

# Andres Oppenheimer

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Demonstrators take part in a march against corruption in Lima, Peru in 2018. Teo Bizca Getty Images  
A new poll scheduled to be released Oct. 15 should trigger alarm bells about the future of democracy in Latin America: Support for democratic institutions is at its lowest levels since the survey was started 15 years ago.

The Latin America Barometer poll was conducted in 20 countries, with more than 31,000 interviews, between late 2018 and early 2019. It shows that only 57.7 percent of Latin Americans support democracy, compared with 67.6 percent in 2004, according to a preliminary version of the survey conducted by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP.)

Uruguay, Costa Rica and Argentina, followed by Chile and Mexico show the most support for democracy.

But on the other end of the list, Peru is one of the countries where people have the lowest regard for democratic institutions.

Peru is going through its worst political crisis in three decades. On Sept. 30, President Martin Vizcarra and the country's opposition-controlled Congress, in effect, fired each other, leaving the nation for a few hours with two presidents —Vizcarra and his vice-president Mercedes Araoz.

The crisis was temporarily resolved — or pushed forward — when Araoz resigned after the military sided with Vizcarra. Now, Peru is expected to hold legislative elections in January to pick a new temporary Congress that will last until new congressional and presidential elections planned for 2021.

According to the LAPOP poll, only 41.8 percent of Peruvians trust democratic institutions, and only 28 percent say they are satisfied with democracy. In addition, almost 59 percent of Peruvians said they would support an unconstitutional presidential coup against Congress.

Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, Vanderbilt University professor of political science and LAPOP poll director, told me that, "The poll's data may well explain why Vizcarra is likely to weather this political storm." She said that, "Public appetite for Congress was very low, and there was extremely high tolerance among the public for the president's decision to close the Congress."

Paradoxically, Peru has been one of Latin America's economic biggest success stories in recent decades. The country has steadily grown and reduced poverty more than most Latin American countries, and — despite a recent slowdown to 4 percent growth last year — is still growing more than the region's average.

But Peru's political system has been shaken by the Odebrecht corruption scandal like that of no other country.

Investigations into the Brazilian construction giant's millions of dollars in bribes to top political figures have resulted in charges against former Peruvian Presidents Ollanta Humala, Alejandro Toledo and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, as well as against the country's opposition leader Keiko Fujimori.

Charges linked to the Odebrecht scandal also led to the recent suicide of former President Alan Garcia. Now, virtually all of Peru's living former presidents are either in jail or facing corruption charges.

During a recent visit to Peru, I was left with mixed feelings about its record number of jailed former leaders.

On the one hand, it can be seen as a triumph of justice in a region where most former presidents enjoy virtual impunity from corruption charges. On the other hand, some of them have been jailed without sentencing, under controversial rules that allow judges to put people behind bars before they are sentenced to prevent them from fleeing the country.

It's hard to know whether Peruvian judges have overplayed their hand. Perhaps they have helped create a climate of distrust in all politicians, and in democracy itself. Or perhaps they were just doing their jobs and should be commended for it.

But the scary thing about Peru's constitutional crisis and the fact that only 28 percent of Peruvians are satisfied with democracy is that they are indications that the country may be fertile ground for an authoritarian outsider. And, as the new nationwide poll suggests, most other Latin American countries run the same risk.