

Topical Brief #036

The 2018/19 AmericasBarometer

Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Noam Lupu

Vanderbilt University

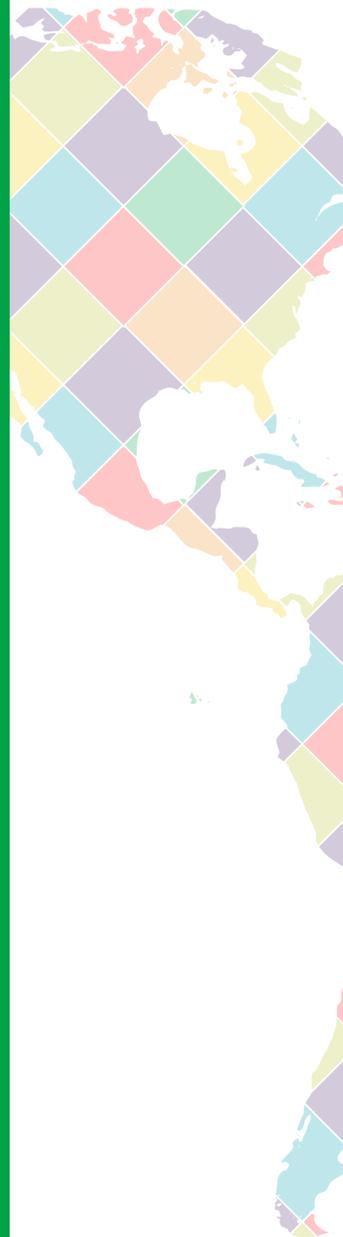
liz.zechmeister@vanderbilt.edu

noam.lupu@vanderbilt.edu

October 15, 2019

Key Findings:

- LAPOP announces the release of the latest round of the AmericasBarometer and the report, *Pulse of Democracy*.
- The 2018/19 AmericasBarometer includes nationally representative surveys conducted in 20 countries.
- Support for democracy and political legitimacy remain at middling levels.
- Frequent social media use is connected to greater support, but lower satisfaction with democracy.



The pulse of democracy in the region remains weak. We base this assessment on data from the 2018/19 round of the AmericasBarometer. The data from this round were collected between late 2018 and mid-2019, and consist of national surveys in 20 countries across the Americas. Thanks to core support from USAID and Vanderbilt University, all country datasets are available on the LAPOP [website](#). This *Topical Brief* announces the release of this latest round of data. We provide a snapshot of some key results and the survey project. Interested readers are directed to find more information by visiting our website and our newly released report, *Pulse of Democracy*.¹

Key Findings from the 2018/19 AmericasBarometer: Democracy, Legitimacy, and Social Media

Citizen support for democracy is critical to sustaining free and fair systems and bolstering against democratic backsliding. Yet, as Figure 1 shows, support for democracy declined in the last round of the AmericasBarometer (2016/17) and remains low in this round, fielded between late 2018 and mid-2019. The figure shows the percentage of adult citizens, in the average Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region country, who agree with this statement: “Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government.”²

Public satisfaction with how democracy is performing has also declined, while tolerance for executive coups (i.e., the executive shuttering congress) has continued to grow.³ The proportion of the public that finds it justifiable for the president to dissolve congress increased to a significant degree in Peru between 2017 and early 2019, an opinion shift that presaged Peru’s current political crisis.⁴

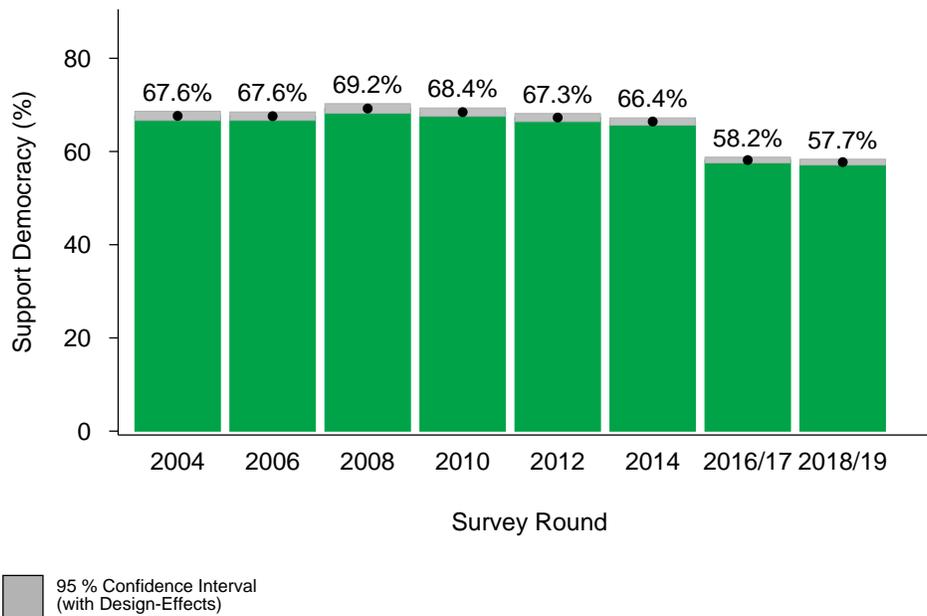
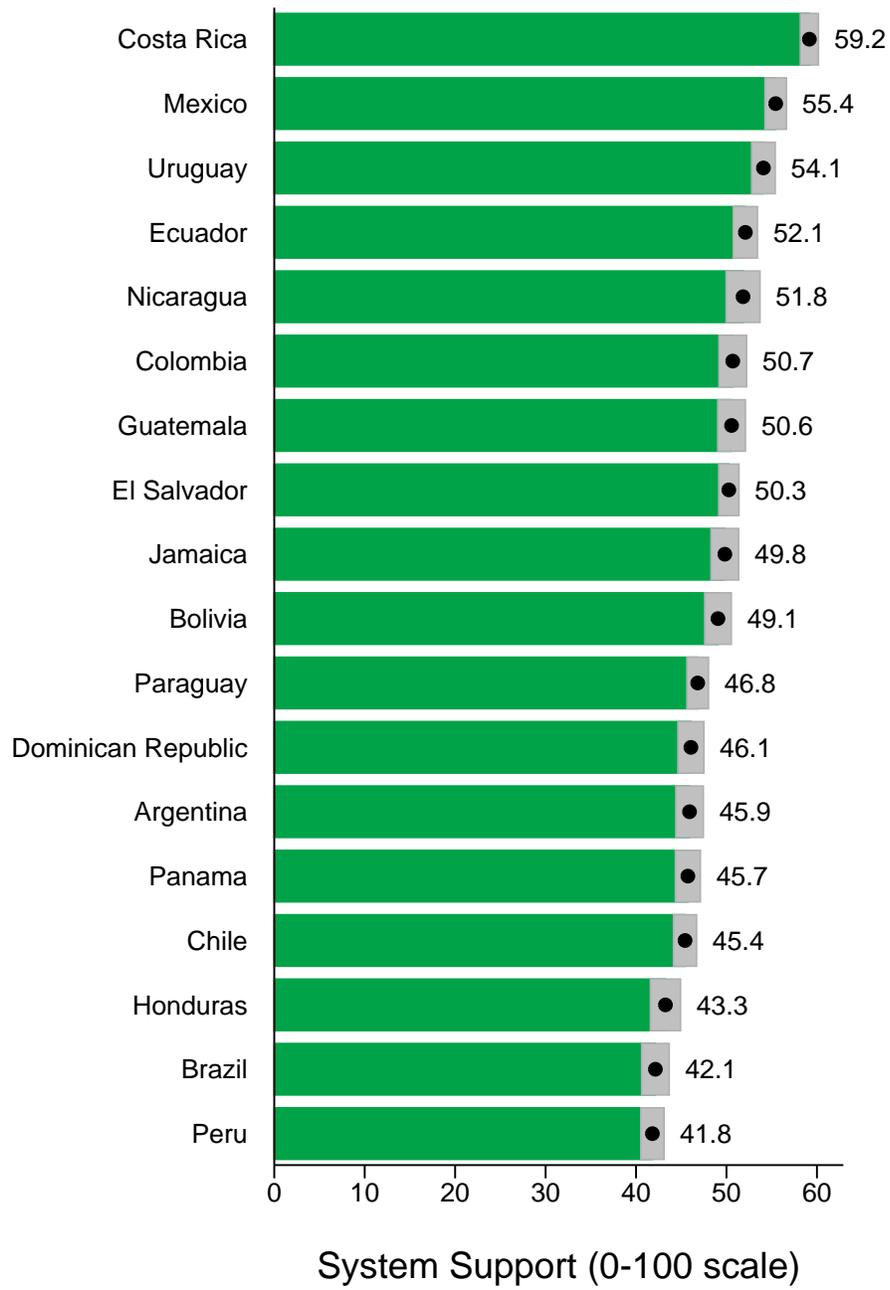


Figure 1: Support for Democracy in the LAC Region, 2004-2019

Political legitimacy – the extent to which the public views their country’s basic core institutions and processes as worthy of respect and confidence – remains low in the average country in the Americas. LAPOP measures political legitimacy – or system support – by taking the average of responses to five questions that ask whether courts guarantee a fair trial, the individual respects the country’s institutions, basic rights are protected, the political system evokes a sense of pride, and the political system should be supported. Figure 2 shows mean scores on this system support measure on its 0-100 scale, for each of the Latin American and Caribbean countries included in the 2018/19 AmericasBarometer. The country with the greatest level of system support is Costa Rica, while the country with the least amount of system support is Peru. In the majority of cases, system support levels are below the scale’s mid-point.⁵



95 % Confidence Interval
(with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2018-2019; v.GM20190821_E

Figure 2: System Support in the LAC Region, 2018/19

In the midst of this milieu of doubt regarding the value of democracy and the capacity of political institutions, social media are on the rise. Globally and in the Latin America and Caribbean region, analysts are asking whether social media on the whole help or hinder democratic processes and democracy itself. Findings from the AmericasBarometer's new social media module allow us to see how widespread social media are in the region and who uses them (the younger, the more urban, and the more educated). They also allow us to see distinctions among the political attitudes held by those who use social media frequently. In brief, frequent social media users tend to adhere more to core democratic values but also tend to be more disaffected in their satisfaction with democracy and their confidence in core political institutions.⁶

Figure 3 shows rates of satisfaction with democracy, on average for the LAC region, according to level of social media use. Those coded as “high social media” users report accessing one or more social media platforms weekly or daily. Those coded as “low social media” users report accessing social media monthly or yearly. The figure also includes data on those who report no social media use. As the figure shows, rates of satisfaction with democracy are lowest among those who use social media most often.

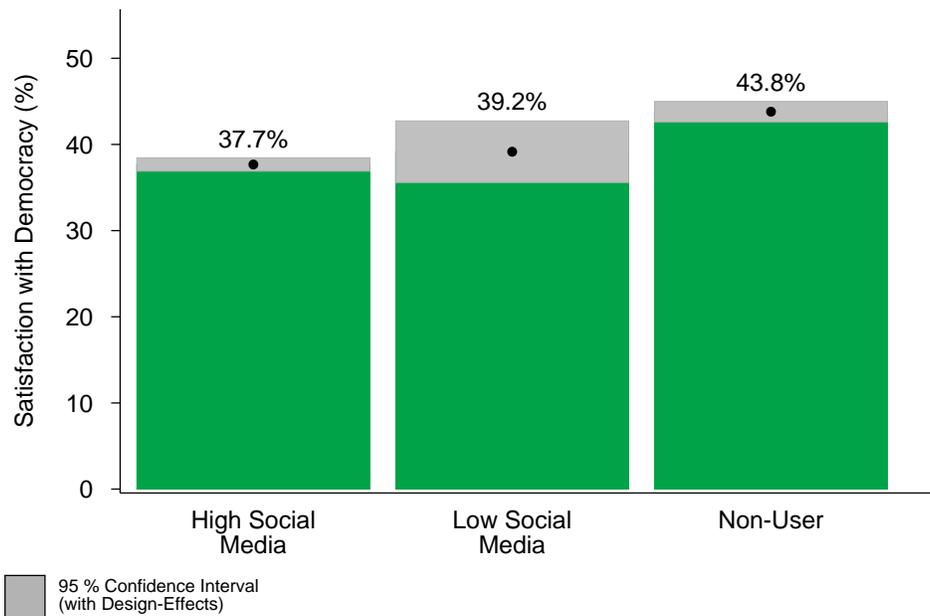


Figure 3: Satisfaction with Democracy by Level of Social Media Use, 2018/19

Background on the AmericasBarometer Survey

The AmericasBarometer by LAPOP is a unique tool for assessing the public's experiences with democratic governance. The survey permits valid 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 2018/19 AmericasBarometer represents the 8th round of this project. The questionnaire contains a common core that allows us to assess the extent to which citizens support democratic values, perceive a sufficient supply of basic liberties, experience the rule of law, engage in political life, support their system of government, use social media, and more.

Fieldwork for the latest round of the AmericasBarometer began in late 2018 and continued into the summer of 2019. At this time, 20 countries are included in the round. For the first time since their initial inclusion in the AmericasBarometer, we selected not to conduct surveys in Venezuela and Haiti due to instability and related concerns about interviewer safety. We will revisit this decision as circumstances change. For now, the full dataset for this round includes 31,050 interviews, conducted across urban and rural settings and implemented with the assistance of partners and fieldwork organizations across the Americas.

Questionnaire content reflects input from a wide range of project sponsors and stakeholders. The surveys were pretested in each country via cognitive interviews and programmed into Survey to Go software for fieldwork. The samples are nationally representative and also programmed into the e-instrument. All fieldwork teams used e-devices for fieldwork and were trained in the project's protocols and in quality control. To monitor quality, we applied LAPOP's FALCON (Fieldwork Algorithm for LAPOP Control over survey Operations and Norms). All of interviews were audited at least once to ensure that interviewers were in the sampled location, enumerators were those who attended training, questions were read correctly, interview protocols were followed, and contact attempts were recorded efficiently and accurately. All datasets were audited and processed by our team. The data and project reports are publicly and freely available at the project website (www.lapopsurveys.org).

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 fieldwork organization 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. On behalf of this entire team, we express our hope that the reports and data generated by this project reach and are useful to the broadest possible number of individuals interested in and working to improve democracy and development across the Americas.

Notes

1. Zechmeister and Lupu (2019).
2. Respondents were asked to express their disagreement or agreement on a 1-7 scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7); responses 5-7 are coded as agreement.
3. Castorena and Graves (2019).
4. For more, see Ramírez Bustamante and Zechmeister (2019).
5. See also Castorena and Morton (2019).
6. Lupu, Zechmeister, and Ramírez Bustamante (2019).

References

- Castorena, Oscar, and Sarah L. Graves. 2019. "Support for Electoral Democracy." In *Pulse of Democracy*, edited by Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Noam Lupu, 8–25. Nashville, TN: LAPOP.
- Castorena, Oscar, and Brielle Morton. 2019. "Democratic Legitimacy." In *Pulse of Democracy*, edited by Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Noam Lupu, 30–47. Nashville, TN: LAPOP.
- Lupu, Noam, Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, and Mariana V. Ramírez Bustamante. 2019. "Social Media and Political Attitudes." In *Pulse of Democracy*, edited by Elizabeth J. Zechmeister and Noam Lupu, 52–65. Nashville, TN: LAPOP.
- Ramírez Bustamante, Mariana V., and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister. 2019. "Tolerance of Executive "Coups" in Peru." *Topical Brief* 35:1–5. LAPOP: Nashville, TN. <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/ITB035en.pdf>.

Zechmeister, Elizabeth J., and Noam Lupu, eds. 2019. *Pulse of Democracy*.
Nashville, TN: LAPOP.



Elizabeth J. Zechmeister is Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University and Director of LAPOP.

Dr. Noam Lupu is Associate Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University and Associate Director of LAPOP.

This report was translated by Sebastián Larrea and Mariana V. Ramírez Bustamante. Formatting, production, copy editing, graphics, and report distribution were handled by Rubí Arana, Dr. Oscar Castorena, Maita Schade, and Laura Sellers. Our data and reports are available for free download on the project website. Please follow us on Twitter or Facebook to stay in touch.

As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys.

The contents of this *Topical Brief* are the sole responsibility of the authors and LAPOP and do not necessarily reflect the views of any supporting organization. LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys are supported predominantly by USAID and Vanderbilt University. The 2018/19 round also had support from the IADB, the UNDP, the Open Society Foundations, and academic partners and researchers across the Americas.

vanderbilt.edu/lapop
@lapop_barometro
@LatinAmericanPublicOpinionProject
lapop@vanderbilt.edu
+1-615-322-4033



230 Appleton Place, PMB 505, Suite 304, Nashville, TN 37203, USA