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# The Honduran “Catharsis”<sup>1</sup>

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**I**n this *Insights* Series report, we use data from the 2010 AmericasBarometer to assess public opinion among Honduran citizens toward the June 2009 removal and exile of the sitting president, Manuel Zelaya, by the Honduran military. We do so by placing public reactions in the context of a recent study of political legitimacy in Latin America, using the 2004 AmericasBarometer data, by John Booth and Mitchell Seligson, which detected serious warning signs of political instability in Honduras (Booth and Seligson 2009).<sup>2</sup> They

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found that political legitimacy in Honduras was very low compared to legitimacy levels in its neighbors in Central America. The authors examined the proportions of citizens who were “triplely dissatisfied” as a percent of all voting aged citizens versus those who were “triplely satisfied.” The “triplely satisfied” were the citizens who fell *above* the scale midpoint (i.e. “satisfied”) on each of three key dimensions of political legitimacy, namely 1) support for democracy, 2) support for national institutions, and 3) evaluation of the incumbent government’s economic performance. The “triplely dissatisfied” group consisted of those citizens who fell *below* the legitimacy scale midpoints on those same three key dimensions. Booth and Seligson then compared the proportions of triplely dissatisfied versus triplely satisfied for each country, which they argued could demonstrate a proclivity toward political stability or unrest. Their theory did not assert that having dissatisfied citizens was in itself a problem for democracy, since disaffection can be healthy for democracy. Rather they argued that the *balance of dissatisfied to satisfied citizens* is what matters. When times are bad and critics of the system are numerous, a democratic political system also needs supporters who believe in democracy, support the nation’s institutions, and are not overly critical of government economic performance. Absent that key group of supporters, stability can be placed at risk.

Booth and Seligson found that in 2004 for every triplely satisfied citizen Honduras had 1.57 triplely dissatisfied citizens. In contrast, for every triplely dissatisfied Costa Rican there were 12.5 triplely satisfied ones.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in 2004 Honduras had almost 20 times more citizens with multiple low legitimacy attitudes than did Costa Rica at the time. They concluded that this strongly suggested that as early as 2004 Honduras demonstrated “greater risk for unrest, political turmoil, and support for antidemocratic regimes than [did] the other countries based on this

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<sup>3</sup> This is calculated by dividing 1.0 by the .08 ratio, which yields 12.5

indicator” (Booth and Seligson 2009 148). These findings proved to be consistent with others from the same survey. For example, they found that Hondurans justified a hypothetical military coup much more than citizens in any other country they studied. Indeed, 56.2% of the voting aged population would have justified a coup (186).

Seligson and Booth then revisited this issue in a prior *Insights* “Special Report” using the 2008 AmericasBarometer survey and found the situation of multiple dissatisfaction in Honduras much more extreme than in 2004. The proportion of triply dissatisfied Hondurans went from 12% in 2004 to over 31% of the voting-age population in 2008, and there were over six times more triply dissatisfied Hondurans than those who were triply satisfied. Seligson and Booth interpreted this imbalance between the very disgruntled and satisfied citizenries as a very clear warning that Honduras’ risk of political instability had risen sharply from 2004 to 2008.

These survey data from 2008 pointing to growing disaffection among Honduran citizens illuminated the context in which political conflict emerged and boiled over in 2009. As we know, Honduras’ political system experienced a severe political crisis that began as a showdown between the elected president, Manuel Zelaya, and the Honduran Army, courts, and Congress. On June 28, 2009 the military removed Zelaya from office and forcibly exiled him to Costa Rica. The crisis stemmed from a political clash over Zelaya’s attempt to survey Hondurans on support for a referendum on convening a constituent assembly to reform the national constitution. Defying a court order, Congress, the business community and elements in his own party in pursuit of his objectives, Zelaya tried to conduct the referendum. Allegedly acting under orders from the Supreme Court (of dubious constitutionality), the Army entered the president’s private residence on the morning of June 28 and detained him. Rather than bringing President Zelaya to court to stand charges,

however, the Army instead acted in violation of the Honduran Constitution, which explicitly prohibits expatriation, by exiling him to Costa Rica.<sup>4</sup> The National Congress then ratified Zelaya’s removal and installed Roberto Micheletti as interim President.

The events leading up to President Zelaya’s ouster, and those of June 28, 2009 have divided Honduran society and generated intense debate about the constitutionality of Zelaya’s policies and the actions taken by the military, Congress, and the courts. In this *Insights* paper we look at the Honduran public’s reaction to the June 28, 2009 events and their aftermath. The 2010 AmericasBarometer survey in Honduras<sup>5</sup> asked a series of questions related to the political crisis. In this second special *Insights* paper on the Honduran crisis we revisit the findings of Booth and Seligson from 2008 to explore how, and to what extent, the crisis has affected Hondurans’ attitudes toward their political system in 2010.

First, we explore responses to a series of questions that measure attitudes directly related to the political crisis: Did Hondurans in our survey conducted in early 2010 support the ouster of President Zelaya? Did they express support for the policies Zelaya wanted to implement? Did they believe that either president or the Army behaved unconstitutionally?

In response to our first question, we find that 58% of voting age Hondurans *opposed* the

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<sup>4</sup> President Zelaya returned to Honduras clandestinely on September 21, 2009 and stayed at the Brazilian embassy until an agreement and a general amnesty were brokered that led to Zelaya’s departure to the Dominican Republic in January 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The 2010 sample consists of 1,596 interviews selected using multi-stage stratified sampling design to represent nine different geographic regions of Honduras. Random selection proportional to size was used at all stages, except at the household level where quotas for age and gender were used to select the adults to be interviewed. The sample in each stratum closely approximates the underlying population distribution of Honduras. The margin of error for a sample of this size is  $\pm 2.5\%$  at the 95% confidence interval.

removal from office of President Zelaya.<sup>6</sup> We also wanted to know how Hondurans reacted to the Zelaya's exile, an action that is explicitly prohibited by the constitution.<sup>7</sup> Probing more deeply, we found that opposition to the exile was even greater, with 72% of voting aged respondents in the AmericasBarometer 2010 survey expressing *opposition*.

Opponents of President Zelaya and some constitutional scholars have argued that the actions of the military did not in fact constitute a *coup d'état*. President Zelaya's supporters and others say that this was a clear case of an unconstitutional and unjustifiable coup.

How did the average Honduran weigh these two positions? The results of the AmericasBarometer survey for 2010 reveal that a majority of Hondurans believe that Zelaya's removal was indeed a coup. Over 61% said the actions taken by the military on June 28 constituted a *coup d'état*.<sup>8</sup> They held to this position even though large majorities also expressed opposition to Zelaya's intended reforms. Indeed, more than 70% of Hondurans were opposed to his proposed constituent assembly (at least in early 2010) and over 75% were against the "consulta" that Zelaya had wished to carry out. President Zelaya repeatedly and forcefully denied that his reforms would have included presidential reelection.<sup>9</sup> However, the opposition claimed that reelection was the

key constitutional change sought by Zelaya and his supporters. This debate between Zelaya and those who supported his ouster notwithstanding, the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey reveals, however, that almost three quarters of Hondurans *opposed* changing the Honduran constitution to allow for presidential re-election.<sup>10</sup>

### **What happened to the triply dissatisfied citizens?**

The removal of President Zelaya, and the subsequent national elections that took place in November 2009 seem to have been cathartic for the Honduran population in terms of their levels of dissatisfaction with the legitimacy of their political system in the period before the coup. In order to assess the relative weight of the triply dissatisfied versus other citizens, Seligson and Booth (2009) constructed an index of triple dissatisfaction. It gave Hondurans below the scale mean on all three of the regime performance, support for institutions, and support for democratic regime principles legitimacy norms a score of 2, those above the scale mean on all three a score of zero, and those with mixed positions a score of 1. As an analytical tool, the index captured and weighted the proportions of triply dissatisfied, mixed values, and triply satisfied segments of the population. Figure 1 shows that by early 2010 the mean national Honduran score on the triple dissatisfaction index had declined substantially from the peak observed in 2008.<sup>11</sup> It had dropped from its high of 1.3 in 2008 to 1.0 in 2010. This level was still far higher than that found in neighboring Costa Rica, but among

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<sup>6</sup> Respondents were asked: ¿Estuvo usted de acuerdo con la destitución del Presidente Zelaya?

(1) Sí (2) No (88) NS (98) NR, which in English means: "Were you in agreement with the removal from office of President Zelaya?"

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked: ¿Estuvo usted de acuerdo con el envío al exilio del Presidente Zelaya? (1) Sí (2) No (88) NS (98) NR, which in English means, "Were you in agreement with the sending into exile of President Zelaya?"

<sup>8</sup> The question asked was: ¿Considera usted que la destitución del Presidente Zelaya, en Junio del 2009, fue un golpe de estado?(1) Sí (2) No (88) NS (98) NR, which in English reads: "Do you think that the removal from office of President Zelaya, in June, 2009, was a coup d'état?"

<sup>9</sup> Note that the constitution itself absolutely prohibits changing the no-reelection provision, one of the "inviolable" clauses (*artículos péticos*).

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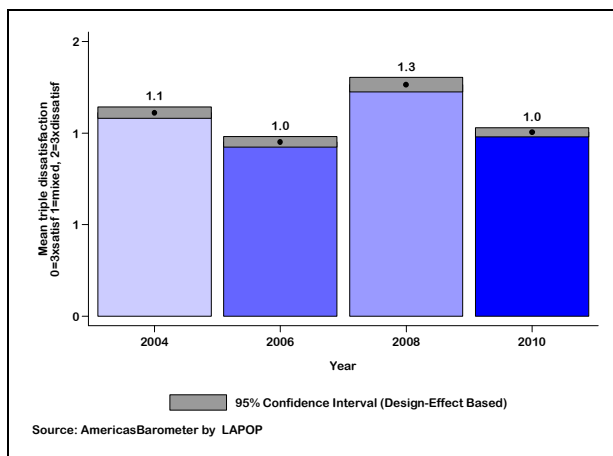
<sup>10</sup> The question read: ¿Está usted de acuerdo con reformar la Constitución para permitir la re-elección presidencial? (1) Sí (2) No (88) NS (98) NR, which in English means: "Are you in agreement to amend the constitution to permit presidential re-elections?"

<sup>11</sup> The survey was conducted in early 2010, seven months after Zelaya's ouster. Just a month before the survey took place was the inauguration of the new president, Porfirio Lobo, who had been chosen in the regularly scheduled presidential election of November 2009.

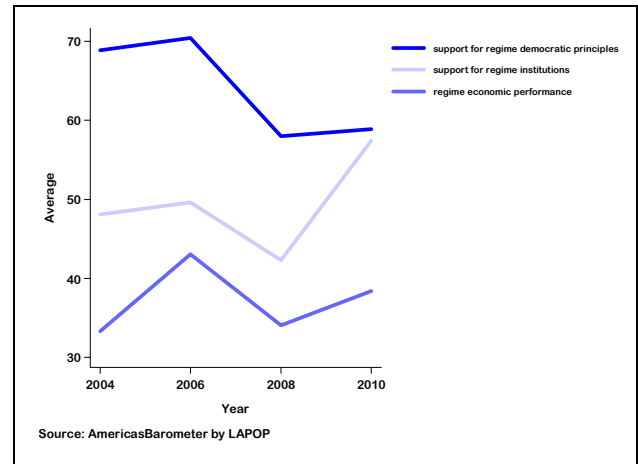
Hondurans it represented a sharp decline from 2008.

But what specifically had changed? Had Hondurans become on average more democratic, more institutionally supportive, or happier about the performance of their administration in handling the economy? Figure 2 breaks down the triple dissatisfaction index into its components and follows them over time. It reveals that discontent was quite widespread in 2008. That year levels of support for regime institutions, support for democratic principles, and evaluation of regime economic performance were at or near their lowest observed levels in this time series. Figure 2 also reveals a recovery of each of these components of regime legitimacy in 2010 after the coup. Support for democratic principles recovered slightly between 2008 and 2010. Support for economic performance, by far the lowest component of triple dissatisfaction, rose modestly from 2008 to 2010 but remained low (not surprisingly, given the global economic slowdown and the particular problems faced by Honduras as foreign assistance and some foreign investment were reduced after the coup). The evaluation that improved the most was support for institutions, which increased roughly 15 scale points from before to after the coup.

**Figure 1.**  
**Mean Levels of Triple Dissatisfaction**



**Figure 2.**  
**Components of the triple dissatisfaction index in Honduras, over time.**



What were the sources of citizen dissatisfaction with government in Honduras? OLS regression analysis indicates that demographics had an evolving impact on the levels of triply dissatisfied respondents over time (see Table 1, where significant relationships are highlighted by shaded boxes). What stands out in this analysis is that respondent wealth (as measured by a multi-item index of wealth in the home) contributed significantly to triple dissatisfaction (the better off were less dissatisfied) in 2004 and 2010, but not in 2006 and 2008. That indicates that rich and poor alike were triply dissatisfied in the years immediately prior to the 2009 coup, while after the coup the rich returned to their position of 2004 being significantly more triply satisfied than other Hondurans.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Other findings from the regression analysis are: First, respondent education levels mattered little. Second, the size of one’s community of residence mattered for triple dissatisfaction in 2004 and 2010, with larger communities likely to have more disgruntled people. In 2006 and 2008, however, triple dissatisfaction was present in all sizes of communities. Finally, sex and age had little to do with shaping triple dissatisfaction over time. This evidence shows that during Zelaya’s administration citizens’ frustrations became generalized by urban geography and wealth prior to the 2009 coup, but afterward returned to prior patterns (urbanites and the poor more triply dissatisfied).

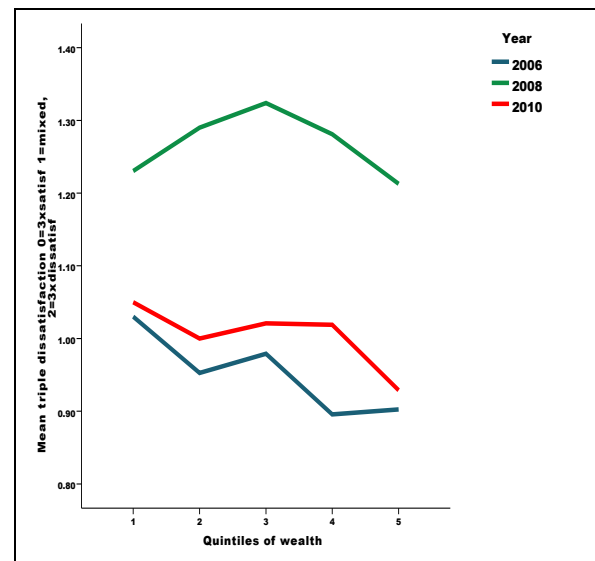
**Table 1.**  
**Predictors of levels of triple dissatisfaction in Honduras, by year**

Variables	T-scores			
	2004	2006	2008	2010
(Constant)	16.05	12.164	13.336	15.061
Wealth	-2.510	-1.899	1.408	-4.012
Age	2.099	.757	-1.825	1.300
Education	-.679	-1.873	-3.206	1.647
Female	.588	1.609	.861	-.428
Size of community of residence	3.151	1.717	-1.387	3.012

Shading indicates statistical significance.

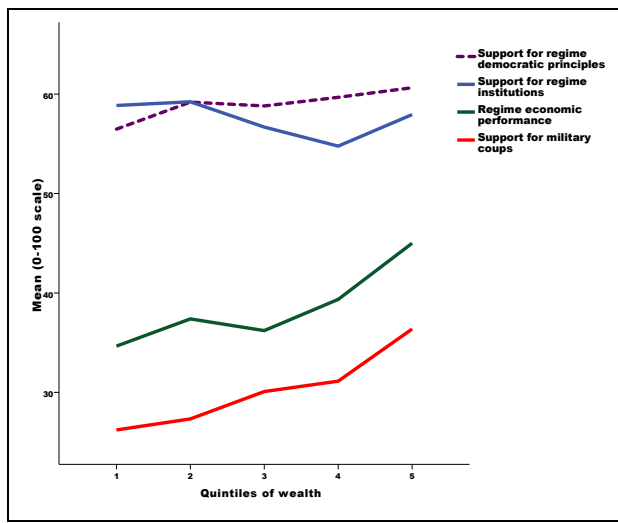
Analyzing further the connection between wealth and the triple dissatisfaction indicator provides evidence of the extent to which “satisfaction” with the Honduran regime is rooted in social class differences. First, Figure 3 clearly reveals the dramatic surge in triple dissatisfaction from 2006 to 2008, followed by an almost as large decline from 2008 to 2010. For 2006 and 2010 mean triple dissatisfaction levels were generally lower as income quintiles rose. For 2008, however, a distinctive curvilinear relationship appears, with lower and higher incomes showing less dissatisfaction than middle income respondents. This reinforces the evidence in Table 1 suggesting a shift in the class basis of dissatisfaction with regime economic performance. Specifically, middle quintile citizens showed much higher triple dissatisfaction than in 2006 or than they would later in 2010. Something clearly happened between 2006 and 2008.

**Figure 3.**  
**Triple dissatisfaction levels by year and levels of wealth**

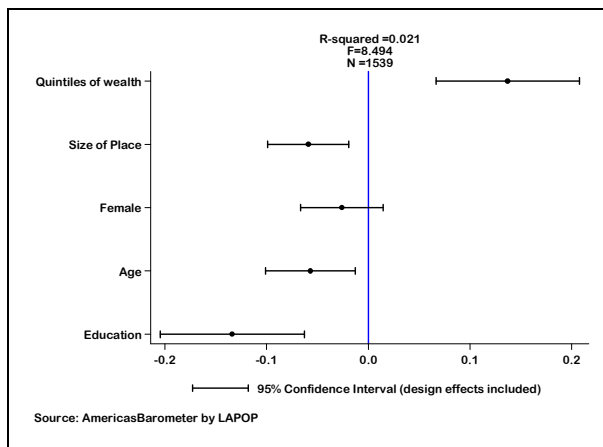


What was the relationship between Hondurans’ economic class position and their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the regime in 2010, some 8 months after the coup? Looking at the three components of the triple dissatisfaction measure, Figure 4 indicates that wealth was not a significant factor explaining two of the components of the triple dissatisfaction variable, namely differences in support for regime democratic principles or regime institutions. However, wealth was significantly related to citizens’ evaluations of regime economic performance. This provides further support for the argument that citizens were reacting to the sharply populist, pro-poor shift in his policies in the second half of his term in office. In 2010, in contrast, with the new administration in power, elites were more supportive of the economic performance of the regime than those in lower wealth quintiles. Elites, however, expressed far more support for coups than Hondurans in lower income quintiles, which suggests that the coup proved satisfactory to the interests of wealthier Hondurans, and reinforced their view that unpopular economic policies can be “cured” by unconstitutional means.

**Figure 4.**  
**Legitimacy norms and coup justification in 2010,**  
**by levels of wealth**



**Figure 5.**  
**Determinants of Support for Coups, 2010**



**What demographic factors determine support for coups?<sup>13</sup>**

The regression analysis shown in Figure 5 indicates that wealth and education were significant determinants of support for coups in 2010. Wealthier Hondurans expressed higher support for coups, while Hondurans with lower levels of education expressed higher support for coups. These results suggest a combination of low education and high wealth may be lethal for democracy in Honduras, and perhaps elsewhere.

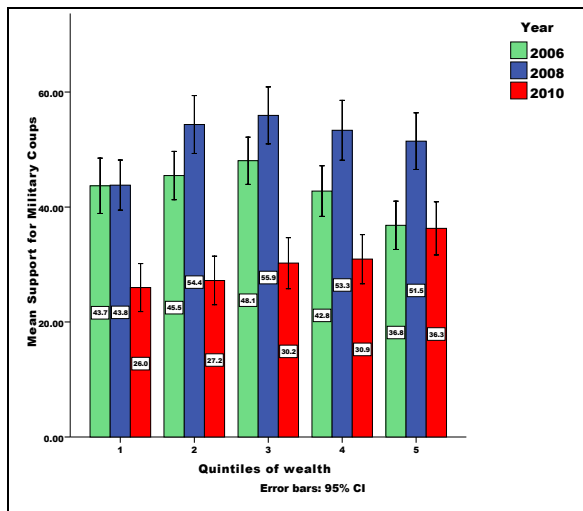
Figure 6 reveals higher support for coups in 2008 (the blue bars) than in 2006 (the green bars), indicating a rise in displeasure with the Zelaya administration. As in Figure 3, we also observe curvilinear effects. In 2006, support for coups was substantially elevated among middle sector respondents, and the pattern was similar in 2008. For 2010 (the red bars), however, we observe a precipitous pattern change -- a great drop in coup justification from 2008 for all wealth quintiles. Other patterns are worth noting. By 2010 the curvilinear patterns of coup justification by wealth level seen in 2006 and 2008 had disappeared. The wealth-coup justification relationship had become linear and positive. In 2010 -- following the coup of 2009 -- support for coups had declined substantially from 2008, from about 51 to 36, for the wealthiest, and from 44 to 23, for the poorest. That still left the wealthiest Hondurans with the highest levels of coup justification and the smallest decline of any quintile from 2008, again suggesting that elite interests may have been far better served by the coup than those of lower strata. There are various ways to interpret this overall decline in coup support. One is that a

<sup>13</sup> Scale composed of the following questions: JC1. When there is high unemployment; JC10. When there is a lot of crime; JC13. When there is a lot of corruption: (1) A military take-over would be justified (2) A military take-over would not be justified. The scale is measured on a 0-100 metric.

“catharsis” or some purging of pent up emotions could indeed have occurred. Another is that Hondurans, upon reflection on the coup’s costs (increased domestic conflict and repression, external opprobrium, economic assistance cuts), had changed their minds about how good an idea a coup might be.

Figure 6 also reveals that everyone except the poorest supported a coup more in 2008 than in 2006. The biggest changes occurred among those in the top quintile or the wealthiest, whose support for coups went from 36.8 in 2006 to 51.5 on the 0-100 scale in 2008. However, every wealth group reduced its coup support between 2008 and 2010. The largest decreases seem to be among the middle classes.

**Figure 6.**  
**Justification of Military Coups by Wealth Quintiles by Year**

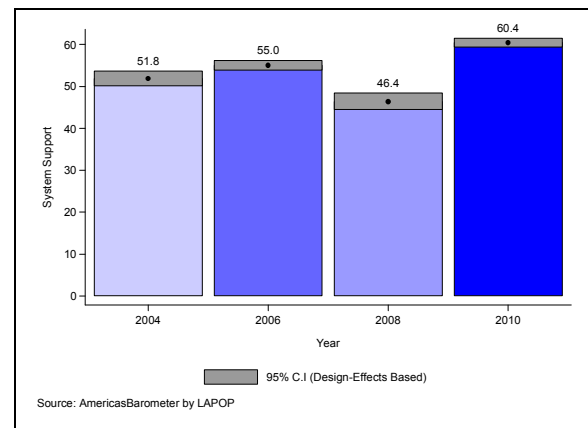


According to the AmericasBarometer data, Hondurans were the most triply dissatisfied citizens in Latin America in 2008. In 2009, they suffered a traumatic political crisis. Evidence from the AmericasBarometer 2010 survey conducted several months after the coup and following the election of a new government in November 2009 indicates that Hondurans’ level of triple dissatisfaction had waned considerably by 2010. Our analysis has shown that elites, defined operationally here as those in the

highest quintile of wealth, were the most triply satisfied in 2010 and, perhaps not coincidentally, the most supportive of military coups.

Finally, the AmericasBarometer 2010 survey, conducted during the honeymoon period a month after the inauguration of the new President, showed a significant increase in support for the political system over 2008. The victory of Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo in the November 2009 presidential elections, along with the departure of Zelaya from Honduras and a general amnesty to those involved on either side of the crisis, seemed to have significantly increased generalized support for the political system, as compared to 2008 when Zelaya was in power and when the prior AmericasBarometer survey had been taken. As shown in Figure 7, the AmericasBarometer measure of system support<sup>14</sup> increased by 14 points from an average of 46.4 in 2008 to 60.4 in 2010.

**Figure 7.**  
**Honduras’ System Support Over Time**



<sup>14</sup> A scale composed of the following questions: **B1.** To what extent do you think the courts in Honduras guarantee a fair trial? **B2.** To what extent do you respect the political institutions of Honduras? **B3.** To what extent do you think that citizens’ basic rights are well protected by the political system of Honduras? **B4.** To what extent do you feel proud of living under the political system of Honduras? **B6.** To what extent do you think that one should support the political system of Honduras?

## Conclusions

After the tumultuous events of 2009, most Hondurans perceived the events as a *coup d'état*, and opposed both the coup and President Zelaya's exile from Honduras. However, large majorities nevertheless reported opposing Zelaya's attempted survey and his proposal for a constituent assembly.

Triple dissatisfaction was very high among Hondurans in 2008 but had declined significantly by 2010. Between 2006 and 2008 all of the component legitimacy measures making up the triple dissatisfaction index declined. Triple dissatisfaction's distribution by economic class changed dramatically in 2006 and 2008. In 2004 triple dissatisfaction was highest among the poor and lowest among the wealthy, and highest among rural and small-town dwellers while lower among urbanites. In 2006 and 2008 triple dissatisfaction became broadly generalized across wealth levels and urban settings. This pattern, however, reverted to the earlier pattern in 2010. Something very similar happened with justification of coups over time. So, irrespective of the predominant role of national elites as alleged architects of the coup,

Hondurans across the social spectrum became broadly discontented in 2006 and 2008. This likely created an atmosphere in which top political elites would consider that undertaking a coup would be much easier.

In the wake of the coup, support for institutions rose sharply and evaluation of economic performance increased as well. Hondurans' support for democratic regime principles, however, by 2010 had recovered very little of the ground lost between 2006 and 2008. This indicates that support for basic democratic principles remain at the levels prior to the coup, thus representing a continued potential threat to stable democratic governance. Between 2008 and 2010 support for coups among the wealthiest cohort of Hondurans declined the least of any economic group. And in 2010 the

wealthiest cohort remained the most coup-justifying segment of the Honduran citizenry.

Democratic consolidation is often described as a condition that prevails once citizens and elites of a nation have a generalized embrace of democratic norms and a commitment to constitutional democratic rules as the "only game in town." Whatever cathartic effect the 2009 coup may have had, or whatever second thoughts citizens may have had about what took place, coup justification remained highest among the best-off Hondurans in 2010 in the wake of months of political trauma, protest, violence, repression and international condemnation. The findings of the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey in Honduras offer little evidence that Hondurans, and especially Honduran elites, view democracy as "the only game in town."

## References

John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, *The Legitimacy Puzzle in Latin America: Political Support and Democracy in Eight Nations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.