

Poll Shows Many Latin Americans Unsure About Democracy

Democracy is making gradual inroads in Latin America, but economic concerns have set serious obstacles in its path. This is the sobering conclusion to emerge from *Latinobarómetro*, a poll carried out in 17 countries by a Chilean-based organization that includes such respected analysts as Juan Linz, Martin Lipset, Hans-Dieter Klingeman and Dieter Nohlen. The survey has been conducted in Latin America every year since 1995, enabling it to trace shifting attitudes toward institutions, economic policy, free trade, integration (both regional and hemispheric), and other issues that factor into important political decisions. The methodology used makes it possible to compare different countries and reach conclusions about trends in the region.

The 2001 poll shows a dramatic decline in support for democracy in the region's most populous countries, with the exception of Mexico. In Brazil, the percentage of respondents who said that democracy was preferable to any other form of government fell from 50% in 1997 to 30% in 2001. The percentage of people who agreed with this statement fell from 75% to 58% in Argentina, and from 69% to 36% in Colombia. Even in Mexico, 35% of respondents said that in certain circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one. The figure was 18% in Brazil, 21% in Argentina and 16% in Colombia. Paraguay was an extreme case; more respondents there preferred authoritarianism (43%) to democracy (35%).

The survey also revealed that four out of five Latin Americans believe that corruption, organized crime and drug addiction have "increased a lot" in their countries in the last three years. In addition, it found a growing sense of economic crisis in the last five years in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru. The only countries where respondents perceived an improvement in the economy were Mexico and Venezuela, while Brazilians reported a moderate decline. Across the region, privatizations received a more negative rating than they did three years ago.

The poll results show an alarming drop in public support for the process of democratic consolidation that has been underway in Latin America for the last two decades. The main culprits seem to be the social costs associated with economic reform, including privatizations; the current state of the economy in each country (more favorable at present in Mexico than elsewhere); and the greater visibility of corruption, crime and drugs.

The responses reveal structural problems that raise concerns about the future of democracy in the region. With the exception of Mexico and Nicaragua, Latin Americans trust their fellow citizens less today than they did six years ago, and respondents expressed little faith in the basic institutions of representative democracy. Less than 25% reported having "a lot" or "some" confidence in the

judiciary and the national congress, and not even 20% said they trusted political parties.

Many of the phenomena reported are part of the normal challenges of democracy. Typically, conflicts that remain "hidden" under authoritarian regimes become visible in the more open climate of democracy. But in young democracies, notes Latinobarómetro Director Martha Lagos, "more people think the economy is tied to democracy," making democracy more vulnerable than in stable, industrialized countries. The increased poverty and misery of many Latin Americans have had the effect of limiting public acceptance of democracy.

Democracy will continue to be a topic of debate in Latin America in the coming months. In September, the Organization of American States will hold a special meeting in Lima, Peru to discuss the adoption of a "Democracy Clause" based on the accords signed at the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City. Several countries, led by Venezuela, have indicated that they will oppose a formula based on the concept of representative democracy. And next year, elections in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia will put democratic institutions to the test amid the pressures of the Argentine economic crisis and the US economic slowdown. In these and other cases, widespread doubts about democracy may find concrete expression in the region's politics.

Results of the Latinobarómetro poll appear in the July 26, 2001 issue of *The Economist*:

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