

Support for democracy in a slump across Americas, according to new survey | Research News @ Vanderbilt

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Democracy is struggling for support in the Americas, according to the 2018/19 AmericasBarometer report, with just over half of all citizens expressing faith in the system for the second survey period in a row.

“When citizen support for democracy is weak, it becomes difficult for nations to sustain free and fair political systems and leaves them vulnerable to authoritarian rule.”

“The newest data show troubling signs that democracy is at risk of further backsliding in the Americas,” said Elizabeth Zechmeister, Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Political Science and director of LAPOP. “When citizen support for democracy is weak, it becomes difficult for nations to sustain free and fair political systems and leaves them vulnerable to authoritarian rule.”

The AmericasBarometer has been conducted every two years since 2004 by LAPOP, a survey research lab at Vanderbilt University. Twenty nations across North and South America, including the Caribbean, were surveyed in this round. Haiti and Venezuela were excluded this time due to security concerns. The results will be presented on Tuesday, Oct. 15, at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. The event will also be webcast (the webcast link will be available here).

Democracy in decline

In the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region, support for democracy has failed to rally following a significant fall two years ago. Between 2004 and 2014, the percentage of support clustered consistently in the high 60s. In 2017 it dropped eight points to 58 percent, and in 2019 it stands at just above 57 percent.

Public satisfaction with democracy’s effectiveness also remains low after a hard 13-point fall in 2017. In the 2019 survey, just over 39 percent of the public reported satisfaction with how the

democratic system is working in their country. This is the lowest average recorded to date since polling began in 2004.

Also concerning is that nearly a quarter of residents express support for executive coups—the shutdown of the legislature by the chief executive. This figure has steadily risen by nearly 10 points over the past 6 years.

“Latin Americans are looking to presidents to solve pressing issues like poverty, food insecurity and crime,” noted Noam Lupu, associate professor of political science and associate director of LAPOP. “And they are increasingly willing to forego democratic institutions like checks and balances to get things done.”

“It’s important to remember, however, that we see a great deal of variation between individual countries,” Zechmeister said. “In nations with strong, stable democracies, such as Uruguay or Costa Rica, we see support for democracy in the mid-70s, while nations with deeply troubled governments like Nicaragua and Peru have dipped below 50 percent.”

Support for democratic institutions also down

In addition to lower faith in democracy as a whole, residents of Latin America and the Caribbean reported, on average, lower confidence in the core institutions that comprise a functioning democratic government. Overall, there’s less faith that governments protect basic rights, lower pride in one’s government system, and increased skepticism about the fairness of the court systems. Political parties fared worst of all, while the executive branch fared the best.

“Interestingly, we see an uptick in support for democratic systems in nations that have recently held elections, suggesting that regular participation in democratic processes reinforces the legitimacy of the system among citizens,” Zechmeister said.

Social media use affects perceptions of democracy

For the first time in the poll’s history, the AmericasBarometer asked a multi-question module

about social media use and looked at the relationship between social media use and political beliefs.

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In Latin America and the Caribbean, nearly two in three adults (64.4 percent) use WhatsApp, while 56.2 percent use Facebook. Twitter is used less often (less than 8 percent use Twitter). The typical social media user is young, urban and educated. The survey finds that about 28 percent of adults view political information on Facebook and/or Twitter on a daily basis, while 12.9 percent of adults view political information daily on WhatsApp. Frequent users of social media—those who log on daily or weekly —tend to be more politically tolerant on the whole, but are also less satisfied with democracy and less trusting of democratic institutions.

“While social media can be a good source of political information, its impact on democratic attitudes is neither a net good nor a net bad,” Lupu said. “There’s no question social media will have an effect on politics in the region, but our survey results suggest that the effect is a mixed one.”

ABOUT LAPOP

The LAPOP lab at Vanderbilt University is a center for excellence in international survey research and a leader in public opinion polling in the Americas, with more than 40 years of experience. The AmericasBarometer is the only scientifically rigorous comparative public opinion survey of the Western Hemisphere. The surveys are based on national sample designs and conducted with the assistance of partners across the region. Core support for LAPOP’s work is provided by USAID and Vanderbilt University.