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## Democracy in Hard Times: Belize

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**Executive Summary.** This report marks the first in a subseries examining the economic crisis and democratic attitudes within selected countries studied in the 2010 AmericasBarometer surveys. We find that in early 2010, almost all Belizeans perceived that their country was in the midst of an economic crisis, and that many had experienced personal or family job and income loss. However, we find little change in Belizeans' support for democracy between 2008 and 2010. Moreover, when we examine relationships at the individual level, we find that neither economic evaluations nor perceptions of government economic performance are significantly associated with democratic attitudes. Thus, Belize is an exception to previously reported findings that economic evaluations and democratic attitudes are strongly linked in the Americas as a whole.

**H**ard times—in particular the economic crisis—and their impact on democracy was established as the theme for the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer survey.<sup>1</sup> In recent months, LAPOP has published book-length reports on this subject for the Americas as a whole and for many individual countries; all reports are available at our website. In 2011, the *Insights* series will feature a subseries entitled *Democracy in Hard Times*, providing short reports on countries for which book-length reports are not available. In this, the first of this subseries, we examine Belize. We look at Belizeans' economic perceptions and experiences, and at the relationship between these and support for democracy in 2010.

Belizeans are not unaccustomed to fluctuations in their country's economy. Past episodes of volatility have been linked to Belize's susceptibility to changes in the international market and to instances of government overspending (Hausman and Klinger 2007). In the midst of the recent global economic decline, Belize's GDP growth dropped from a healthy 3.8% in 2008 to -0.5% in 2009.<sup>2</sup> What effects might this recent economic contraction have had on public opinion in Belize? In particular, has it affected attitudes towards the democratic regime?

Despite some salient differences in the country's politics and culture<sup>3</sup>, economically Belize shares

important similarities with other Central American countries. Like these other countries, its economy is tightly connected to that of the United States, and tourism and agriculture form important economic sectors. It is not surprising, then, that the country experienced negative consequences of the recent worldwide economic recession found in the rest of the region.<sup>4</sup> The negative growth rate for 2009 may be one reason that Belizeans identified the economy as the most important problem facing the country in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the nations in the Americas, however, have managed the crisis unusually well, recovering quickly. Belize also fits this pattern, in that its growth rate is expected to be positive by the end of 2010.<sup>6</sup> Such a quick recovery might be one factor militating against finding deep imprints of the crisis

on Belizean public opinion, in particular with respect to support for democracy.

There are other reasons to expect support for democracy to be relatively robust in Belize. As a previous *Insights* report based on 2008 AmericasBarometer survey data found, Belizeans' support for democracy, the political system, and democratic participation are high, in many cases higher than in other countries of Central America and the Caribbean (Seligson

*With democratic rule uninterrupted since independence, and with economic growth projected to be positive by the end of 2010, Belizeans' support for democracy is expected to be relatively high and stable.*

<sup>1</sup> Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org>

<sup>3</sup> A former British colony, Belize's official language is English (though Spanish is common; in fact, 39.6% of respondents to the 2010 AmericasBarometer Belize survey were interviewed in Spanish); it is a parliamentary democracy led by a prime minister; and it remains a member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

<sup>4</sup> If there is an exception in Central America with respect to the economic effects of the global crisis, it is Panama, which managed to maintain a positive growth rate in 2009 (<http://www.worldbank.org/>).

<sup>5</sup> In the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey, while issues related to security troubled many (21.9% of Belizeans indicated that the most important problem was related to crime and violence), the majority of survey respondents, 51.8%, indicated an economic issue.

<sup>6</sup> Economic growth information taken from <http://www.worldbank.org/>.

and Zéphyr 2009).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, since independence from the United Kingdom in 1981, Belize has had uninterrupted democratic rule. While Belizeans are certainly not strangers to political scandal, and while many inequities by social class and gender remain, politics has been relatively consolidated around two major parties throughout the country's democratic history.<sup>8</sup> Thus, we expect to find high support for democracy in Belize, and we expect this support to be relatively resistant to any depressive effects from the economic downturn.

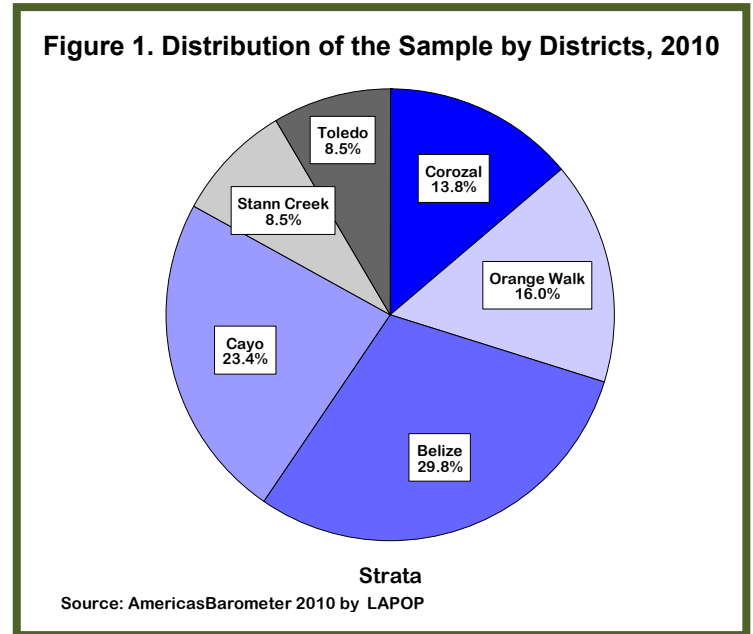
First included in the 2008 round of the AmericasBarometer, Belize was surveyed a second time as part of the 2010 AmericasBarometer. In that round, 43,990 individuals from 26 countries in the Americas were interviewed with a nationally representative, probability sample. The 2010 survey of Belize asked 1,504 people about their experiences, concerns, political attitudes, and socio-economic and demographic profiles, among other topics.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the sample in six strata, which correspond to the six districts in Belize. The full description of the sample design is available at [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/argentina/Belize\\_2010\\_Tech\\_Info.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/argentina/Belize_2010_Tech_Info.pdf).<sup>9</sup> The questionnaire was prepared, tested, and administered in both English and Spanish (see earlier footnote on the percentage of respondents selecting to be interviewed in Spanish). We believe these two surveys to be the first scientific, nationwide studies of public opinion on democracy in Belizean history.

<sup>7</sup> Prior issues in the *Insights* series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Fernández (1989), McClaurin (1996), Moberg (1992), and Weigand and Bennet (1993).

<sup>9</sup> Consistent with AmericasBarometer practices, the sample was further stratified by urban and rural areas of residence. All interviews were carried out using handheld computers (PDAs).



## Perceptions and Experiences in Hard Times

How did Belizeans perceive the economic crisis? The AmericasBarometer 2010 included for the first time two items to try to assess these perceptions. First, respondents were asked if they perceived an economic crisis.<sup>10</sup> Second, those who thought that there was one were asked who is to blame for it.<sup>11</sup>

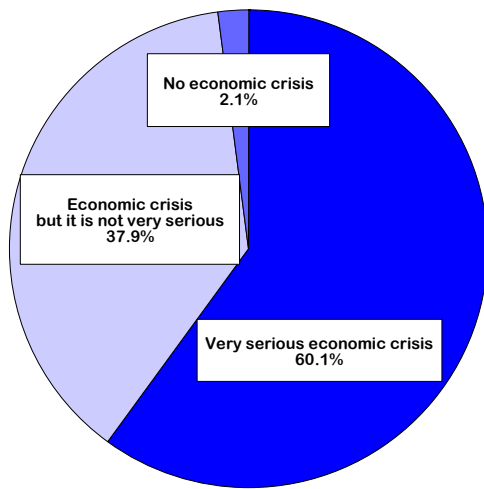
Figure 2 shows that more than 60% of Belizeans perceived a very serious economic crisis, whereas 37.9% reported that there was an economic crisis but it was not very serious. Only 2.1% said that there was not an economic crisis.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> **CRISIS1.** Some say that our country is suffering a very serious economic crisis, others say that we are suffering a crisis but it is not very serious, while others say that there isn't any economic crisis. What do you think? (1) We are suffering a very serious economic crisis, (2) We are suffering a crisis but it is not very serious, or, (3) No economic crisis

<sup>11</sup> **CRISIS2.** Who is the most to blame for the current economic crisis in our country from among the following: (01) The previous administration, (02) The current administration, (03) Ourselves, the Belizeans, (04) The rich people of our country, (05) The problems of democracy, (06) The rich countries, (07) The economic system of the country, or, (08) Never have thought about it, (77) Other

<sup>12</sup> Non-response was very low, at 1.13%.

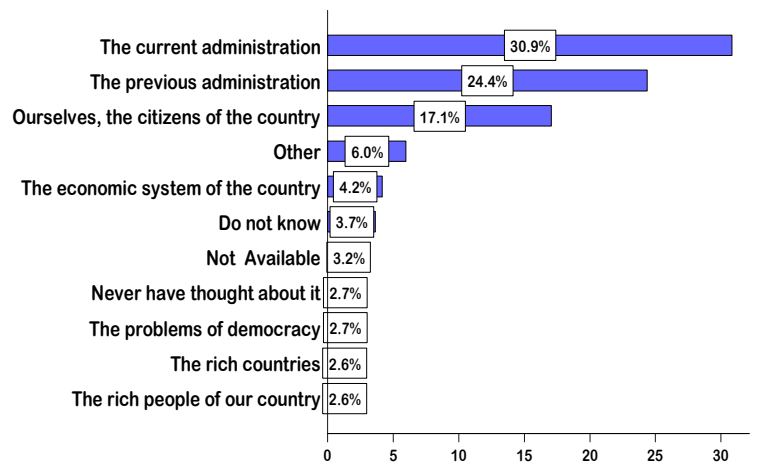
**Figure 2. Percentage of the Population Who Perceived an Economic Crisis in Belize, 2010**



**Perception of Magnitude of Economic Crisis**

Source: AmericasBarometer 2010 by LAPOP

**Figure 3. Who is to Blame for the Economic Crisis in Belize?**



**Who is the most to blame for the current economic crisis in our country?**

Source: AmericasBarometer 2010 by LAPOP

Whom did Belizeans blame for the crisis? Figure 3 shows that nearly 1 out of 3 Belizeans who perceived a crisis blamed the current administration and about a quarter blamed the previous administration. The United Democratic Party (UDP) and Prime Minister Dean Barrow took control of government following the February 2008 parliamentary elections, just as the economic crisis was beginning to unfold. However, economic growth had been slowing under the administration of the former Prime Minister Said Musa of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Thus, it makes sense that Belizeans would be divided in their attributions of blame for economic troubles. At the same time, almost 20% of Belizeans who perceived a crisis blamed themselves, as a collective, and less than 6% blamed either rich countries or rich Belizeans.

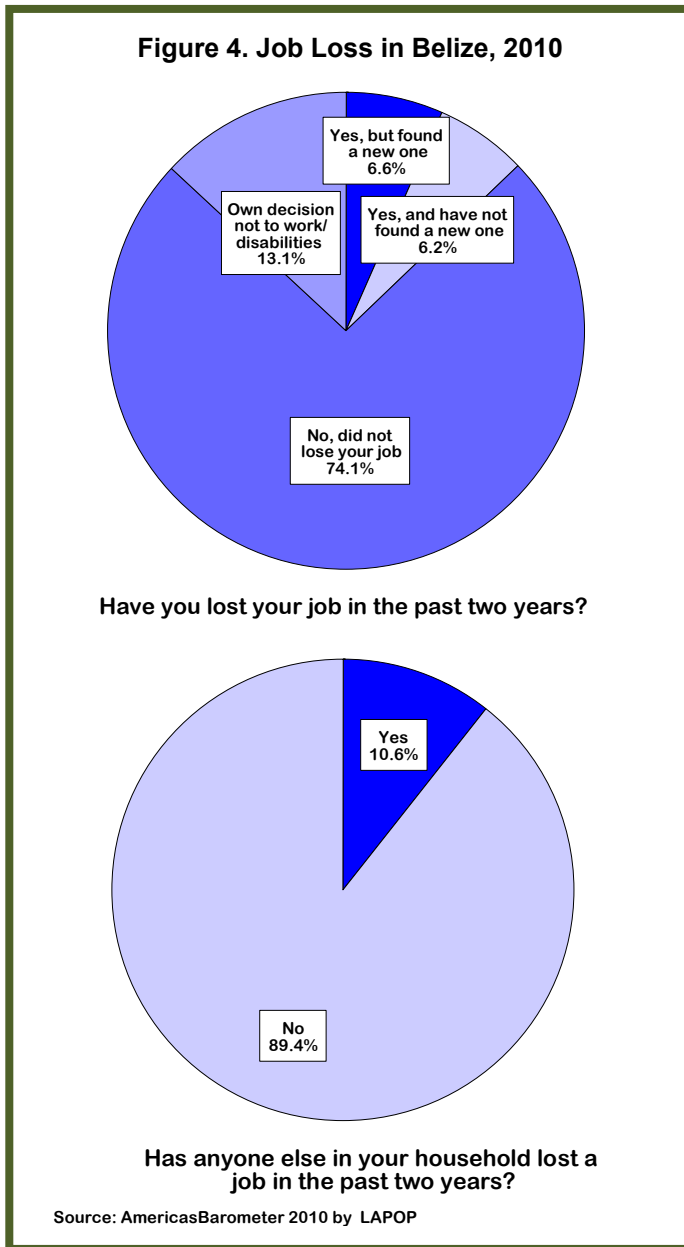
In addition to examining perceptions, we can also examine economic experiences during the period of the crisis. Among the many questions available in the larger survey, here we select out responses to questions related to job loss.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> OCUP1B1. Have you lost your job in the past two years? (1) Yes, you lost your job but found a new one, (2) Yes, you

Figure 4 shows that at the beginning of 2010, 13% of Belizeans had lost a job in the past two years, though about half reported having subsequently found a new one. Moreover, about 11% reported that another household member had lost a job in the past two years. Overall, 21% of respondents had experienced some form of job loss in their households in the past two years, suggesting that many Belizeans' perceptions of the crisis are based on their real experiences.<sup>14</sup> This rate of job loss places Belize in the middle of the pack in both Central America and the Caribbean. Job loss in Belize was higher than in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean, as well as Honduras and Panama in Central America; nonetheless, Belizeans did better than neighbors in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Jamaica, among other countries.

lost your job and have not found a new one, (3) No, did not lose your job, (4) Did not work because you decided not to work or because of disabilities. OCUP1B2. Besides you, has anyone in your household lost his or her job in the past two years?

<sup>14</sup> Unemployment in Belize stood at 12.6% in late 2009. See <http://www.statisticsbelize.org.bz/>.



## Economic Crisis and Support for Democracy

Did the economic crisis affect Belizeans' attitudes towards their political system? The AmericasBarometer surveys contain numerous indicators of democratic attitudes and values. Among these is a question derived from a classic statement by Churchill on democracy. Interviewers provide respondents with the statement: "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government."

They then ask respondents how much they agree with this point of view on a 1-7 scale. As is standard for LAPOP reports, that scale is converted here to a 0-100 scale for ease of presentation.

This round of the AmericasBarometer provides evidence that, despite the economic crisis, Belizeans' support for democracy has not declined. Results comparing support for democracy in 2008 and 2010 in every country in Central America are shown in Figure 5. The dark blue bars show the average levels of support for democracy found in 2010 whereas the light blue bars show the average levels found in 2008. Whenever the two grey areas at the ends of the bars overlap, there is no statistically significant difference between the two years. For example, support for democracy declined in Belize from 71.9 to 70.9, but this decline is not statistically significant. Across the entire Americas, support for democracy experienced only a very small but statistically significant decline from an average score of 72.5 to 71.4, measured on a 100-point scale.

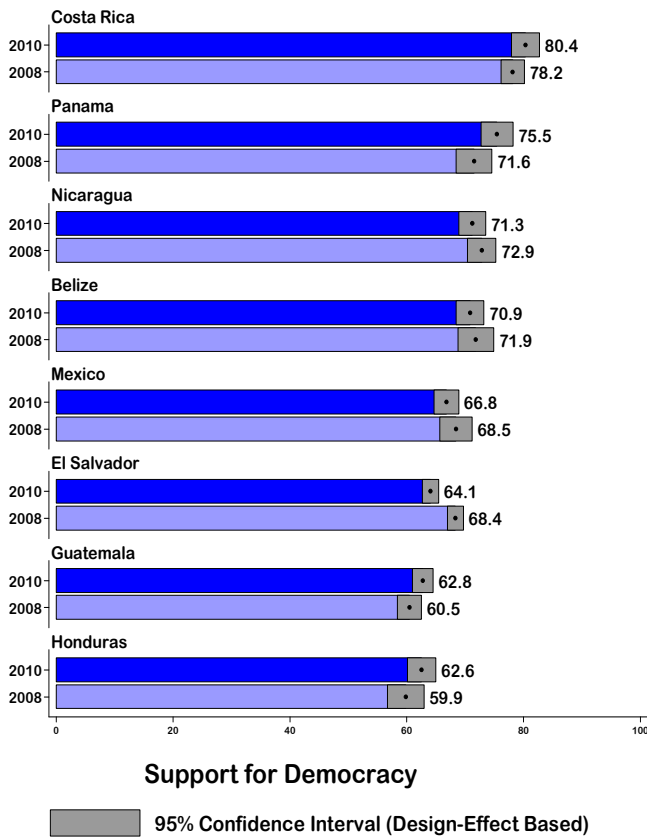
It is possible that national averages mask a correlation at the individual level between perceptions of economic crisis and democracy. Indeed, this has been shown to be the case in the Americas as a whole (Seligson and Smith 2010).

To examine the relationship between perceptions of economic crisis and support for democracy in Belize, we conduct regression analysis using individual survey responses. First, we include traditional socioeconomic and demographic control variables: age, sex, education, place of residence (urban vs. rural area), and wealth quintiles.<sup>15</sup> We also include measures of satisfaction with the prime minister and with the economic performance of the government. Finally, we included variables

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the wealth indicator, see: Córdova, Abby B. 2009. "Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth using Household Asset Indicators." *AmericasBarometer Insights*. (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>).



**Figure 5. Average Support for Democracy in Central America, 2008-2010**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

measuring personal and national economic evaluations. In order to reduce the number of economic variables we include in the same model, we ran a factor analysis on four variables: negative current perceptions of the national and personal economic situations as well as negative retrospective perceptions of the national and personal economic situations.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> These variables were measured as follows: **SOCT1**. How would you describe the country's economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad or very bad? **SOCT2**. Do you think that the country's current economic situation is better than, the same as or worse than it was 12 months ago? **IDIO1**. How would you describe your overall economic situation? Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad or very bad? **IDIO2**. Do you think that your economic situation is better than, the same as, or worse than it was 12 months ago?

This analysis yielded a single factor (assessed by an eigenvalue over 1.0), which we include to capture economic evaluations.

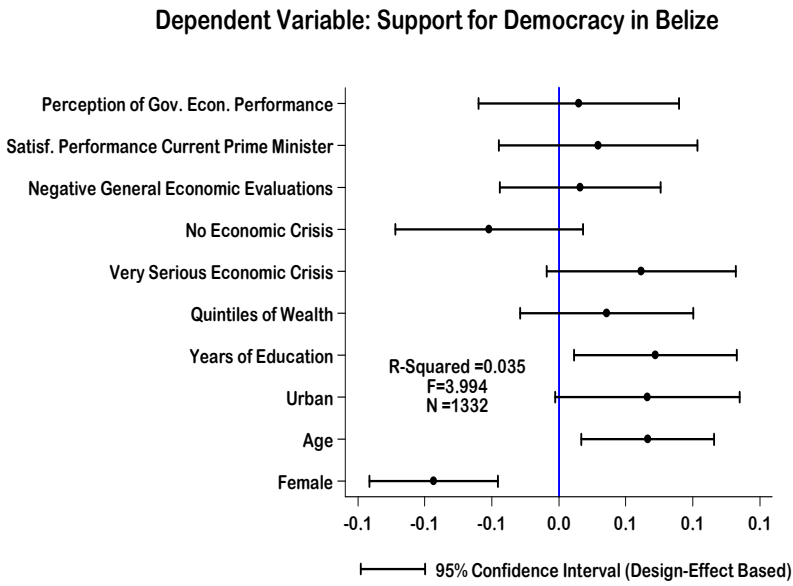
Figure 6 shows the effects of these variables on support for democracy in Belize. Each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables on support for democracy is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical "0" line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left of the "0" line a negative effect. If the effects are statistically significant, the confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot do not overlap the vertical "0" line (at .05 or better). If the confidence intervals overlap the vertical line, the effects are statistically insignificant. Since coefficients are standardized, the magnitude of each effect indicates its relative strength.

Figure 6 shows that education increases support for democracy. This result is consistent with our previous studies of democracy in the Americas, and once again reinforces the notion that education is one of the most effective ways to build a political culture that is supportive of democracy. In addition, males and older individuals are more supportive of democracy than females and younger individuals, even when controlling for education and other variables.

What is most striking about the results presented in Figure 6, however, is that *economic perceptions and experiences are not associated with support for democracy*, again suggesting that the economic crisis did not significantly affect public opinion toward democracy in Belize.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> When we run several new models, the results are virtually unchanged. We separately analyzed each economic evaluation included in Figure 6 as well as additional economic measures, while controlling for socio-economic and demographic factors, satisfaction with the performance of the current prime minister, and perceptions of government economic performance. The only models in which the economic variables yield statistically significant results are for negative perceptions of the national economic situation (although the effect is very small), decrease in

**Figure 6. The Impact of Perceptions and Experiences with the Economic Crisis on Support for Democracy in Belize, 2010**



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

These results hold even in models in which we separately introduce perception of government economic performance, satisfaction with the performance of the prime minister, and economic evaluations, while controlling for demographic factors.<sup>18</sup> This is certainly

household income, and perception of a very serious economic crisis. Interestingly, however, in each of those cases the results run counter to expectations: negative perceptions of the national economic situation, a decline in household income, and the perception of a very serious economic crisis each *increase* support for democracy. Moreover, when we run the same models but control for crisis perceptions, the economic variables lose statistical significance while the effect of perceiving a very serious crisis remains virtually the same, with the exception of the model for a decline in household income (where crisis perceptions are statistically insignificant but income decline has a significant and positive impact on support for democracy). Thus, we conclude with a certain level of confidence that the crisis did not negatively affect attitudes toward democracy in Belize.

<sup>18</sup> When we run the models without perception of government performance or satisfaction with the performance, the positive effect of a decrease in household income remains, but the coefficient for household job loss becomes statistically significant and negative. Of the many models we have tested, this is the only one in which an

encouraging news, indicating that Belizeans remain committed to democracy even when confronting negative experiences with the economy.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we examined Belizeans' perceptions and experiences with the economic crisis and how it affected their support for democracy. First we found that almost all Belizeans perceived either a serious or very serious economic crisis. Only 2.1% reported that there was not an economic crisis. In addition, a high percentage (55%) of those perceiving a crisis tends to blame the current or the previous administration for the crisis. One out of five Belizean households had at least one member who had recently lost a job, demonstrating that the crisis had had a pronounced personal impact.

Did these negative economic experiences influence Belizeans' support for democracy? Our findings in this regard are striking, and differ from what we have found across the Americas as a whole (Seligson and Smith 2009). Despite the fact that the crisis personally affected an important percentage of the population, Belizeans' democratic attitudes (as measured on this single indicator) proved robust and stable. We do not find an overall trend in the direction of lower democratic support. Moreover, at the individual level, we find that neither economic perceptions and experiences nor evaluations of government economic performance have affected Belizeans' commitment to the democratic regime. The only important predictors of democratic attitudes that we find are sociodemographic ones, including education, age, place of residence, and gender. This indicates that in Belize commitment to democracy in the abstract is a

economic variable has a negative impact on support for democracy, yet the effect is very limited.

relatively stable personal trait, perhaps akin to a value, one that is developed through long-term socialization processes and that is not responsive to short-term economic and political forces. Thus, Belize may be an exception to patterns found in many new democracies around the world, where support for the democratic regime is strongly linked to both immediate experiences and evaluations of the government of the day (for instance, Booth and Seligson 2009; Bratton et al., 2004; Mishler et al., 1998).

Owing to space constraints, we have been unable to address Belizeans' attitudes towards many other components of their political system. A future study should examine the effects of the crisis on other public opinion indicators in Belize, including life satisfaction, political tolerance, support for the political system, and satisfaction with democracy. This would allow us to assess more completely the consequences of the economic downturn on democratic political culture in Belize.

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## Appendix. Predictors of Support for Democracy in Belize

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Female	-0.093*	.0238
Age	0.066*	.0247
Urban	0.066	.0342
Years of Education	0.072*	.0302
Quintiles of Wealth	0.036	.0321
Very Serious Economic Crisis <sup>+</sup>	0.062	.0351
No Economic Crisis <sup>+</sup>	-0.052	.0348
Negative General Economic Evaluations (Factor Score)	0.016	.0298
Satisfaction with Performance Prime Minister	0.030	.0368
Perception of Government Economic Performance	0.015	.0372
Constant	0.004	.0319
<i>R-Squared</i>	0.035	
<i>Number of Obs.</i>	1332	

\* p<0.05

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at \*p<0.05, two-tailed.

<sup>+</sup>Reference Group: Economic Crisis but Not Very Serious