

The Latinobarómetro poll

Democracy's ten-year rut

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Latin Americans do not want to go back to dictatorship but they are still unimpressed with their democracies.

IF ANYONE ever imagined that building strong democracies in Latin America would be a swift and easy task, this year's Latinobarómetro poll should disabuse them. Economies have been growing strongly across the region and governments are spending more than ever on social programmes, but the poll—taken in 18 countries and published exclusively by *The Economist*—suggests that only about half of Latin Americans are convinced democrats and only one in three is satisfied with the way their democracy works in practice. Those figures have remained almost identical for three years in a row—and are down on those of a decade ago.

This year's poll points to a slightly sunnier mood: political institutions are a little less reviled and presidents are still quite popular even though many are nearing the end of their term. Respondents are slightly more optimistic about their economic prospects, and a bit less hostile towards the United States. They are even starting to warm again to privatisation.

Latinobarómetro, a Chilean organisation, has carried out similar surveys each year since the mid-1990s. So the poll has captured shifts in opinion in the region during a decade that saw initial enthusiasm for democracy and free-market reform tempered by recession (severe in places), and followed by the advent of leftish governments and then a strong economic recovery. Through this switchback, says Marta Lagos, Latinobarómetro's director, what is striking is the underlying stability of opinion.

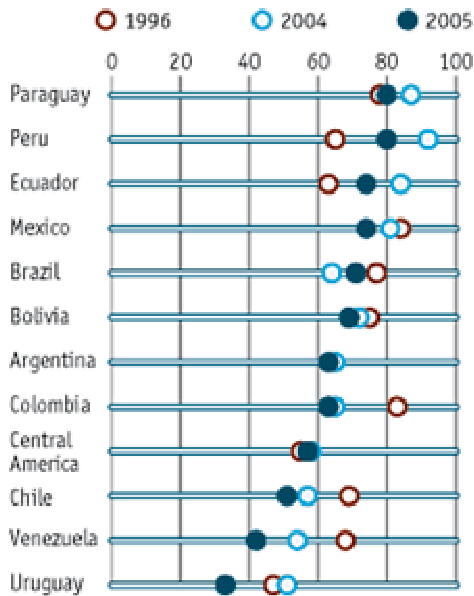
Support for democracy is lower in a dozen countries today than in 1996 (see charts 1 and 2). It is worryingly low in Peru, parts of Central America and Paraguay (the only country with a strong authoritarian streak). In Brazil, some of the shine brought by the election of Lula da Silva in 2002 appears to have been removed by a recent corruption scandal involving his party. On the other hand, support for democracy is very high in Venezuela, perhaps because both supporters and opponents of Hugo Chávez, the socialist president, claim it as their banner. It is high, too, in two small countries, Uruguay and Costa Rica, which many political scientists say are the region's only "consolidated" (ie, fully fledged) democracies. It is rising in Chile (which many would say now qualifies for the "consolidated" tag) and in Mexico. But only in Uruguay and Venezuela are a majority of respondents satisfied with the working of democracy (see chart 3).

Nevertheless, the poll suggests a growing resilience in Latin American democracy. Some 62% say that in no circumstances would they support a military coup (though only 51% in Ecuador, 49% in Peru, and 31% in Paraguay). And 70% agree with the Churchillian notion that whatever its problems, democracy is the least bad system of government.

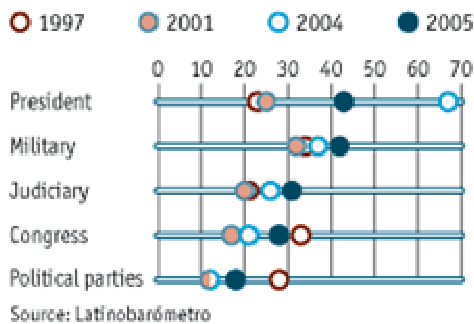
A little less dissatisfied

3

How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country? % responding "not very satisfied" and "not at all satisfied"



For the groups, institutions or persons in this list, how much confidence do you have in each? % responding "a lot" and "some", unweighted Latin American average

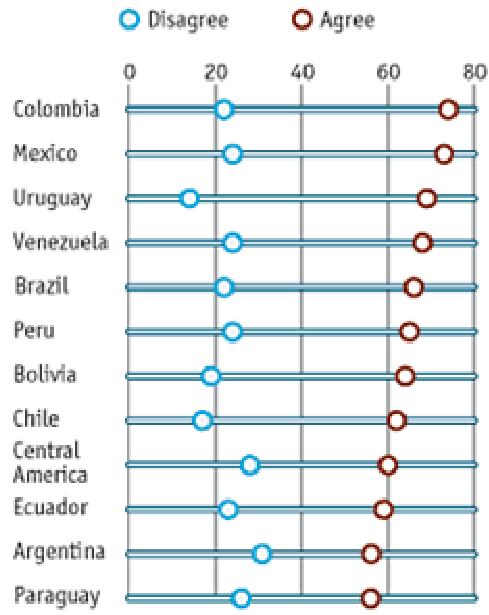


Source: Latinobarómetro

The value of markets

4

Is a market economy the only system which can develop your country? % of respondents, 2005



Source: Latinobarómetro

Private pleasures

5

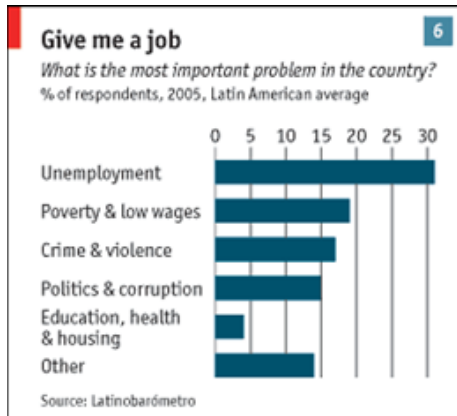
The privatisation of state companies has been beneficial % responding "very" or "somewhat", Latin American average



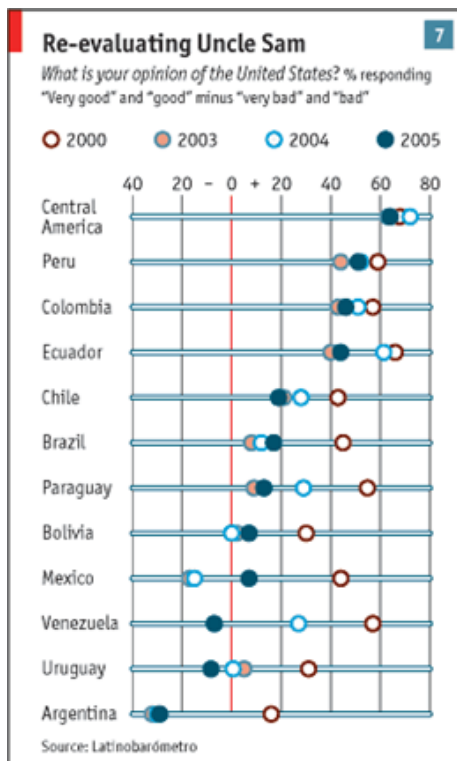
Source: Latinobarómetro

But much of the machinery of democracy is missing or defective. Only 26% of respondents said that citizens in their country are equal before the law—the same number as in 1998. Only a fifth express much faith in political parties and only a quarter in the Congress and the courts—though in both cases that is a slight improvement on recent years (see chart 3). In some countries, mistrust of political institutions has led citizens to take to the streets—in Bolivia, where protests have toppled two presidents in as many years, 11% of respondents said they had taken part in roadblocks and another 12% said they might do so.

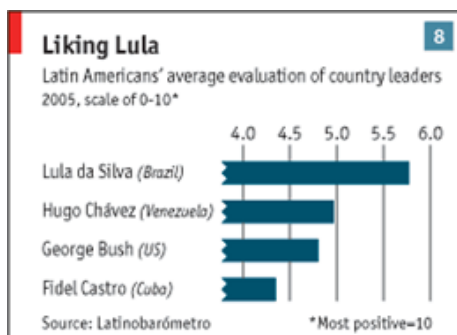
The poll shows that a clear majority believe that a market economy is the only means by which their country can develop (see chart 4). Sentiment towards privatisation is improving—perhaps, Ms Lagos suggests, because more people appreciate the service improvements delivered by privatised utilities now that they have a bit more money with which to meet their bills. Latin Americans continue to see their main problems as



being unemployment, crime and poverty (see chart 6). Just 31% (up from 27% last year) think their country is progressing. Only in Chile and Venezuela do a majority see progress. But across the region, expectations are rising: 54% think their children will live better than they do, up by 4% compared with last year.



Almost everywhere, opinions towards the United States are thawing, though they are yet to reach the warmth of the late 1990s (see chart 7). There are two exceptions. One is Venezuela, where Mr Chávez accuses (without proof) the United States of planning to invade his country. The other is Uruguay, where a left-wing government took power this year. The most anti-American country remains Argentina, which has long had difficult relations with the United States (except for an interlude in the 1990s). In many other countries, respondents thought that relations with the United States were becoming closer. That may be because the memory of the Iraqi war, which was very unpopular in Latin America, is fading. Central America, with which the United States this year enacted a free-trade agreement, is the most pro-Yanqui part of the region.



The most popular leader among Latin Americans seems to be Brazil's president, Lula da Silva, despite his party's recent woes (see chart 8). However, fewer than 50% of respondents expressed an opinion about Lula. Mr Chávez is more popular than his mentor, Fidel Castro, and his arch-enemy, George Bush. But the appeal of *chavismo* in the region may be more limited than is often claimed. Only in the Dominican Republic, a generally pro-American country, did more than 10% of respondents choose Venezuela as the Latin American country they most trusted; in Bolivia and Ecuador, two countries seen as vulnerable to Venezuelan influence, only 5% and 9% did respectively. And the poll suggests that most Latin Americans place themselves in the political centre.

The poll also indicates that crime remains a big problem in the region. Some 41% of

respondents said they knew someone who had been a victim of crime in the past 12 months—up from 33% last year. But 30% think progress is being made in reducing corruption in their country, up from 26% last year. The poll also reveals the steady rise of Protestantism in the world's most Catholic continent. In 1995, 80% of respondents said they were Catholic and only 3% Protestant. This year, those figures were 70% and 15% respectively.

After a decade of polling, two things are clear. Latin Americans will not easily revert to authoritarianism, even in hard times. But on the other hand, building consolidated democracies amid poverty, inequality and a legacy of past undemocratic practices, is a long, slow job.

Latinobarómetro is a non-profit organisation based in Santiago, Chile, which has carried out regular surveys of opinions, attitudes and values in Latin America since 1995. The poll was taken by local opinion-research companies in 18 Latin American countries, and involved 20,209 interviews in August and September 2005. The average margin of error was 3%. Central America in the charts refers to Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic. Further details from www.latinobarometro.org