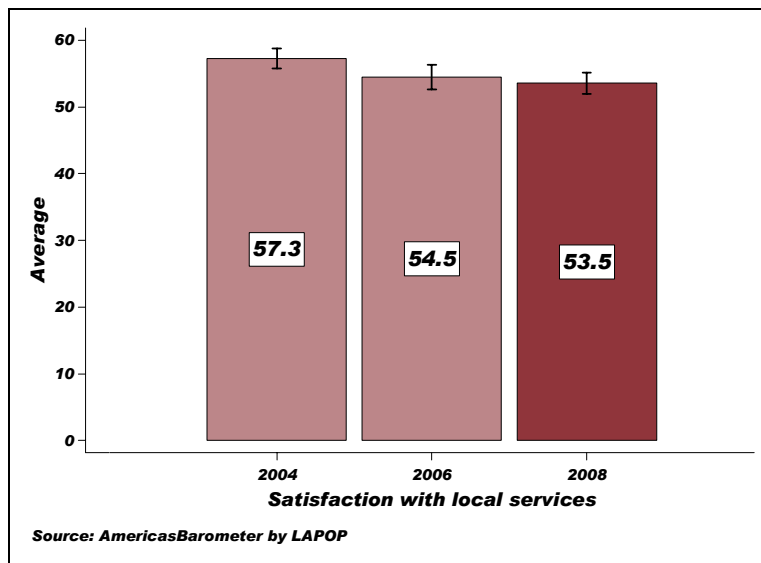


Figure 15. Satisfaction with local services, 2004-2008

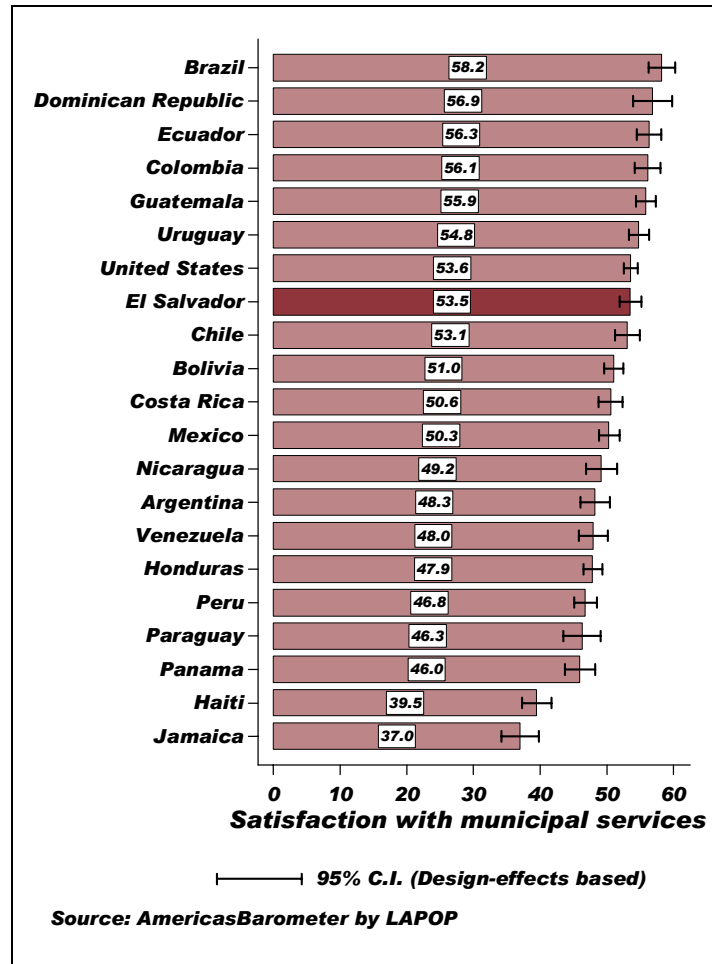


Figure 16. Satisfaction with municipal services in comparative perspective, 2008

Those surveyed express satisfaction with treatment received in mayoralties: 7.6% believe that they have treated very well, 50% well, 30.9% neither well nor poorly, 9.5% poorly, and 1.9% very poorly. The 2008 data show divided opinion with respect to which level of government should be given more resources and responsibilities; 47.2% think the national government should have more resources at its disposal while 46.7% support increased resources and responsibilities for the municipal government; 6.1% prefer that nothing changes.

Thus, the legitimacy of institutions and interpersonal trust are impacted by the satisfaction with municipal services; a higher level of satisfaction corresponds with higher levels of local institutional legitimacy and higher trust among citizens.

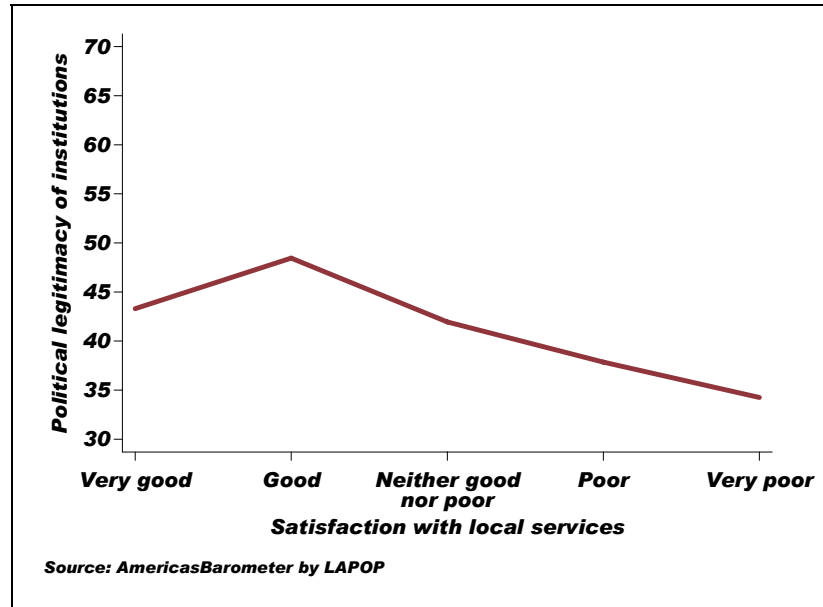


Figure 17. Relationship between satisfaction with local services and legitimacy of institutions

Perceptions of the National Economy and their Impact on Democracy

Almost two-thirds (61.2%) of citizens think that the principal problems of the country are economic: i.e. poverty, unemployment, inflation; one-third (34.2%) mentioned problems with security and crime in general, including gangs and kidnappings. The economy and security – above all, the former – make up 96% of the opinions of Salvadorian citizens regarding the most important problem in society; the rest of problems like basic services, politics, and others are mentioned by no more than 4% of those surveyed.

The performance of the central government in economic matters is critically evaluated by citizens. To be able to compare the opinions of citizens about the performance of government on diverse political and economic aspects, the responses to specific questions were adapted to a scale of 0-100, in which 100 would be the most positive evaluation of the government's management of the fight against poverty and unemployment and a 0 would be the most negative evaluation. On average, Salvadorians evaluated the government's performance on economic tasks with a score of 36. Compared with the results of other countries, this locates El Salvador in a medium-low position in the region. The factors that influence these opinions are education level (the more highly-educated people are more critical of the government's performance) and wealth (those in higher socioeconomic classes tended to be more critical as well); but above all, perceptions of one's personal economy and the national economy affected

perceptions of government performance on economic issues. Citizens who perceived that their own personal economic situation, as well as the state of the national economy, was poor also tended to be more critical with respect to the government’s work in the economic sphere.

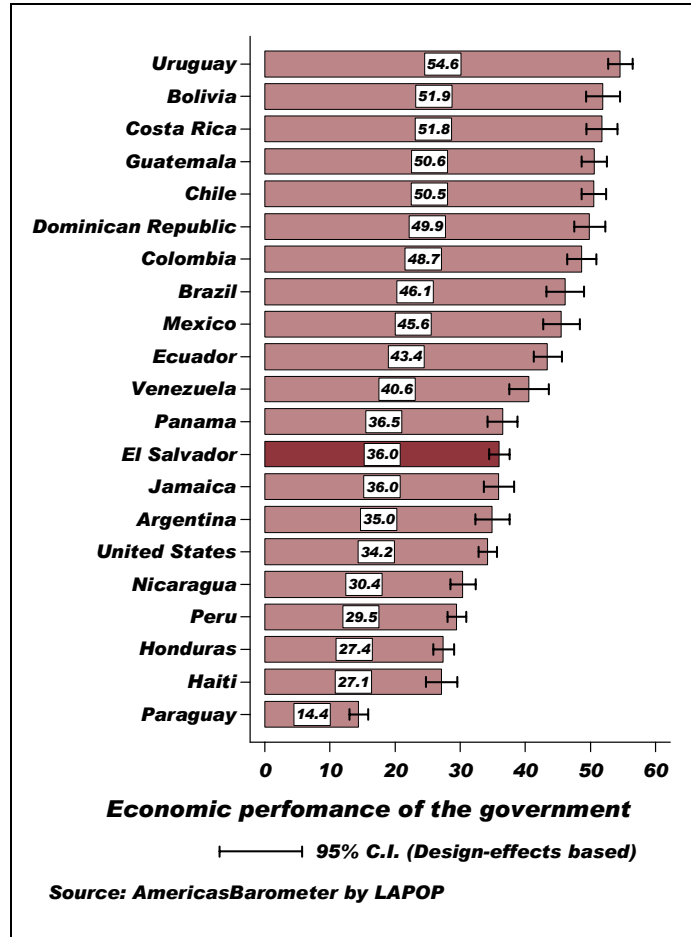


Figure 18. Perception of the economic performance of the government in comparative perspective, 2008

The perception that the government is working insufficiently in the economic area reduces support for the political system and interpersonal trust.

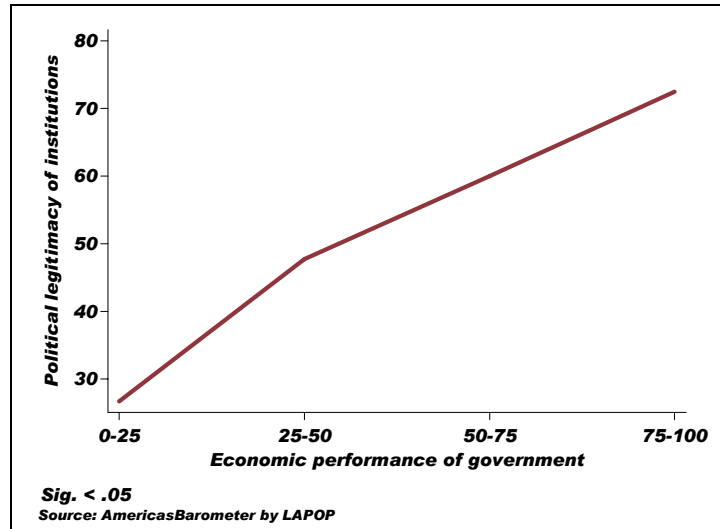


Figure 19. Political legitimacy by economic performance of government, 2008

The Legitimacy of the Political System

The scale of system support measures the level of support that citizens grant their political system, without focusing on the current government. In the political science literature, this is referred to as “diffuse support” or “system support.” This scale has been created from the average of five questions, converted to a range from 0-100 so that the results can be more easily understood. The average obtained for each of the questions was: courts (43.9), basic rights (42.7), pride (47.8), support (56.2), and institutions (68.3), and the scale of support for the system has an average of 51.8.

Examining the evolution of levels of support for the system during the period 2004-2008, one can point out two important traits: a) a decreasing trend for four questions (courts, rights, pride, and support) throughout the time period, and b) while institutions increased from 2004 to 2006, support decreased in the 2008 study. The average system support fell from 59.5 in 2004 to 55.4 in 2006, and dropped again in 2008 to 51.8. El Salvador is situated in a medium position in terms of level of support for the system in comparison to other countries considered in this study.

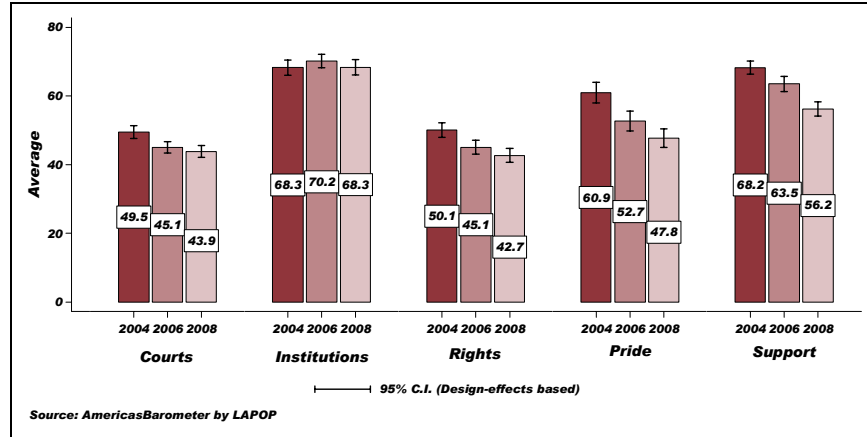


Figure 20. Response average to the questions for support for the system scale, 2004-2008

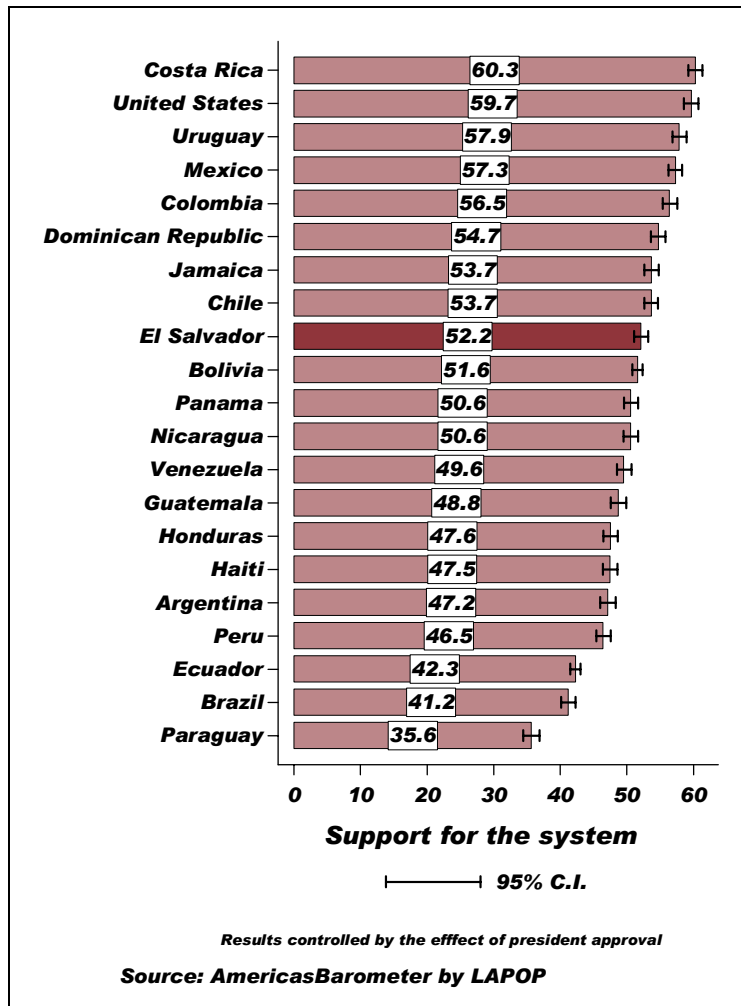


Figure 21. Support for the system in comparative perspective, controlled by the effect of president approval

According to the 2008 survey data, the institution that enjoys the highest level of trust is the Catholic Church (63.6), followed by the Human Rights Ombudsman (63). In the second group one finds the “Procuraduría General de la República” (58.3), the municipalities (57.1) the Armed Forces (56.5) and the media (55.7). In the third group are elections (48.7), the National Civilian Police (48.6), the Attorney General (47.4), the national government (46.9), the justice system (45.9), the Supreme Court (45.7), the president (45.2), the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (44.6), the “Corte de Cuentas” (43.8), and the Legislative Assembly (40.3). At the lowest level were political parties (35.6).

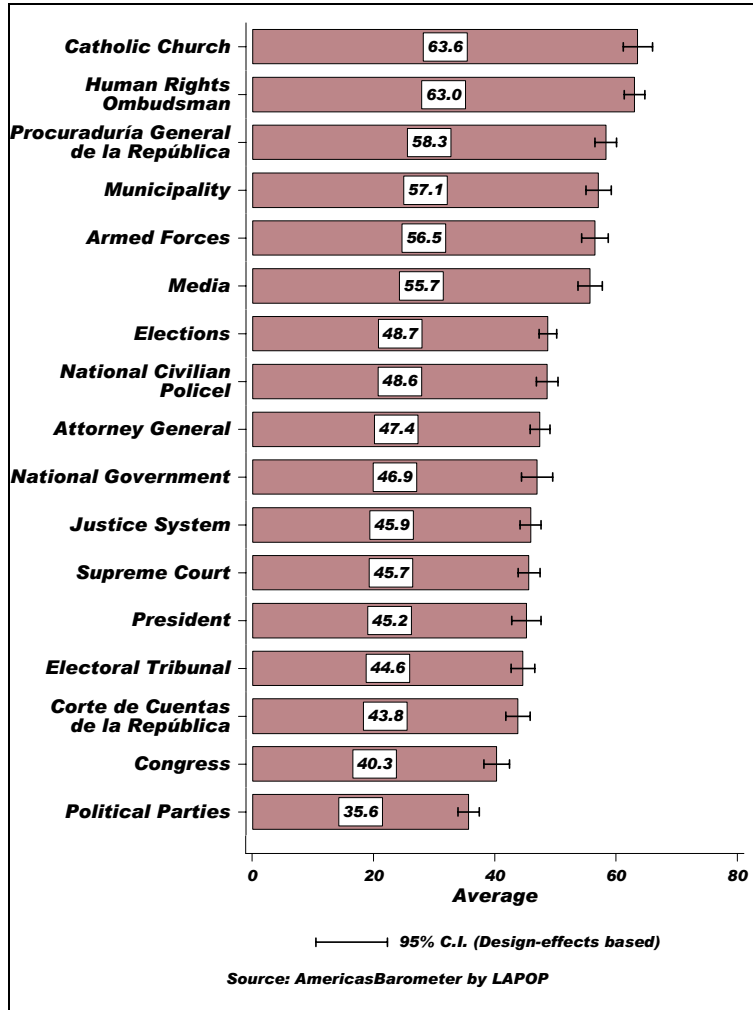


Figure 22. Trust in institutions, 2008

When comparing trust in specific institutions in the 2004, 2006, and 2008 surveys, one observes a general decrease in Salvadorian trust in the various institutions. The reduction in trust between 2004 and 2008 is more significant in the Legislative Assembly (12.2 points), the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (15.3 points), the National Civilian Police (16 points), and with respect to trust in elections (16.4 points).

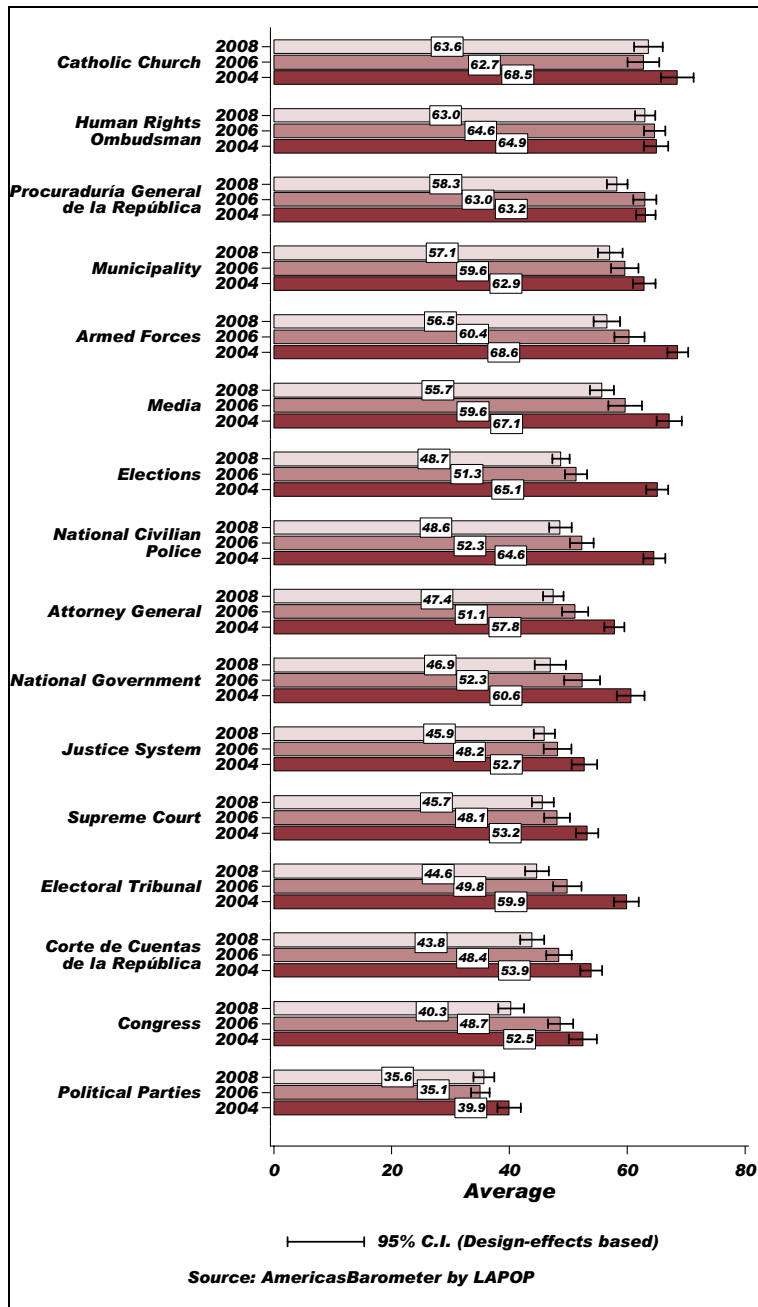


Figure 23. Trust in institutions, 2004-2008

The scale of political tolerance is based on four questions that refer to four basic liberties: the right to vote, the right to peaceful demonstration, the right to run for public office, and freedom of expression. This graph (Figure 18) has been created by the average obtained for the four questions used, and the results were converted to a range from 0-100. The average obtained for each one of the questions was: the right to run for public office (46.8), freedom of expression (49.4), the right to vote (59.9), and peaceful demonstration (60.7), and the political tolerance graph has an average of 54.2.

In general terms, it is clear that in all four questions the average increased between 2004 and 2006, but on three of the questions there was a drop-off in 2008 (peaceful demonstration, right to run for office, and freedom of expression) and only one increase in 2008 (right to vote). The average political tolerance increased from 51.3 in 2004 to 55.8 in 2006, but it later fell to 54.2 in 2008. El Salvador is thus situated in an intermediate position in terms of political tolerance in comparison to other countries considered in this study.

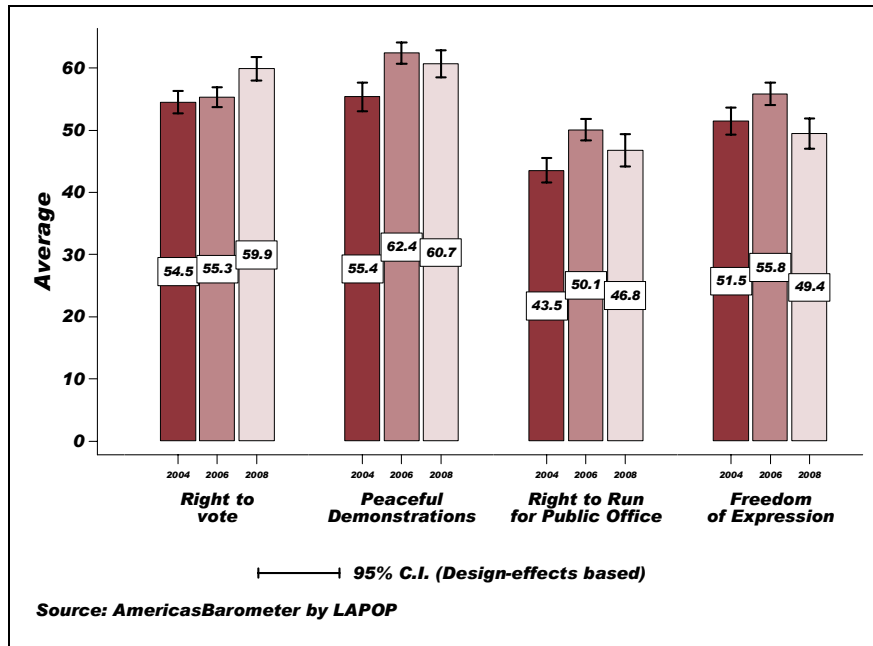


Figure 24. Average responses to the political tolerance scale items

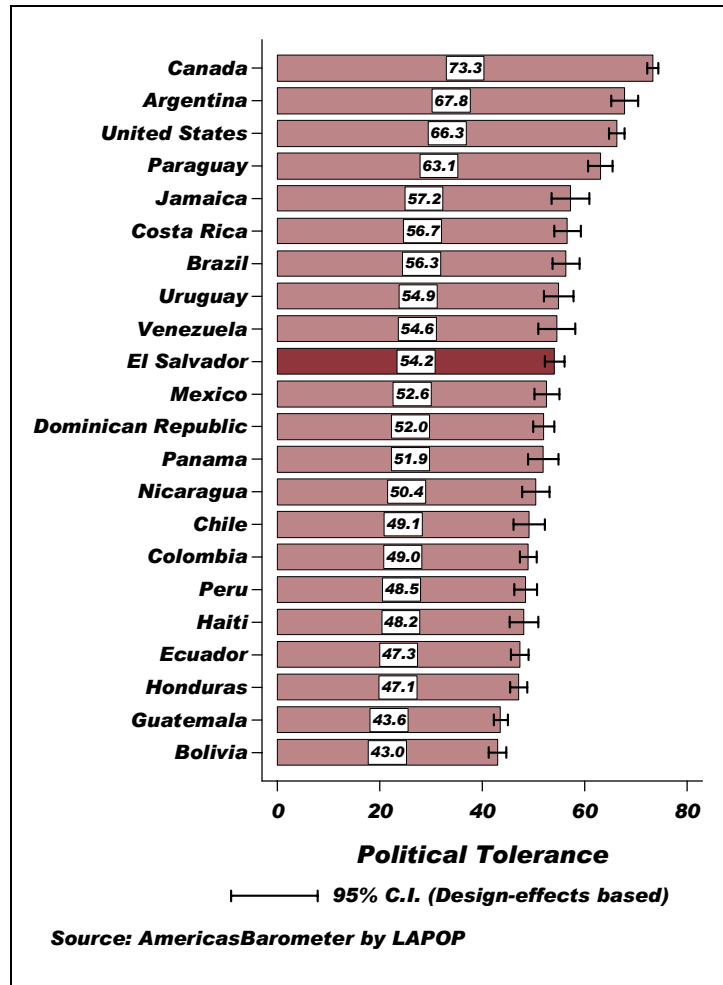


Figure 25. Political tolerance in comparative perspective, 2008

For the analysis of support for stable democracy, we have examined the relationship between the scale for system support and the scale for tolerance, dividing each into high and low levels, creating four possible combinations. The distribution of those surveyed in 2008 in these four boxes is the following: 23% located in the cell for stable democracy, 29% in authoritarian stability, 27% in unstable democracy, and 21% in the box for democracy at risk.

These results can be placed in a historical perspective, due to the fact that one can count the data from the surveys carried out in 2004 and 2006. The “stable democracy” cell remained at 32% in 2004 and 2006, but fell to 23% in 2008. This can be attributed principally to the deterioration of support for the system. One feature identified in the multiple regression analysis is that the assessment of those interviewed with respect to government economic performance is associated with support for stable democracy. The “authoritarian stability” cell fell from 35% in 2004 to 27% in 2006, but increased to 29% in 2008. The “unstable democracy” cell rose from 17% in 2004 to 25% in 2006 and 27%

in 2008. Lastly, the “democracy at risk” cell remained at 16% in 2004 and 2006, but increase to 21% in 2008.

Table 1. Relation between support for the system and tolerance in El Salvador, 2004-2008.

Support for the system	Political tolerance					
	High			Low		
High	Stable democracy			Authoritarian stability		
	2004	2006	2008	2004	2006	2008
	32%	32%	23%	35%	27%	29%
Low	Unstable democracy			Democracy at risk		
	2004	2006	2008	2004	2006	2008
	17%	25%	27%	16%	16%	21%

Evaluations of Democracy

With respect to the assessments of democracy, 10.5% thinks that the country is very democratic, 39.3% somewhat democratic, 39% not very democratic, and 10.8% think the country is not democratic at all. In this study, it has been found that Salvadorians exhibit strong support for democracy as a form of government: 84.5% prefer electoral democracy as opposed to 15.5% that would support strong leader; 78.4% prefer democracy as a form of government, whereas only 9.7% prefer an authoritarian government, and 12% say there is no difference between democratic and authoritarian governments.

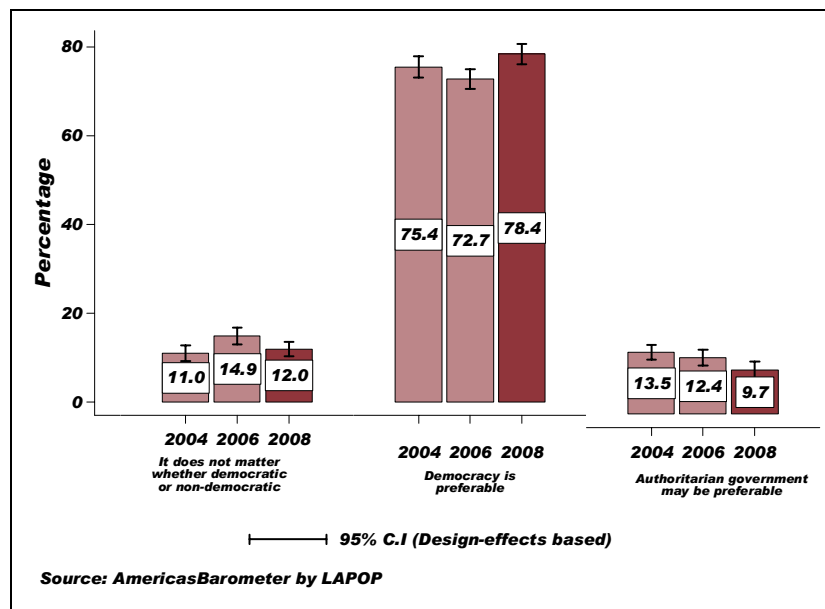


Figure 26. Regime type according and year of survey, 2004-2008

These results become more interesting when one compares them with the measurements from 2004 and 2006. The support for a democratic regime fell from 75.4% in 2004 to 72.7% in 2006, but then increased to 78.4% in 2008. Meanwhile responses of support for authoritarianism and indifference received relatively low percentages: support for an authoritarian government was 13.5% in 2004, 12.4% in 2006, and fell to 9.7% in 2008; the level of indifference went from 11% in 2004 to 14.9% in 2006, then to 12% in 2008.

The data from the study show that the majority of Salvadorians continue supporting electoral democracy: 84.5% believe that electoral democracy is the best option, while only 15.5% prefer a strong leader that need not be elected. In the period 2004-2008 however, there has been a reduction in the level of support for electoral democracy, as support has fallen from 94.5% in 2004 to 87.6% in 2006, and then to 84.5% in 2008.

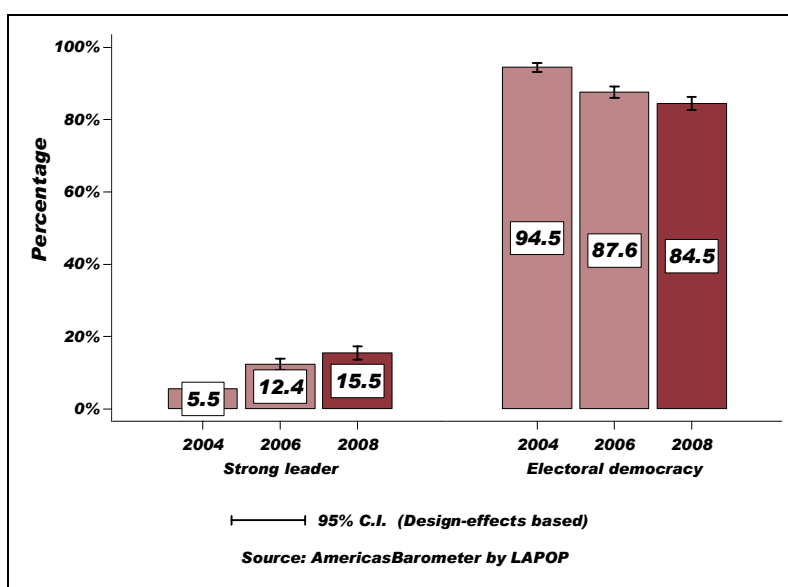


Figure 27. Preference for strong leader or electoral democracy, 2004-2008

Paradoxically, this survey has found important levels of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy: 3.2% feel very satisfied, 39% satisfied, 45.2% unsatisfied, and 12% very unsatisfied with the functioning of democracy. A comparison of the 2004 data shows that the level of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy has grown. The average satisfaction with democracy (on a scale from 0-100) for 2004 was 54.5, which fell to 46.4 in 2006 and 44.5 in 2008.

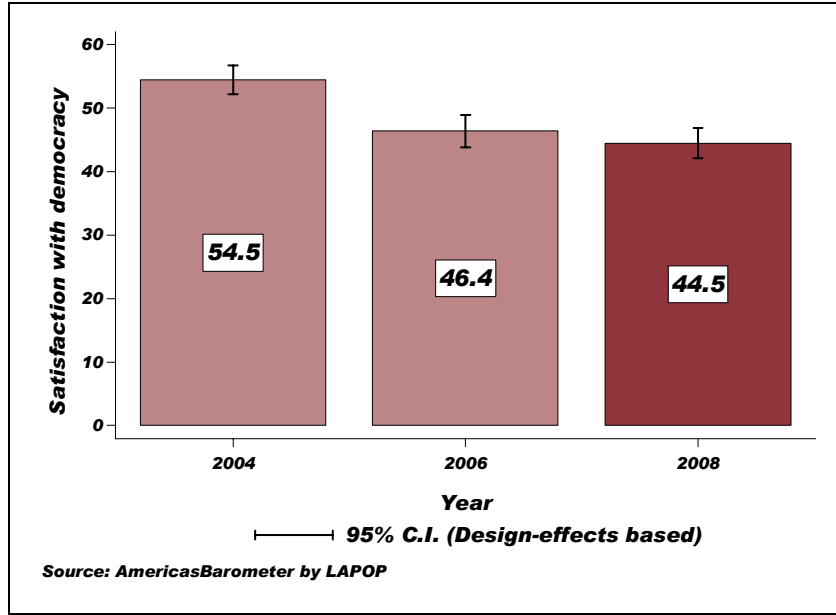


Figure 28. Satisfaction with democracy, 2004-2008

Electoral Behavior and Political Parties

There are six principal determinants of the intention to vote: involvement in the 2004 presidential campaign, sympathy with a particular party, interest in politics, size of the place of residence, age, and education level. This study has identified low levels of citizen trust in political parties; and these have diminished in past years, falling from 39.9 in 2004 to 35.6 in 2008 (on a scale from 0-100).

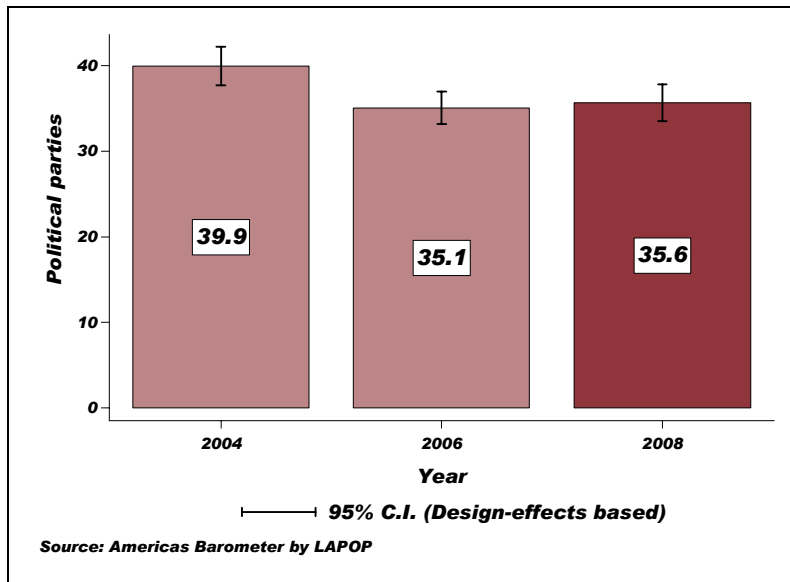


Figure 29. Trust in political parties, 2004-2008

Of those surveyed, 9.1% think that political parties are very democratic in internal organization, 36.8% say they are somewhat democratic, 42.8% say they are not very democratic, and 11.3% say they are not democratic at all. Of those surveyed, 40.9% expressed sympathies for a political party. Of this group, 2.5% expressed that the intensity of this link was very strong, 42.3% strong, 25.1% neither weak nor strong, 6.5% weak, and 1% very weak. In terms of interest in politics, 15.7% expressed a great deal of interest, 13.9% some interest, 39.3% little interest, and 31.1% no interest at all. With respect to political participation by women, 83.8% agreed that women should participate in politics as much as men, 10% maintained that women should only participate when family obligations permitted, and 6.2% expressed that it is not appropriate for women to participate in politics. Trust in elections has diminished in recent years, from an average (on a scale from 0-100) of 65.1 in 2004 to 51.3 in 2006, and now 48.7 in 2008.

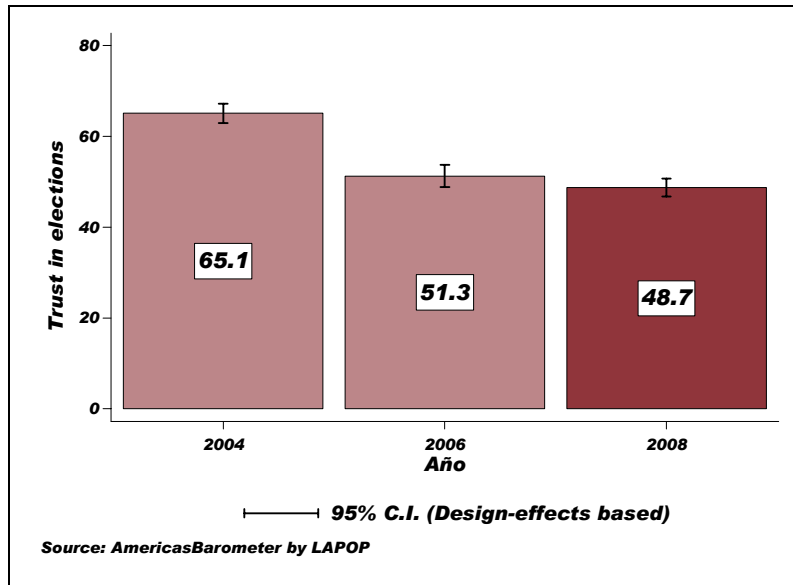


Figure 30. Trust in elections, 2004-2008