

AmericasBarometer: Topical Brief – March 11, 2013

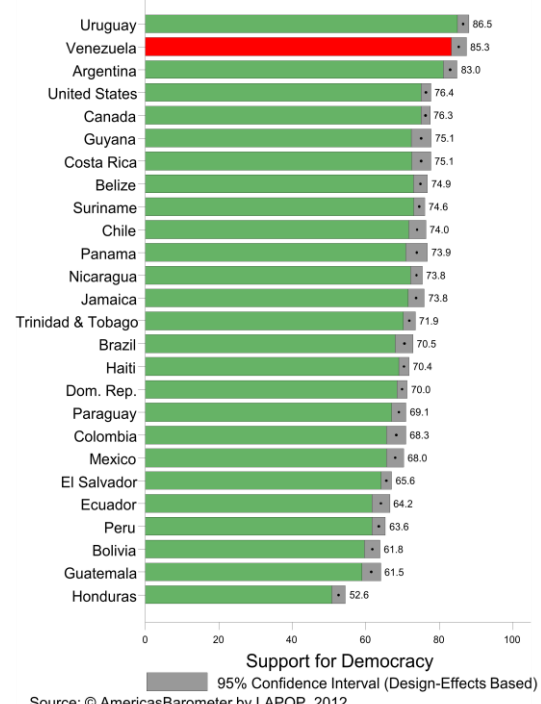
Public Support for Democracy Endures in Venezuela

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The recent illness and now passing of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has raised many questions with respect to what will be the nature of democratic politics in the country following the departure of this highly influential leader. In light of widespread concern that Chávez, in power for 14 years, weakened traditional forms of representative democracy, now is a good moment to assess the extent to which Venezuelans are supportive of democracy as a system of government.

This *Insights* Topical Brief is the first in a series of reports focused on political attitudes in Venezuela. While Venezuela has one of the longest experiences with democracy in Latin America (dating back to 1958), questions of democratic commitment have been raised by critics of President Hugo Chávez’s administration. The disappearance of the traditional party system and the new style of populist leadership under Chávez left many questioning the prospects for democracy in that country. Furthermore, Venezuela has experienced a number of challenges in recent times that conceivably could shake confidence in democratic politics: the country was highly affected by the recent global economic crisis; high levels of crime and corruption have taken their toll on citizens’ sense of security; and, the political system has come to reflect deep and often vitriolic divisions between Hugo Chávez’s supporters and his opposition.

Figure 1. Support for Democracy, 2012



Nonetheless, according to the most recent AmericasBarometer survey carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the Venezuelan public’s support for democracy is the second highest in the region. During February and March of 2012, a nationally representative sample of 1,500 respondents was interviewed as part of a broader study conducted in 26 countries of the

Americas. In all 26 countries, respondents were asked about to what extent they support democracy in the abstract. The results (mean values on a 0-100 scale) are shown in Figure 1.¹

Venezuelans' average support for democracy in abstract is 85 points on a 0-100 scale. This puts the country in second place on the list, just below Uruguay and above long-established established democracies such as the United States (4th), Canada (5th), and Costa Rica (7th).

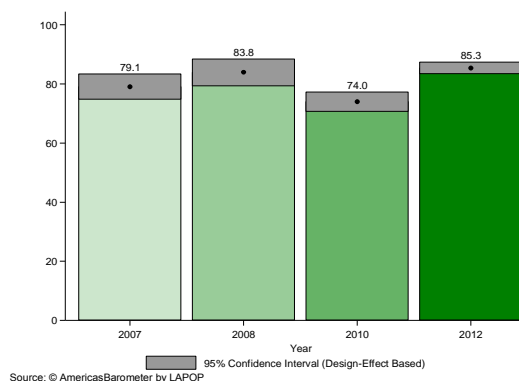
Beyond the comparatively high levels of support for democracy in the abstract among Venezuelans, Figure 2 shows that average support for democracy in Venezuela is also fairly stable over time. While support for democracy has endured at comparatively high levels in recent times, the data do show a drop of about 10 points between 2008 and 2010, likely due to the effects of the economic crisis. Nonetheless, by 2012 average support for democracy had increased again, to levels on par with the pre-economic crisis time period.

In analyses we conducted of factors that predict support for democracy in Venezuela in 2012, we find that the only factors that help distinguish those Venezuelans who are more supportive of democracy from those who are less supportive are age (older are more supportive than the young) and education (more educated are more supportive than the less well-educated), but beyond those two factors support for democracy is fairly evenly spread across the Venezuelan population (rich and poor, urban and rural).

Understanding Venezuelans' views on democracy seems crucial in the current context of political uncertainty with respect to when elections will be held and who will replace

¹ The question wording was the following: **ING4**. Changing the subject again, democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?" responses were given in a 1-7 agree/disagree scale and transformed to a 0-100 scale. Higher values indicate higher support for democracy.

Figure 2. Average Support for Democracy Over Time in Venezuela



Chávez as president of Venezuela. One might question whether the support for democracy in the abstract is grounded in support for basic democratic institutions (e.g., elections) and processes (e.g., checks and balances). In a forthcoming report we will show strong evidence that, indeed, Venezuelans express high levels of commitment to the basic democratic institutions and processes.

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Full results of the 2012 AmericasBarometer - Venezuela survey and the AmericasBarometer 2012 comparative study can be consulted on-line at www.LapopSurveys.org. The full data set is available for on-line analysis or download (in SPSS and Stata formats) at no cost.