

Rating Latin America's Presidents

When the media ask Latin American experts and the public in general about their leaders' performance, the response is usually negative, with the government receiving a very low score. This pattern holds true in a recent public opinion poll carried out by Colombia's Centro Nacional de Consultoría and published in the newsmagazine Poder. It includes analysis by Georgetown University professor Arturo Valenzuela, who served as an advisor on Latin American affairs during the Clinton administration.

According to the study, which uses data supplied by polling agencies in each country, only 20% of those surveyed considered their leaders to have performed well or very well. The presidents who fared the best were Peru's Alejandro Toledo (with a favorable response rate of 51%), Mexico's Vicente Fox (45%) and Chile's Ricardo Lagos (34%). These same presidents received the highest scores for their management of the economy: Fox (38%), Toledo (29%) and Lagos (28%).

Only 13% of those polled gave their government's a good grade on security. The governments of Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Guatemala and Venezuela received the lowest scores. This does not necessarily mean that these countries are the most unsafe, but rather reflects their citizens' dissatisfaction with the way security has been handled.

Ratings of government's anti-corruption efforts varied greatly from country to country. Forty percent of Peruvians believed that their president has performed well or very well in this area. Presidents Fox and Lagos each received a 25% favorable response rate to this question, while the presidents of Venezuela and Guatemala scored only 1%.

The governments were also rated on their education policies. Fifty-one percent of Chileans, 39% of Mexicans and 36% of Bolivians gave their leaders a high ranking in this area. The lowest score was received by Paraguayan President Luis González Macchi, with 8%.

Latin Americans were also asked their opinion about the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Positive responses far outranked negative ones, 71% to 29%. The countries showing the most support were Mexico (75%), Peru (73%), Chile and Colombia (both 71%).

In his analysis of these responses, Valenzuela first gives some general context. The political and economic transformations of the last few decades, he argues, have not produced the lasting structural changes necessary for improving the standard of living of most citizens of the region.

Valenzuela singles out Brazil as the most difficult Latin American country to

govern, "not only because of its size but also because of its strong tradition of federalism, which leaves it with one of the weakest central governments in the world today." To this challenge is added a history of weak political parties with regional caudillos and huge social disparities. Valenzuela gives Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso generally good marks, "although his administration has been tainted by an energy crisis that his government did not see coming and has handled incoherently, without a strategic vision."

He calls Colombian President Andrés Pastrana "another leader who faces a complex situation." Pastrana is "trying to salvage a dying peace process as government institutions lose legitimacy and the country breaks apart in a war that has no apparent end in sight." All this, Valenzuela adds, "has affected an economy that, while never very big, was stable at least."

Argentina's Fernando de la Rúa has been strongly criticized for his handling of the worst political and economic crisis in his country in more than a decade. Valenzuela notes that despite his political experience and long career in public service, De la Rúa has refrained from decisive action "in an effort to avoid splitting from his party and governing coalition, contributing to a sense of paralysis and lack of confidence that perpetuates the vicious circle of the country's crisis."

Valenzuela describes the election victory of President Fox in Mexico as a sign of the new democratic and economic trend in that country, which is reflected in greater confidence about the future among both Mexicans and outside observers. "Proximity to the United States gives Mexico a strong competitive advantage over the rest of the Latin American countries," Valenzuela concludes. "Increasingly, its northern neighbor acts as a pole of economic development for Mexico." But, "we must wait and see if Fox has enough political power to pass the economic and political reforms that the country needs," he adds. Indeed, Mexico's leading newsmagazine, *Proceso*, recently accused the Fox administration of failing to fulfill its promises for change. "With no clear direction or tangible accomplishments, the government of Vicente Fox appears to be heading more toward the past than the future, a regression that ignores the lessons of the nation's history," the magazine charged.

In his assessment of Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, Valenzuela points out that now that he is in power he can no longer blame all of the country's problems on its past leaders. Chávez "has benefited enormously from the increase in the price of oil, the commodity that sustains his nation's economy," Valenzuela pointed out. "This has both strengthened and weakened his position, because it leaves him vulnerable to a sudden drop in the price of 'black gold.' If this happens, it could raise doubts about the concentration power in the country."

Chilean President Lagos, Valenzuela says, "has the difficult task of consolidating the socialist movement's hold on power and leaving behind the Pinochet era. He must do so with limited political power in a country that still looks back with nostalgia to the period of economic bonanza under right-wing rule."

The survey results and ensuing analysis leave no doubt that Latin America is enduring difficult times. "But despite all that has happened, one thing is clear," Valenzuela states: "There is no turning back from the political and economic reforms that have made the continent more democratic and its economies more open. The great challenge facing the region-and its leaders-is to implement those policies to improve conditions for all levels of the population. That is a government's ultimate goal."