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# LATIN AMERICA: Democracy falls short on inclusion

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## Abstract

The latest Latinobarometro survey.

A new poll released on September 25 by Latinobarometro finds that as the economy has slowed, discontent has predictably increased. However, the protests which have become a regular feature of the region reflect political as well as economic dissatisfaction. Despite the consolidation of the institutional structures of democracy and stable support for it as a form of government, Latin Americans remain unconvinced that it serves the interests of the majority as well as it could or should.

## Full Text

**SUBJECT:** The latest Latinobarometro survey.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** A new poll released on September 25 by Latinobarometro finds that as the economy has slowed, discontent has predictably increased. However, the protests which have become a regular feature of the region reflect political as well as economic dissatisfaction. Despite the consolidation of the institutional structures of democracy and stable support for it as a form of government, Latin Americans remain unconvinced that it serves the interests of the majority as well as it could or should.

**ANALYSIS:** Impacts.

Demands for democracy to deliver the expected economic and political inclusion will increase.

Slower growth has not dampened expectations of a better economic future, which will raise pressure on governments.

Party political identification, with figures as low as 24% in Chile and 23% in Brazil, is set to continue declining.

After almost 30 years of democracy, most Latin American countries clearly comply with its formal requirements.

As Latinobarometro, a Santiago-based research organisation that has surveyed public attitudes in Latin America since 1995, points out in its latest report (covering 18 countries), 128 presidential elections have taken place in that period and, although 14 presidents were unable, for different reasons, to complete their term, they were replaced according to the established institutional procedures ( see LATIN AMERICA: 'Perils of presidentialism' persist - October 7, 2015).

Moreover, contrary to common belief, election turnout as a percentage of the voting-age population has risen, reaching a regional average of 76% in presidential elections in 2014, up from 64% in 1995 (and a low of 56% in 2003). Elections are also increasingly perceived as clean.

Despite slower economic growth -- which UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) forecasts at 0.5% this year, down from 1.1% in 2014 and 2.9% in 2013 (see LATIN AMERICA: Growth pessimism gains ground - August 3, 2015) -- support for democracy as preferable to any other form of government has not declined significantly.

At 56% according to this year's Latinobarometro survey, this support represents a drop from 61% in 2010 but remains close to its 20-year average -- although it tends to be lower among young people who, without their elders' experience of dictatorship, tend to judge it more critically on its results.

There are, however, grounds for a number of concerns about the quality, as opposed to the mechanics, of democracy:

Satisfaction with democracy.

This is lower than in any other region of the world, although, as the report points out, this reflects factors including high expectations and an increasingly better educated, empowered and critical citizenry.

From 44% in 2012, it dropped to 37% this year and reached over 50% in only four countries (Uruguay, Ecuador, Argentina and the Dominican Republic) while, in Brazil and Mexico, it was running at 21% and 19%, respectively.

Governmental approval.

This dropped to a regional average of 47% (January-February 2015), down from 60% in 2009 (but still well above the low of 36% seen in 2002).

Protests.

At the same time, protests have become increasingly common and, in some cases, such as student protests in Chile or protests against mining and energy projects around the region, have had a significant impact on government policy.

In 2015, 38% of those surveyed indicated they had or would participate in an authorised march, up from just 13% in 2005, while 21%, up from 3%, had or would participate in an unauthorised protest.

In answer to another question (without historical data), more than half indicated that they were willing to take to the streets to protest about issues that (in decreasing order of willingness) included education and healthcare; wages and working conditions; democratic rights; and exploitation of natural resources.

Moreover, 30% indicated that they viewed social networks (often a vehicle for criticism of the government) as a way of participating in politics (although 22% also indicated that they create only an illusion of participation).

This willingness to protest constitutes a very different situation from the 1990s when protest was muted by fear of rocking the new democratic boat as well as by the legacy of the authoritarian regimes' destruction of citizen organisations.

Economic impact.

Discontent can be attributed partly to the economic situation with which, over the years, satisfaction with democracy has consistently shown a correlation. In 2001, in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, it dropped to a low of 25% and, in 2011-12 when the region was still riding high on the commodity-price boom, peaked at 44%.

In view of the subsequent weakening of growth, this year's drop to 37% was hardly surprising. However, the economy's impact is also reflected in other indicators:

Perception of progress .

In this year's survey, only 32%, down from 37% in 2013 and 39% in 2010, considered their country to be progressing while 22% considered that it is going backwards and 44% that is stagnating.

There are, however, wide differences between countries. In Bolivia, 63% consider the country is progressing as compared to just 15% in Venezuela and 14% in Paraguay.

Principal problem .

Crime is identified as the region's single most important problem (23%). In 2011, 63% consider that their country is becoming ever less safe -- up from 55%,. However, this is outweighed by economic problems which, taken as a whole (including unemployment, inflation, poverty and lack of food), total 34%.

Crisis of representation .

However, the survey also provides evidence of a crisis of representation, with roots deeper than the current economic slowdown. Although with important differences between countries, it appears to reflect mistrust of the way democracy is working:

Representation of interests.

Only 23% of those surveyed felt represented by Congress and only 29% considered that their country is governed in the interests of all as opposed to those of a few powerful groups.

Transparency .

A clear majority perceives lack of transparency in the state (62%), the government (60%), and private companies (56%) and this has been accompanied by an increase in perceptions of corruption and a decline in perceptions of progress in combating it.

This is partly due to the weight in regional averages of Brazil, where only 16% consider the government

transparent. In Colombia and Peru, the figure reaches only 24%.

Income distribution.

According to Latinobarometro, 60% of Latin Americans -- some 360 million people -- feel they are not getting their fair share of the economic pie.

Despite the region's success in reducing poverty, income inequality has remained extremely high and impatience with slow progress on this front is now likely to be aggravated by slower economic growth, with the new middle classes fearing the loss of what they have achieved ( see LATIN AMERICA: Austerity may risk poverty progress - February 4, 2015).

CONCLUSION: This perception, already being aggravated by slower economic growth, suggests the need for political changes that include greater governmental openness and transparency and, for example, fairer and more efficient judicial systems. It may also require mechanisms, possibly including some forms of direct democracy such as plebiscites, to increase trust in and identification with decisions.

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