

Democracy and Governance in the Americas: Key Findings from LAPOP's *AmericasBarometer*

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Democracy is on the defensive in the Americas and around the world. Among its constituents, skepticism is brewing over the extent to which democracy can succeed in delivering on citizens' expectations and improving the quality of their daily lives. The 2016/17 AmericasBarometer taps into this simmering frustration and permits it to be studied in comparative perspective across population subgroups, countries, and time. It also documents some notable signs of resilience. In this vein, the survey reveals important nuances in challenges to democratic governance across a heterogeneous region.

In a newly released report, *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016/17: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Governance*, we examine public support for the institutions at the core of democracy, the extent to which citizens feel their countries are succeeding in supplying the basic liberties required of democratic governance, citizens' experiences and evaluations regarding corruption and crime, their involvement with and assessments of local politics, and their general democratic orientations. To do so, we make use of data from the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer, often in combination with data from prior

rounds of the study. The report is available on LAPOP's website: www.lapopsurveys.org. In this *Topical Brief*, we present a summary of the key findings from the report.

Support for Democracy

To begin, Chapter 1 of the report finds a significant decline in support for democracy and its core principles and institutions. As Figure 1 shows, in the Latin America and Caribbean region, support for democracy decreased by almost 9 percentage points between 2014 and 2016/17.

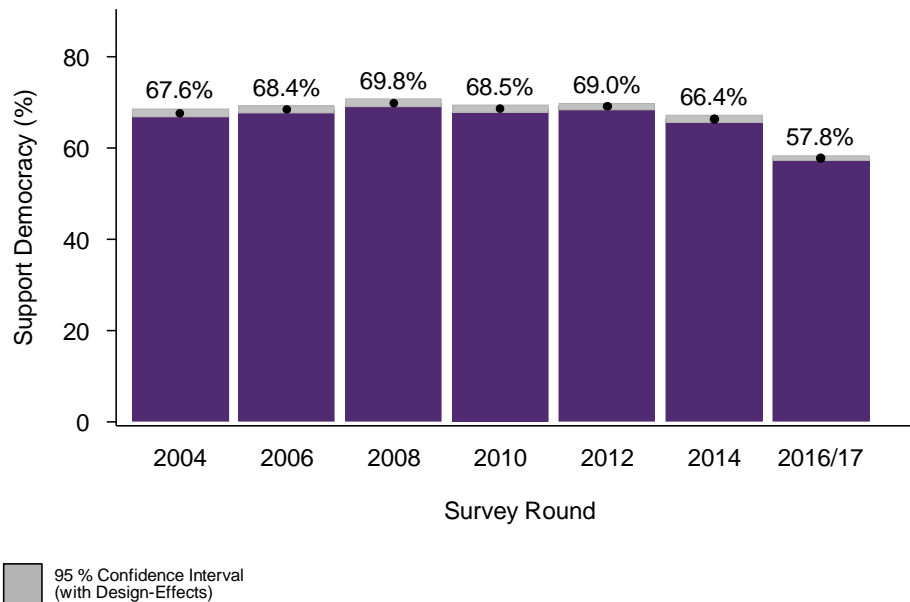
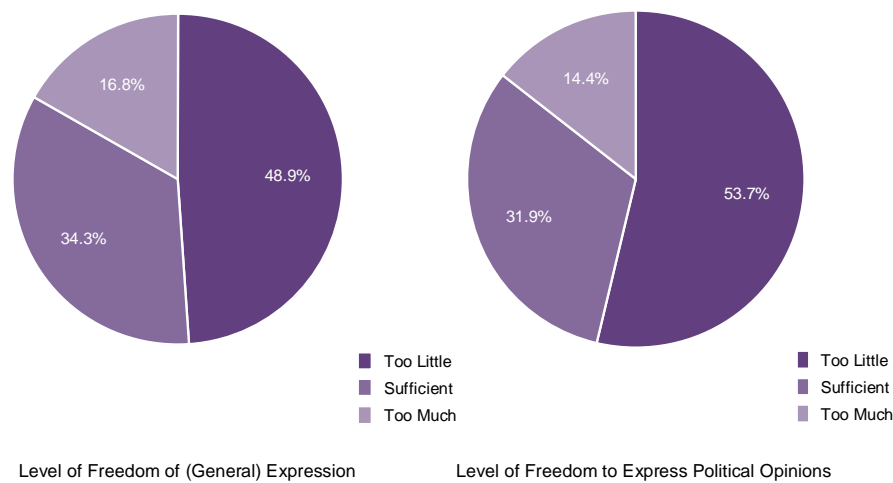


Figure 1. Support for Democracy over Time

Likewise, in 2016/17 compared to 2014, the average citizen is more likely to support extralegal actions (i.e., coups) to remove elected leaders from office. These shifts in support for the most basic premises of modern democracy – that the system in the abstract is ideal and that elections are the only legitimate way to alternate power – are found alongside low levels of trust in elections and declining confidence in political parties.

The Supply of Liberties

Basic liberties, such as freedom of the media, expression, and fundamental human rights, are critical to the public's engagement and inclusion in the democratic political system. Chapter 2 focuses on the degree to which the public perceives these basic freedoms are restricted. Across the Americas as a whole, the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer finds that 44% of the mass public believes there is very little freedom of the press. Likewise, as Figure 2 shows, nearly half of the public (48.9%) perceives that there is very little freedom of expression, and a higher proportion (53.7%) feels there is very little freedom to express political opinions without fear.



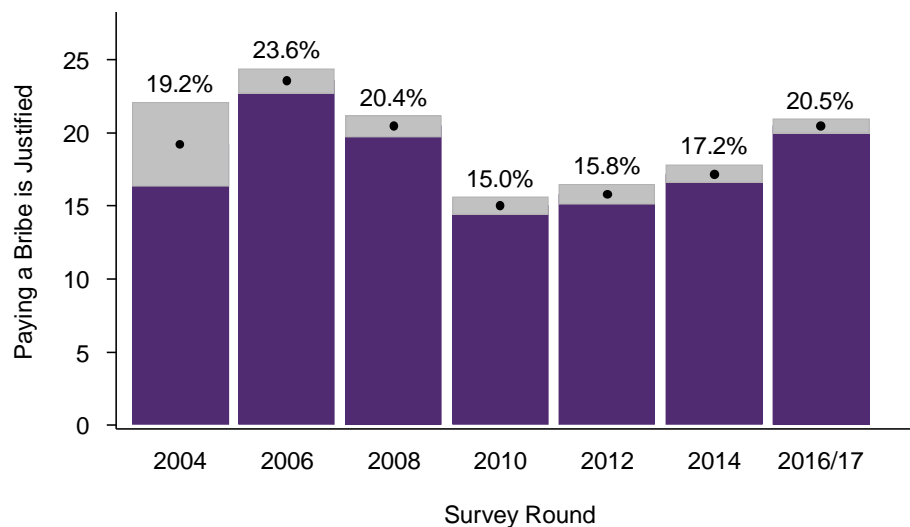
Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2016/17, v07132017

Figure 2. Perceptions of Basic Liberties Provision in the Americas

Reports of deficits in the supply of basic liberties are even greater when we focus on human rights protection: across the Americas on average nearly two-thirds of the public states that human rights are insufficiently protected in their country. Thus, while democracy promises a set of basic freedoms, a large proportion of the public in the Americas perceives that it is falling short in this regard.

Corruption

Democratic governance and public confidence in democratic institutions are stronger when public officials and politicians refrain from corrupt behaviors. Chapter 3 documents that, in the Latin America and Caribbean region, one in five adults, on average, is asked to pay at least one bribe each year. This proportion has not changed much over time, suggesting that, once it takes root, corruption is difficult to eradicate from a political system. When evaluating political leadership with respect to corruption, we see widespread cynicism: across the Americas, most individuals believe that a significant number of politicians are corrupt. By calling out corruption, the public has the potential to provide an important check on corruption's pervasiveness within the system. In fact, on average across the region, only one in five individuals believes that paying a bribe is a justifiable act.



95 % Confidence Interval
(with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2004-2016/17; v07132017

Figure 3. Tolerance of Corruption over Time

Yet, as Figure 3 shows, this tendency to tolerate corruption is on the rise. Experiences with corruption may fuel discontent, but they ultimately produce a public that is more apathetic on this issue: as Chapter 3 reports, those who report experiences with bribery and perceive more political corruption are also more likely to find it justifiable.

Crime and Insecurity

A pressing problem in the region is crime and insecurity. The fourth chapter documents that it is increasing in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Considering the Americas as a whole, the AmericasBarometer reveals a rise in the average regional crime victimization rate and in reports of insecurity; on the former, see Figure 4.

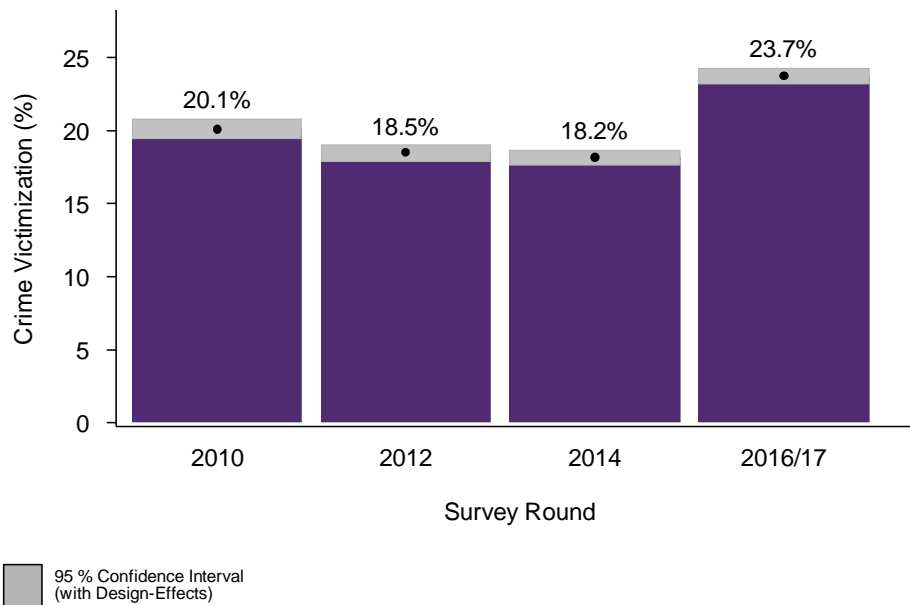
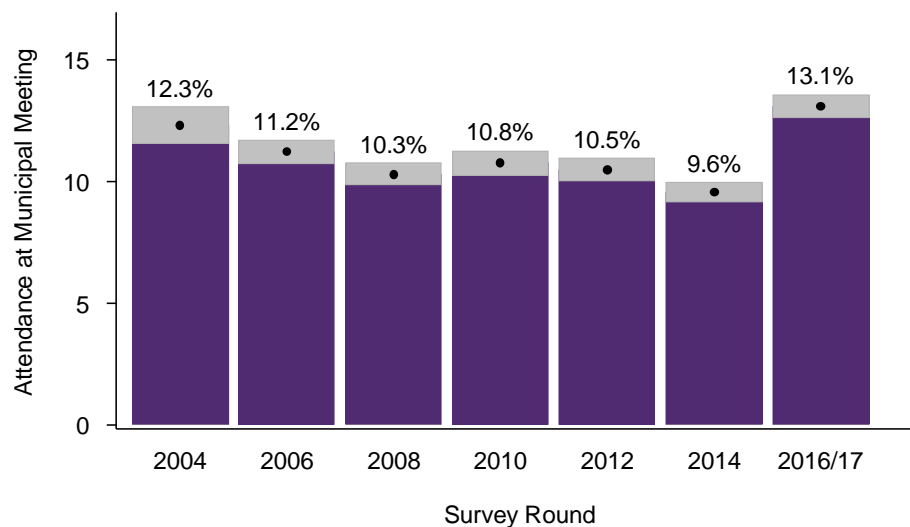


Figure 4. Crime Victimization over Time

Police are at the frontlines of efforts to curb criminal activity and preserve citizen security. For the last two rounds, the AmericasBarometer has asked individuals to estimate how long it would take for the police to respond to a home invasion. Compared to 2014, in 2016/17 a greater percentage of citizens report it would take over three hours for the police to respond; in other words, an increasing proportion of the public believes the police cannot or will not show up in an emergency. Clearly, maintaining a professional body of police officers is an important policy challenge for those working to implement programs and policies related to citizen security.

Local Governance

Most citizens' experiences with democratic governance are local. Chapter 5 of the report focuses on engagement in local government, evaluations of services, and the relevance of these factors for overall life satisfaction. At this level, we find some important evidence of democratic resilience. As shown in Figure 5, data from the AmericasBarometer show that the regional average rate of citizen participation in local government meetings increased between 2014 and 2016/17.



95 % Confidence Interval
(with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2004-2016/17, LAC 21; v.07132017

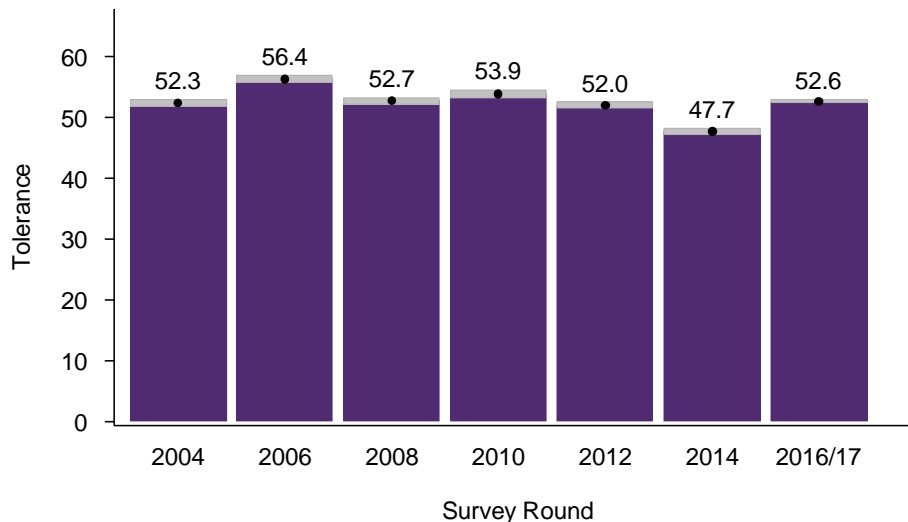
Figure 5. Participation in Meetings of Municipal Government over Time

The increase in citizen meeting attendance is most evident in countries experiencing significant national governance challenges. But even at the local level, citizens report declines in the quality of services, which might be responsible for some of this increased participation: on average, evaluations of public services – roads, schools, and health clinics – have declined relative to 2014.

System Support and Political Tolerance

Chapter 6 concludes the volume with an analysis of region-wide trends regarding two pillars of democracy: support for the political system and political tolerance. Over the years, LAPOP has hypothesized and found that democracy rests on a firmer foundation to the extent that the public perceives the political system to be legitimate *and* it supports the right to participate of those who may hold diverging political views. On average in the Latin America and Caribbean region, the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer detects a decrease in system support.

Perhaps reflective of the extent to which issues related to the rule of law (defined in terms of crime and corruption) are challenging the region, this decline appears driven by decreased perceptions of the legitimacy of courts and the extent to which the system protects citizens' basic rights. At the same time that the region registered these declines, average political tolerance of the rights of dissenters has increased, as shown in Figure 6. We suspect that public frustration with the performance of the political system breeds support for the rights of those most critical of the regime to participate in politics.



95 % Confidence Interval
(with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2004-2016/17; dirty_GM v07132017

Figure 6. Political Tolerance over Time

Conclusion

Democracy in the Latin America and Caribbean region is facing a critical set of challenges, from low public trust in elections, parties, and political leadership to deficiencies in the supply of basic liberties, the rule of law, citizen security, and robust service provision. As discussed in the book-length report released this week, and as is evident in the AmericasBarometer datasets and the country-specific reports based on this project, experiences of individual countries vary significantly one to the other; each component of democratic values and governance described in the report, and more, can be analyzed in greater detail using these resources. Yet, overall, we can conclude that the public's continued support for democratic governance depends crucially on whether the region's political systems can deliver on its promises. While the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer identifies a number of concerning trends and outcomes in the typical citizen's experiences and evaluations of democratic governance in the region, it also finds some important signs of resilience: participation in local government has increased and democratic orientations conducive to stable democracy have shown a slight rebound. This willingness to engage and these commitments to certain core values are assets on which policymakers can draw as they identify ways to bolster and maintain democratic governance in the region.

About the AmericasBarometer

The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) is a unique tool for assessing the public's experiences with democratic governance. The survey permits comparisons across individuals, subnational and supranational regions, countries, and time, via a common core questionnaire and standardized methods. Comparative research on democratic governance is critically important to understanding today's realities, anticipating key political challenges, and identifying actionable policy solutions.

The 2016/17 round of the AmericasBarometer is the seventh regional survey produced by LAPOP and the largest to date, covering 29 countries across the Americas. The round began in early 2016 in seven Caribbean countries and data collection in the 29th country concluded in the spring of 2017. The full dataset for this round includes over 43,000 interviews, conducted based on national sample designs and implemented with the assistance of partners across the region.

LAPOP makes all reports from the project and all country datasets available for download from its website, www.LapopSurveys.org, free of charge to all. The availability of these reports and datasets is made possible by the project's supporters, including USAID, the Tinker Foundation, the Inter-American Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and Vanderbilt University.

With respect to *questionnaire construction*, to develop new common content for the 2016/17 round, we solicited input from subject, country, and AmericasBarometer project experts across the Americas. Based on ideas developed during this period of activity, we conducted a series of question wording and ordering experiments, with support from the Research in Individuals, Politics, & Society (RIPS) lab at Vanderbilt. We presented some of these results to collaborators convened in New York City for a meeting in the spring of 2016. Following discussions at that meeting and additional sponsor requests and input, we further revised the questionnaire. All new items were piloted in qualitative pre-tests across the Americas. Questionnaires from the project are available online at www.LapopSurveys.org.

With respect to *sample design*, LAPOP country studies are based on stratified probability samples of a typical minimum of 1,500 voting-age

non-institutionalized adults in each country. To ensure that the surveys are nationally representative and cost effective, we stratify countries by major sub-regions and urban/rural divides, and we use a frequency matching approach to select respondents by gender and age. Detailed descriptions of all samples are available on our website.

With respect to *data collection*, the 2016/17 round of the AmericasBarometer deployed electronic devices (tablets and phones) for data collection in 100% of the countries surveyed. The use of electronic devices for interviews and data entry in the field decreases errors, supports the use of multiple languages, and permits LAPOP and field teams to track the progress of the survey in real time, down to the timing and location of interviews (which are monitored but not recorded in public datasets in order to preserve respondents' privacy). For the 2016/17 round, we developed and transferred to partner firms a set of quality control procedures that we call the Fieldwork Algorithm for LAPOP Control over survey Operations and Norms (FALCON ©). Via FALCON, teams working on LAPOP projects are able to verify the location of interviews within programmed geo-fences around work areas; verify interviewer identities via photos and signatures; and verify the quality of the interview via audio and timing files. FALCON allows fieldwork to be reviewed on a daily basis, rather than after fieldwork has been completed; this means that errors can be more effectively and efficiently remedied, resulting in higher quality data. We believe FALCON represents a revolutionary advance in technologically sophisticated and scientifically rigorous survey research, and we are committed to continuing to transfer knowledge of our advances to others.

Standardization is critical to the value of a comparative project, and one way we ensure that we meet this objective is by training all fieldwork teams in AmericasBarometer project protocol. Each local fieldwork team is trained by a LAPOP staffer or an experienced affiliate.

Security issues in the field are a constant concern for all those who work in the field of public opinion research. Shifting patterns of crime, insecurity, and instability in certain parts of the region have brought about additional challenges to the safety of personnel working on the project. We take these issues very seriously and, as in past rounds, we worked with local teams during the course of fieldwork for the AmericasBarometer 2016/17 to develop security protocols and, in a small

number of cases, to make substitutions to the original sample for locations that teams on the ground identified as especially dangerous.

The AmericasBarometer regional and country reports represent the product of collaborations among LAPOP researchers and a set of LAPOP-affiliated experts. The regional (comparative) report, which is summarized in this *Topical Brief* report, focuses on general trends and findings with respect to issues in democratic governance. As in recent years, we were fortunate to work with Dr. Ryan Carlin (Georgia State University), Dr. Gregory Love (University of Mississippi), and Dr. Matthew Singer (University of Connecticut) on the regional report.

Each round of the AmericasBarometer involves a multi-year process and the effort of thousands of individuals across the Americas. In each country, we partner with a local firm and we further benefit from input from researchers, country experts, sponsors, and subject experts located in institutions across the Americas. This network is critical to the quality of the AmericasBarometer and its availability as a public good. We are grateful to all those who contribute to making the AmericasBarometer a valuable tool for the diagnosis and improvement of democratic governance in the Americas.

About the Report

The latest region-wide report by the Latin American Public Opinion (LAPOP) - *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016/17: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Governance* - reports key findings on citizens' evaluations of democracy and governance across 29 countries, surveyed as part of the 2016/17 AmericasBarometer. It was edited by Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, Noam Lupu, and Mollie J. Cohen. Report chapters were written by the editors, plus Ryan Carlin, Gregory Love, and Matthew Singer. The report was released on September 26, 2017 at an event hosted by partner institution Florida International University (FIU). An e-copy of the report is available on LAPOP's website: www.lapopsurveys.org. Media inquiries can be directed to Dr. Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Dr. Noam Lupu.

References

Cohen, Mollie J., Noam Lupu, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, Eds., *The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2016/17: A Comparative Study of Democracy and Governance*. Nashville, TN: LAPOP.

LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys are supported predominantly by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Vanderbilt University. The 2016/17 round also had key support from the Inter-American Development Bank, UNDP, Open Society Foundation, and a number of academic and research partnerships across the Americas. This *Topical Brief* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of USAID or any other supporting agency.

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Data and the regional report for the 2016/17 round of the AmericasBarometer was released on September 26, 2017. Please follow us on Twitter for more information @lapop_barometro. Data and reports from past rounds of the study are available for free download at www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop.