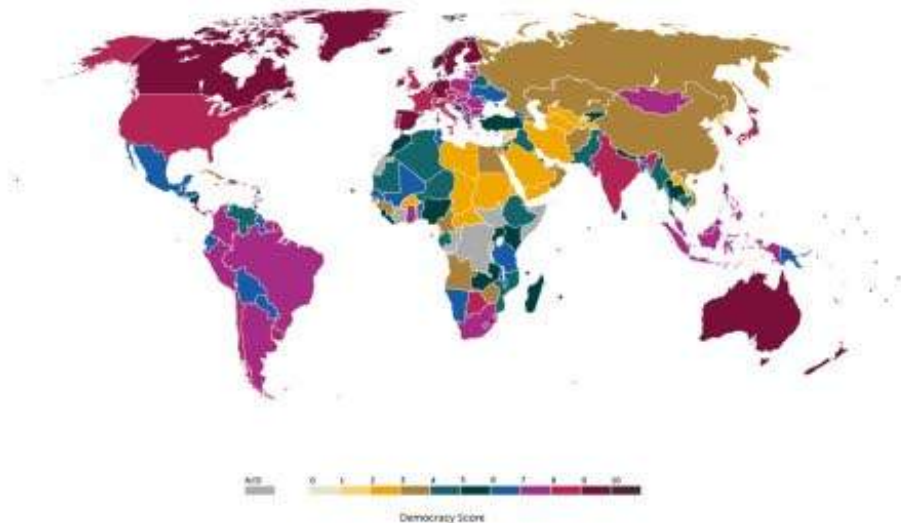


# Columns

 [jamaicaobserver.com/opinion/unpacking-the-lapop-data-is-democracy-in-recession-\\_129325](http://jamaicaobserver.com/opinion/unpacking-the-lapop-data-is-democracy-in-recession-_129325)



**The Blue Mountain Suite, at Knutsford Court Hotel, was abuzz with academics, political representatives, diplomats, journalists, and other special guests for the much-anticipated launch of the United States Agency for International Development-hosted 2017 Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey for Jamaica.**

Information taken from the Vanderbilt University website indicates that LAPOP was started over two decades ago by Mitchell A Seligson and is hosted by Vanderbilt University. In the earlier years they began studying democratic values in Costa Rica at a time when much of the rest of the Latin American and Caribbean region was caught in the grip of repressive regimes that widely prohibited studies of public opinion (and systematically violated human rights and civil liberties).

Today, fortunately, such studies can be carried out openly and freely in virtually all countries in the region, including Jamaica. Using the AmericasBarometer, LAPOP measures democratic values and behaviours in the Americas using national probability samples of voting-age adults.

The 2016/17 survey was conducted in 29 countries and includes more than 43,000 interviews. The data produced are used by the Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, and others in reports, indices, and analyses.

A thought in the opening paragraph of the report caught my attention and became the point of departure for this article: “Democracy is on the defensive in the Americas and around the world.” This is not a casual observation by LAPOP. Just look around the world and you would make the same observation. Spontaneous democratic movements against authoritarian

regimes continue to arise out of civil society, from Ukraine and Georgia to Tunisia and Egypt to Hong Kong. But few of these movements have been successful in leading to the establishment of stable, well-functioning democracies.

It is worth asking why the performance of democracy around the world has been so disappointing.

Is democracy really heading for a recession? In some places across the Americas, countries have been coping with security and economic crises, as well as scandals emanating from governments and parties. Among the mass public, scepticism is brewing over the extent to which democracy can succeed in delivering on citizens' expectations and improving the quality of their daily lives — a telling introduction from the Harriot and Lewis 2018 report.

The 2016/17 surveys taps into the frustration and reveals some important nuances in challenges to democratic governance across a heterogeneous region. The LAPOP report has provided a refined tool for governments in Latin America and the Caribbean with the types of diagnoses and distinctions that are important to designing and implementing effective policy for a democracy in recession.

Since 2012, the report noted, support for democracy in Jamaica decreased around 18 percentage points, and Jamaicans with the lowest levels of wealth report the lowest support for democracy at 47.9 per cent. Reinforcing the scepticism of the value of democracy versus other forms of rule, in 2016/17 compared to 2014, the average member of the public is more likely to support extra-legal actions (ie, coups) to remove elected leaders from office, and the story is not different for Jamaica. Support for a military coup takeover increased by 7.2 percentage points in Jamaica in 2017. There is decline in support for the most basic premises of modern democracy. It suggests the belief that the system is idealistic and that elections are the only legitimate way to alternate power, which are both found alongside low levels of trust in elections and voter participation in Jamaica.

Who supports democracy?

The question of democracy was put to Jamaicans across the island. They were given this statement, "...Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?"

Slightly more than half the citizens (55.8 per cent) in Jamaica support democracy as the best form of government. Comparing its position regionally, Jamaica is in a mid to low position in the Americas. The figure shows that more educated and wealthier Jamaicans have higher levels of support for democracy. Nearly 68 per cent of those with a post-secondary level of education or higher support democracy. Those in the lowest quintile of wealth have lower levels of support for democracy (46.9 per cent) compared to those in the third, fourth, and fifth quintiles of wealth (55.7 per cent, 58.4 per cent, and 63 per cent, respectively).

Jamaica continues to lead the region, at 59.3 per cent, in its belief that a military coup would be justifiable when there is a lot of crime. This is a 7.1 per cent increase since the last report was published in 2015. Demographically and socio-economically there was less support for military coups among those with higher levels of education and wealth, urban residents, males, and older- aged cohorts. Less than half of Jamaicans with post-secondary education levels, in the highest wealth quintile, or 56 years or older support a military coup takeover. Younger Jamaicans, 62.7 per cent, at the age of 18-25 years support a military coup.

Jamaicans high appetite for partisanship showed up in the survey. Jamaica, loving to lead in every sphere of life, is ranked as one of the top countries in the region for partisanship, with 41 per cent of Jamaicans identifying with a political party. However, the percentage of participants reporting trust in political parties ranges from 7.5 per cent in Peru to 35 per cent in Nicaragua. Jamaica is sixth from the top of the chart with 22.5 per cent of Jamaicans trusting political parties, reported LAPOP.

A summary of findings are:

- Across the region, support for democracy is significantly lower in 2016/17 than in previous years. In Jamaica, support for democracy also decreased. Jamaicans with lower levels of education or wealth report lower levels of support for democracy.
- In 2017, support for executive coups in Jamaica continued to be on the rise since 2010. There is less support for coups among those with higher levels of education and wealth.
- Trust in political parties increased in Jamaica by nine per cent in 2017. Less-educated Jamaicans are more likely to trust political parties over Jamaicans that are more educated. In addition, age cohorts who are 36 and older increasingly express trust in political parties.
- Partisan affiliation in Jamaica remained the same in 2017.

The first chapter of the report closed with this observation, “It is worth noting that low support for core democratic institutions is not the only way to measure citizen commitment to democratic values and practices. While public opinion on the indicators explored in this chapter is low and has declined, chapter six shows that one measure of commitment to democratic values and tolerance of the rights of minority groups and viewpoints increased in the Latin America and Caribbean region in 2016/17.

“This may, in fact, be a silver lining to citizen frustration with elections and the menu of options they offer: When individuals find their confidence in democracy, elections, and parties degraded, they may become more supportive of political participation by a broad swath of the public.”

All this is food for thought.

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