


Just the Facts: Confidence in institutions and support for democracy are in decline in the region

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We're a little late to this party, but when it comes to fascinating survey data, late is definitely better than never. Released in August 2017, the biennial [Latin American Public Opinion Project](#) (LAPOP) contains important insights about shifting attitudes toward democracy, confidence in institutions, and many other aspects of public life in the Americas.

The LAPOP survey, which is coordinated by Noam Lupu and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister of Vanderbilt University and funded by USAID and others, operates on an epic, daunting scale. The survey compiles the responses of more than 43,000 citizens from 29 countries in the Western Hemisphere. With the exception of Haiti, where 50% of respondents filled out paper questionnaires, all respondents to the LAPOP survey used e-devices.

The entire report is worth a read for anyone interested in how current events affect popular opinion and how they interact to shape long-term trends in the region ([you can access it here](#)). Still, we know a 200-page report isn't everyone's cup of tea, so we did the hard work for you. Below, are some of the most interesting results.

Support for democracy

Support for democracy in the hemisphere suffered its largest drop in the 21st century in the latest survey, down to 57.8% from 66.4% in 2014 (support peaked at 69.8% in 2008).

Certain countries that fall below the regional average are striking; they include [Colombia](#) (53.3% support for democracy), [Peru](#) (52.7%), [Brazil](#) (52.4%), [Honduras](#) (51.0%), [Mexico](#) (49.4%), and [Guatemala](#) (48.4%, the lowest support for democracy in the hemisphere)—all perhaps a reflection of the recent corruption scandals the countries have been going through.

Most worrying, is that support for democracy is lowest among the youth of the Americas. Only 54.3% of respondents between the ages of 16 and 35 agree that democracy is better than any other form of government compared to 66.2% of respondents older than 66. It's likely no coincidence that support for democracy is higher among those who lived under authoritarian governments before the third wave of democracy swept the region in the 1980s.

Trust in elections

The decline in support for democracy is accompanied by an even more precipitous drop in faith in elections. Only 39.1% of respondents said that they trust elections in their countries; that's the lowest number since LAPOP starting asking the question in 2004, when 61.2% of respondents had faith in elections.

Only 18.5% of Haitians, 23.4% of Brazilians, 24.0% of Colombians, and 26.2% of Mexicans responded that they trust their respective country's elections in the 2016/17 survey. As with support for democracy, trust in elections was lowest in respondents between the ages of 16 and 35.

Support for military coups

Declining support for democracy, elections, and political parties, however, isn't reflected in greater support for military coups in cases of high crime or corruption. Surveyors asked respondents, "In your opinion would a military coup be justified when there is a lot of crime? / when there is a lot of corruption?" Despite widely publicized corruption scandals affecting politicians throughout the region, those who responded yes to that question was only 37.7% across the region, up slightly from 37.1% in 2014 but down sharply from a high of 50.7% in 2004.

There are some exceptions. A majority of Peruvians and Jamaicans support military coups in cases of both high crime and high corruption. Mexico and Guatemala, where crime and corruption are high-profile issues, both fall within in the five highest levels of support for military coups. (The former is curious since Mexico is one of the few countries in the region that hasn't experienced a military coup in its modern history.) Perhaps most shockingly, 44.2% of Canadians support a military coup in cases of high corruption, though it's worth noting that only 21.8% of Canadian respondents believe political corruption is widespread in the country. That's by far the lowest in the Americas, and likely means that the Royal Mounties are not likely to storm the parliament building in Ottawa.

Corruption

Unfortunately, the same is not true of the region at large. The vast majority of citizens across the Americas believe political corruption to be widespread, especially in countries where high profile corruption scandals have affected national politics. 83.4% of Brazilians, 77.2% of Mexicans, 77.0% of Peruvians, 74.9% of Colombians, and 74.2% of Venezuelans believe that "more than half or all politicians are corrupt." In only five countries—Canada, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, the United States, and Uruguay—did fewer than 50% of respondents believe more than half of politicians to be corrupt.

Respondents are also becoming more tolerant of corruption, perhaps a reflection of its seeming omnipresence in many Latin American countries and an increasing sense that it is just the way of life now. Corruption tolerance (respondents who agreed that "sometimes paying a bribe is justified") has been steadily increasing since 2010 (15%), topping off at 20.5% in 2016/7.

Confidence in the judiciary

It's also not just politicians that the citizens of the Americas no longer trust. Sixty three percent of respondents in 2016/7 had little or no confidence that the judiciary will punish the guilty, the highest number since LAPOP began asking the question in 2006.

Declining trust in the judiciary is almost universal across Latin America, though respondents in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Guyana have significantly more confidence in the judiciary than they did between 2006 and 2014. In Brazil, a whopping 89.9% of respondents have little or no confidence that the judiciary will publish the guilty, up from an average of 72.5% in previous surveys. Other regional heavyweights—including Chile (79.3%), Venezuela (77%), Mexico (74.1%) and Argentina (72.4%)—didn't fare much better.

Life satisfaction

It's worth noting that the results of the survey aren't all gloom and doom. Despite declining confidence in institutions, diminished enthusiasm for democracy, and growing perceptions of corruption, respondents' levels of satisfaction with their lives have stayed steady since recovering from a dip during the global financial crisis. (75.9% of surveyed citizens reported that they were satisfied in 2016/7.)

The one major exception is Venezuela, where life satisfaction dipped to 70.5% in 2016/7 from 79.0% in 2014. This drop can likely be attributed to the factor that LAPOP researches found contributes most to life satisfaction: satisfaction with government services.

What's next for the region?

While the results of the 2016/7 LAPOP survey may at first glance portend a greater risk for stable democratic societies, the authors of the survey seem to have reason to be optimistic:

"Robust respect for and commitment to democratic institutions can anchor the system if reformers seek to craft policies to improve the justice system. Pairing this conclusion with rising tolerance for public dissent, policymakers may, indeed, find fertile ground for their reforms... It is thus incumbent upon party leaders to show themselves to be capable, honest, and responsive to citizens."

The citizens of the Americas aren't fed up with their democracies as much as they are with the people and the parties *running* those systems. Maybe what the countries of the region need, instead of new political systems, are some fresh faces and new ideas in politics. The question will be if those fresh faces and new ideas will remain committed to the limits and constraints of democratic rule.