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Democracy is less secure

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Even before the Great Recession, democracy across the globe was suffering setbacks. In 2007, Freedom House recorded a net decline in its ranking of countries as free, partly free or not free. Since then, the downturn has continued, making the last four years the longest period of decline in forty years.

In the Americas, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and Venezuela experienced the most serious deterioration. Five other countries ranked partly free with Cuba as the unfree loner. Still, most countries are free and democracy is holding its own.

Freedom House's index provides the backdrop for The Political Culture of Democracy, 2010, a study based on interviews with almost 44,000 respondents in 26 countries. Since 2004, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) -- housed at Vanderbilt University -- has issued reports on the region's citizens. (www.AmericasBarometer.org) The most recent is especially useful. Despite hard economic times, Latin Americans did not turn on democracy. Mitchell Seligson and his research team offer an intriguing explanation. In many countries, governments tackled the crisis ably. Sound economic policies had already established good macroeconomic foundations and kept inflation low which, no doubt, helped. For the most part, political classes have learned their economic lessons.

Even if two out of five respondents hold the current administration or its predecessor responsible for the crisis, only one in 20 attributed it to democracy. About 13 percent blamed the economic system and a similar share put the onus on themselves, the citizens. Less than 8 percent pinned responsibility on rich countries. Havana, Caracas and other kindred capitals take note.

Given Latin America's not-so-distant past, many citizens probably didn't think the latest crisis to be the worst. In the late 1990s, for example, hard times did take a toll on the public's attitudes toward democracy. Once growth returned in 2003, however, many countries made inroads against poverty and expanded the middle classes. The 2010 LAPOP survey results reflect a growing maturity that should bode well for the region.

All the same, political and economic elites better not rest on their laurels. There's much yet to do to consolidate democracy in Latin America. Even if a widespread return of dictatorships is unimaginable, the institutional architecture that sustains open and democratic societies is not secure. Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua come to mind but so does Argentina which has yet to half bury Peronism, as Mexico has the worst of the old Institutional Revolutionary Party.

LAPOP always asks respondents five questions to measure system support on a 1-100 scale:

- Do the courts guarantee a fair trial?

- Do you respect your country's political institutions?
- Are citizen rights well protected?
- Are you proud of living under your country's political system?
- Should citizens support the political system?

Comparing answers from 2008 and 2010, the crisis years, yielded unexpected results. In Honduras, support rose significantly from 46.4 to 60.4. Before the coup, a majority held the system in low esteem. After the November 2009 election, support soared. Ecuadoreans and Nicaraguans ranked the political system significantly higher while Venezuelans rated theirs about the same (just below 50).

Public opinion applauded the election of opposition parties. In Uruguay, Panama, Paraguay and El Salvador, citizens expressed notably higher support. Uruguay has the highest ranking. In 2010, Paraguayans still gave their political system a score below 50 but strikingly higher than the under-30 figure of 2008. Panamanians voted for a center-right government. Salvadorans elected the center-left Mauricio Funes, the most remarkable alternation of all, given the country's bloody history.

Like Cuba, Haiti is an outlier but for different reasons. Haitians don't trust their justice system nor respect their political institutions nor consider their basic rights protected nor have pride in the political system. Still, Haitians rank highest in activism, whether political protests or participation in religious and community groups or parents', professional and women's associations.

Haitians -- the poorest in the Americas -- are the best citizens.

The Vanderbilt team doesn't include Cuba. LAPOP, after all, studies public opinion in democracies. Yet, I suspect that, even after a transition, Cubans may well rank towards the bottom. Rebuilding their spirit will be harder than establishing democratic institutions.