

## CITIZEN TRUST IN GOVERNMENT: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE FROM LATIN AMERICA

David Pion-Berlin

### What is Political Trust?

Governmental trustworthiness a difficult thing to achieve. It does not come naturally or easily in Latin America or anywhere for that matter; it has to be earned. Trusted officials are those who instill confidence among citizens that one's institution or person has integrity, ability and concern. Citizens must have some assurance that political leaders and the institutions they serve are honest, competent, and responsive to their needs. Trustworthy officials are also those that follow through with commitments; their word is credible.

Right at the onset, we should distinguish between being trustworthy from being popular. Public opinion polls may demonstrate short term approval for the way a president or the congress are handling their jobs. But trust is something that is more akin to political capital; it is earned over time, stored and eventually spent. It should also be apparent that the accumulation of capital allows political figures to occasionally make unpopular decisions. When the public trusts, they are betting that political leaders have the wisdom to lead, whether or not they approve of or benefit from the specific measures. Thus, citizens can give their government high marks on trustworthiness even when their own personal economic fortunes fail to improve—distinguishing trust from yet another concept—satisfaction. Rather than concluding they are selfless, what we can say is that voters have enough confidence in government to believe that eventually things will get better for them. They have this

expectation because they are convinced the government is on their side, or is wise enough to do the right thing which in the longer run will benefit them.

Trust, in other words, earns political authorities the right to make unpopular choices. Certainly, a leader who demonstrates sustained and growing popularity may cultivate trust. But then again, he may not. Popularity may come about merely because he is likeable; voters relate to his personality. Trust however must be based on a firmer foundation of good performance, good policy and integrity.

Because trust is difficult, because it is something to be earned, we should visualize it as the end of a process rather than a beginning. It is something that will derive once other forces are set in motion. Governments must demonstrate some proficiency—some basic ability to deliver a better life for their citizens, some level of responsiveness to demands, and basic integrity. These in turn can raise their esteem in the eyes of their citizens. But a public's approbation must accumulate over time before proficiency, accountability and honesty results in a trusting citizenry. It is not the product of one decisive act, but rather a series of actions that engender some faith among the followers.

Institutions as well as individuals can be trustworthy. They are when they have procedures in place for insuring that political agents are competent, credible, and acting in the interests of those that have placed their trust in them (Levi, 1998: 80). They can achieve that via incentives and disincentives. A congress can promote ethical standards and reward representatives with good behavior by assigning them powerful positions on committees. But they can also punish unethical behavior through inquiries, demotions, and shaming, in short, making it costly for congressmen to misbehave.

## Incentives to be Trustworthy

Even so, how many politicians can measure up to these standards? And why

would they want to? A politician must have some incentive for acting in a trustworthy manner. If he or she could operate purely out of narrow self interest, pleasing himself and a small coterie of fellow power elites, why not opt for doing so over the more challenging task of earning the public's trust? Being held accountable is certainly one inducement (Hardin, 1998: 12). If a political leader is taken to task for failing to perform to the expectations of a voting public, he/she has a reason to want to fulfill those expectations. Fear of being tossed out of office for poor performance, or becoming the subject of investigation for improper conduct (such as corruption) could be a sufficient stimulus. In this regard, we might hypothesize that political leaders who are up for re-election have a stronger incentive to act in a trustworthy manner than those who are not.

Latin American presidents with no re-election possibility—either because they are in their final term or are prohibited from running again—could and do ignore public needs because they bear no political cost. The same holds true for legislators. Trust becomes more of an issue the longer one stays in office and has to respond to the ongoing demands of constituents. In Latin America—unlike the United States—most congressmen do not serve for very long, because they use the congress as a stepping stone to seek other offices (Morgenstern, 2002). Since they anticipate a short tenure as legislators, they have little incentive to cultivate public assurances about themselves. Hence, it is not surprising to find, as we will show later, that the congress receives very poor trustworthy ratings.

Still, this begs the question as to just how vital earning trust is to re-election? Have we raised the bar too high on politicians who after all, find ways of getting re-elected while failing to excel in office? From the politician's point of view, earning trust may be nice, but is not necessary. This has led one theorist to claim that governments will function so long as citizens don't actively distrust them (Hardin, 1998: 11). In keeping with this more minimal requirement, governments may be able to perform up to some level that does not engender too many misgivings with a skeptical public. After all, one of the

hallmarks of an advanced democracy is that a public remains skeptical of its leaders. As Joseph Nye has said in reference to the United States, the nation was founded on the basis of mistrust in powerful rulers (Nye, 1997: 2-3). It is a healthy thing for citizens to be wary of their leaders; to ask hard questions about those in power who profess they are on their side, or to even act as societal watchdogs. The same should hold true for citizens of Latin America.

## The Risks of Distrust

The difficulty transpires when a skeptical public grows too cynical; when wariness translates into a deeper disgust with not only political leaders but the institutions they serve, and more perilously, with the political system writ large. If the electorate loses all faith in political representatives and institutions to operate effectively and honestly, it may be reluctant to get involved in mainstream politics. The result is a decline in voter turnout, a loss of interest in political party activity, etc. In Latin America, this is what Guillermo O'Donnell describes as low intensity citizenship (1993). Citizens fail to exercise their rights to participate fully in the democratic system. According to a 2004 U.N. study, some 30 percent of the public are un-mobilized, meaning they never exercise their rights to participate in any form, or do so rarely (United Nations, 2004: 141). Likewise, only one in four Latin American citizens actively participate in politics. Active participation means going beyond the mere act of voting to contact representatives, work in parties, collaborate on political projects in their communities, etc. Many agree that this is an unfortunate state of affairs when it occurs in regions of the third world where democracies are still struggling to secure their footing.

The risks of cynicism in Latin America are greater than they are for the advanced democracies. Studies of what are called the post-material states find that even as peoples' economic fortunes improve steadily over time, their confidence in government declines (Inglehart, 1998). This can't be explained

either by performance or by the behavior of any particular incumbent. It turns out citizens in the wealthy democracies take prosperity for granted but have become more demanding in other respects; they hold governments to increasingly higher standards on many issues. This may pose difficulties for an incumbent wishing to be re-elected, because citizens are engaging in more dissenting forms of politics (Inglehart 1998:220). But so far at least, these have not translated into a serious erosion of support for the democratic system itself. And the findings are that prosperity continues to be conducive to democratic survival (Przeworski et al, 2000).

A long term decline in trust in the advanced countries has not had the same potentially devastating consequences such declines have had in the much poorer region of Latin America. There, a repeated lack of trust has, in the past, indirectly resulted in a questioning of the political system. Most citizens presume that a government that comes to power in free and fair elections has earned the right to rule. However, that right is one that can be recalled by a public which has grown weary of government malfeasance or incompetence. When citizens begin to question a government's legitimacy, then they may take the next step and doubt whether the democratic political system is worth saving. This in turn may cause citizens to push for regime change (Hetherington, 1998: 792). In the past in Latin America, this was often the prelude to a military coup.

No one is predicting a coup today. But that is not because citizens have a high regard for their governments; they do not. Rather it is because the region is committed to protecting democracies. There are now a number of safeguards built into trade and investment deals that would trigger expulsion of countries from free trade zones if they were upended by military coups. The Organization of American States has taken a more vigilant role in thwarting coup attempts. All regional actors, including the U.S. have taken steps to make it more diplomatically and economically costly for a military government to take over, let alone survive.

But there are no absolute guarantees that democracy will survive at all costs.

The slippery slope from citizen disgust with governments to a rejection of the democratic system still exists, and countries must be careful not to take those first few fateful steps downward toward disaster. In this regard, it is disturbing to note that citizens seem increasingly disenchanted with their governments and leaders. They are in a phrase, less satisfied with government than they once were. Levels of satisfaction are usually tied to performance. The thought is that repeated dissatisfaction could evolve into declining trust.

One of the potential causes for dissatisfaction has to do with economic performance. Whether governments deserve credit or blame, the fact is they are often held accountable for whether or not economies grow and jobs are created. Poverty is rampant in Latin America, and has grown in the last decade both in relative and absolute terms. Unemployment has grown as well; in most countries it is in double digits, and in some surpasses 20 percent. Governments are often blamed for this dismal state of affairs, but the point is, trustworthy governments can ride out the storm. They have earned capital which they can draw upon during difficult transitions. As stated earlier, if citizens believe politicians care about them or at least care about the issues they care about, they may be willing to accept a deferral in personal gratification while cutting the government slack. But over the last decade, indications are that in Latin America, the vast majority of those polled (86%) say that political leaders are not interested in the issues that concern them (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2005: 42). This makes it more likely that citizens will increasingly target politicians for blame as their own economic situation deteriorates.

## What is the Profile of Trust in Latin America?

How trusting are Latin American citizens of their governing institutions? Are there differences in trust levels between one kind of institution and another? And what does this have to do with the public's views about the political system in general? We compiled data from three survey research organizations.

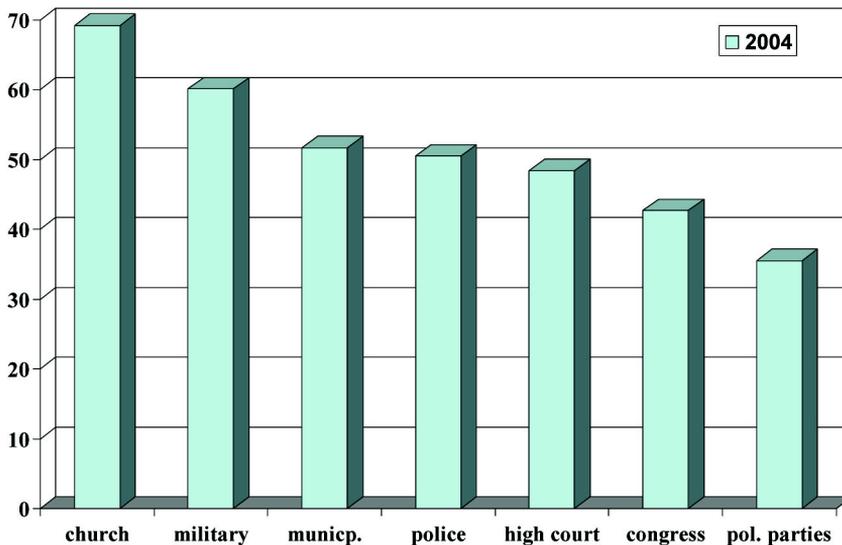
The first is the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) operating out of Vanderbilt University, under the direction of Professor Mitchell Seligson. The second is Corporación Latinobarómetro, a research outfit based in Santiago, Chile. And the third is Transparency International, a non-profit agency devoted to measuring perceptions of corruption in all countries of the world. Figure 1 is based on data compiled by LAPOP. It asks respondents from 8 Latin American countries to rate how highly they trust a series of institutions. We have data for both national governmental entities and local or municipal governments. We have also included the military, police and the church for bases of comparison.

Respondents were asked, “how much do you trust the following institutions?”<sup>1)</sup> As can be shown, the Church and military earn the highest marks, while congress and political parties the lowest. Faith in the Church is probably a mixture of religious observance in a region that is highly Catholic; historical reverence for an age-old institution, some feeling of assurance that the Church is there for people should they need it; and a belief in the overall integrity of the institution. Support for the military is less a sign of familiarity with their performance and more a function of respect. The military is rarely asked to engage in defense related missions, and so citizens are generally unaware about specific military activities. Still support quite probably derives from some vague public notion that the military is competent or at least professional. These results would not look the same 10-15 years ago, when citizens’ memories of military repression were still fresh.

---

1) Initially, results were placed on a 1-7 scale (7 being most trust) and then converted to a 1-100 scale to provide a more common metric for readers.

Figure 1. Trust in Latin American American Institutions 2004, 8 countries  
 Sourec: Latin American Publec Opion Project



Local government earns greater trust than do the institutions of national government. According to research this may have something to do with familiarity (Jennings, 1998: 235-236). People who have more direct contact with local authorities have a greater degree of confidence in them, compared to national governments that seem remote and disinterested. Secondly, differences between support for the Church on the one hand and political parties on the other, may be tied to participation. There are more people involved in local church related groups than there are in political parties. Familiarity with institutions, interaction with people who are members and participation in activities sponsored by those organizations generates more positive feelings towards them.

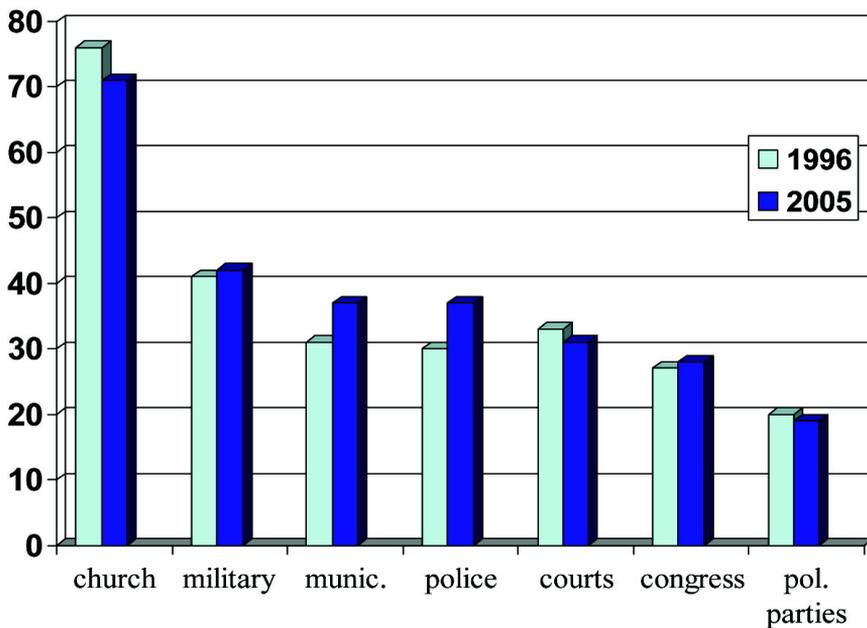
How valid are these results? Compare them to the data in figure 2. This information was compiled from Latinobarómetro, which affords us time series data from 17 Latin American countries going back more than a decade. Yet notice the striking similarities in the trust profiles from these two agencies. In fact, the institutions retain the same exact relative rankings, though absolute

measures differ somewhat. As shown, trust levels for all the political institutions remain low throughout the period. Data for the years between 1996 and 2005 do show variations but political party trust levels never surpass the 28 percent mark, or 36 percent for the congress.

Figure 2. Trust in Latin American Institutions: 1996 and 2005

Source: Latinobarometro

“Do you have a lot or some confidence in these institutions?”

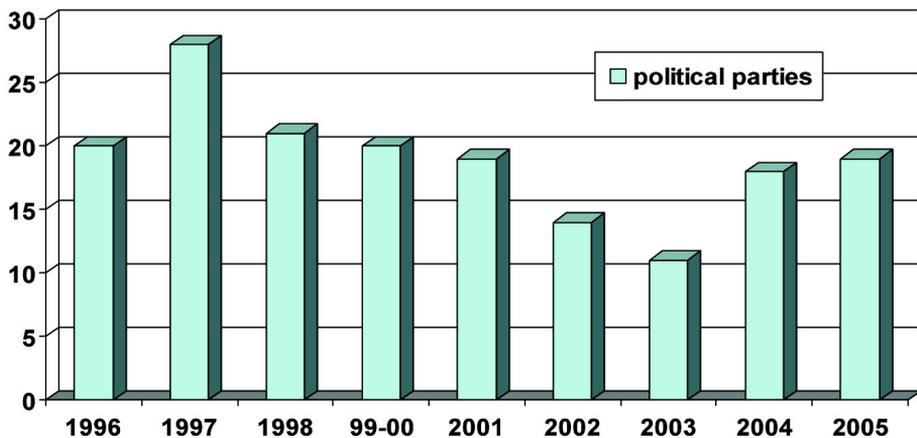


Look at figure 3 for the inclusive data on trust in political parties. The average trust level for parties for this nine year period is just under 19 percent. Another way of viewing this is that 81 percent of respondents have little or no trust in the political parties. Why do so few people confide in political parties? As mentioned above, lack of participation may be one factor. Another may be that in recent decades, established political parties have lost touch with the masses while serving the interests of elites. Meanwhile, newer parties are often “fly by night organizations” designed as personal electoral

vehicles for candidates which never set down roots within society.

Average level of trust for the congress is 26 percent for the nine years, meaning 74 percent of respondents have little or no confidence in that institution. While congress performs marginally better than parties, it still does poorly, for reasons offered above. We do have Latinobarómetro data (not shown) for presidential trust, for the 1996-2004 period. Slightly more than one third of respondents place their faith in the president (36.7%), meaning almost two thirds do not (63.3%). It is in some sense not surprising that presidents score higher than the congress. The general feeling in Latin America is that the legislative branch is extremely weak, ineffectual, and unaccountable. It seldom initiates its own legislation, but rather awaits presidential proposals which it often rubber stamps. Presidents, by contrast, are viewed as stronger authority figures.

Figure 3. Trust in Latin American Political Parties, 1996-2005 Latinobarometro  
“do you have a lot or some confidence in political parties?”

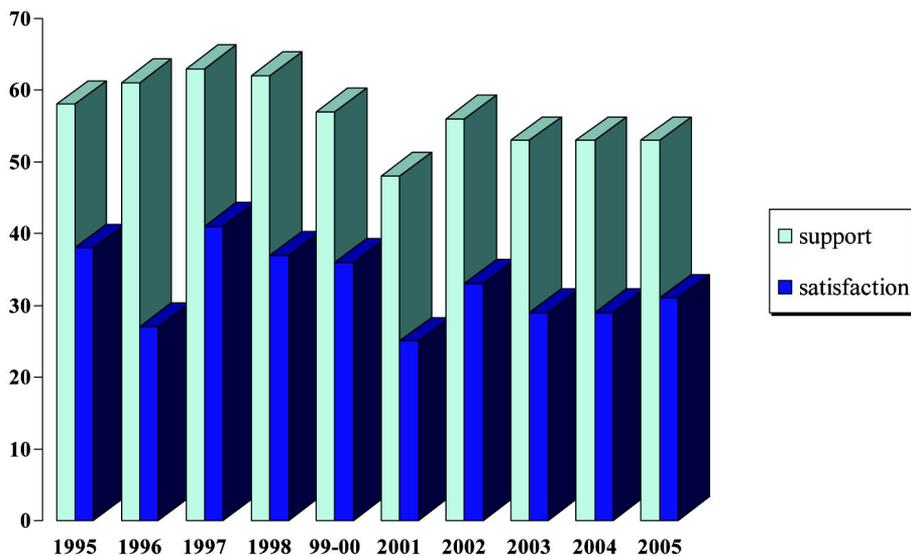


Long term dissatisfaction with the government—which is some function of performance—could also erode the public’s trust in it. But can disappointment with specific administrations and their policies bleed over into disappointment with democracy itself? Perhaps, which is why we report data on public

satisfaction with democracy below. At the same time, we want to differentiate between a public's satisfaction with the democracy which is tied to performance criteria, and its overall support for the system. Support is a more general concept, less tied to specific outputs, and more closely associated with a sense that democracy is the most preferable system, despite its faults. As shown in figure 4, satisfaction levels are consistently low, never exceeding 41 percent. The average for the ten year period is 32.6 percent meaning that 67.4 percent of the public is dissatisfied with the performance of their governments. Compare this to levels of distrust in government as a whole (not shown in graphs) for Latin America. For the period 1998-2005 it is 71.4 percent. Over time, citizens who do not believe that governments are delivering on promises, managing the economy or providing direct services or benefits to them are more likely to lose confidence in those institutions.

Figure 4. Support vs. Satisfaction for Democracy in America, 1995-2004

Source: Latinobarometro

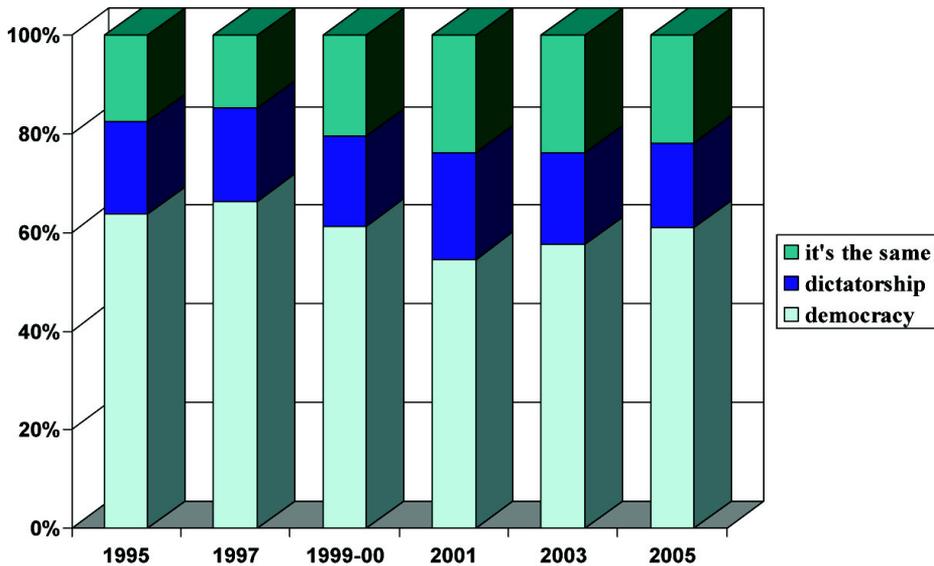


In the same figure, compare democratic satisfaction scores with diffuse support. As can be seen, support remains consistently and appreciably higher

than satisfaction. Moreover, there appears to be no strong correlation between the two. When satisfaction declines in 1996 and again in 2001, support for the system rises in the following years. On average, 56.4 percent of respondents said that democracy is preferable to any other kind of political system. Diffuse support for democracy achieves higher levels if a different kind of question is asked. It is one that harkens back to Winston Churchill who famously remarked that “democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.” Thus, Latinobarómetro asked, Do you strongly agree or agree with the following statement: “Democracy may have problems, but it is the best system of government?” Because citizens can both acknowledge their frustrations with democracy yet register approval of, scores are higher. Between 2002 and 2005 an average of 68% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with that statement.

On the one hand, it is reassuring that diffuse support for democracy remains high, whether measured one way or the other. On the other hand, these levels of support for democracy are consistently and substantially lower than those found in the U.S. or Western Europe. Also disturbing is the fact that large pluralities of citizens are supportive of authoritarian governments under certain conditions, or indifferent between democracy and dictatorship, as shown in figure 5. On average in any given year, 36 percent of respondents either have a preference for dictatorship, or are indifferent between dictatorship and democracy. We hypothesize that depressed levels of public trust in democratic institutions may be linked to these findings. As suggested before, over time, a public that loses faith in governmental performance and integrity may start to question the right of elected officials to rule, or more seriously doubt the efficacy of democracy itself.

Figure 5. Democracy-Dictatorship-Indifference Source: Latinobarometro



While there may be some association between these variables I cannot establish any cause and effect between levels of satisfaction and support for democracy, nor between satisfaction and trust. We can only hypothesize at this point that continued declines in government performance could result in lower and lower levels of satisfaction; that over time this could erode citizen trust in government which in turn could result in declining confidence in the system. I have neither the data nor the statistical procedures to prove those linkages.

Finally, if our premises about the sources of public confidence in government are correct, then an association may exist between corruption and trust. As stated previously, one basis of trust is a citizen perception that government officials have integrity. That means they abide by the law, and do not illicitly exploit their public positions for private gain. To the extent that citizens perceive that governments are corrupt, they have less reason to trust them.

Figure 6. Perception of Corruption in Latin America  
 Source: Transparency International 10-cleanest 0-dirtiest

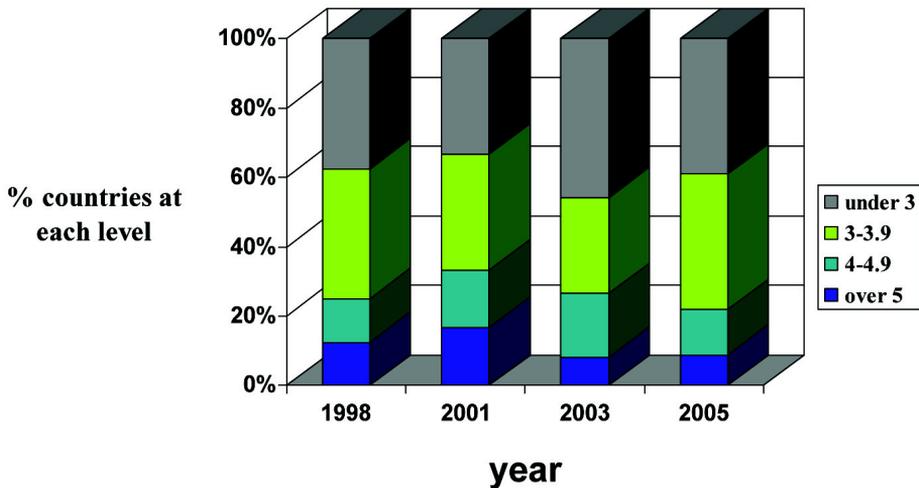


Figure 6 shows the results of a study conducted by Transparency International, which interviewed business elites and country analysts using some 16 separate surveys. Countries are ranked from 10 the cleanest to 0 the dirtiest or most corrupt. Countries that score below 3 are considered to have rampant corruption. Let us consider that countries are doing relatively well if they score above the midpoint, namely 5.0. To get figures for the Latin American region as a whole, I calculated the number of countries that fell within each of the four categories for each year (see the figure below) as a percent of the total number of countries studied in Latin America. As you can see, Latin America fairs very poorly. The great majority of countries fall below the 3.9 mark, and some 40 percent of countries are perceived to have rampant corruption. By the way, the West European democracies, U.S., Australia, and Canada usually score the highest, and South Korea usually comes in around 4.5 - 5.

## Conclusion

Data on trust in Latin American government is not reassuring. The public continues to place greater faith in a non-democratic entity like the armed forces or Catholic Church than it does in its democratic institutions. Levels of trust in political parties, the congress and the judiciary which were low in the mid 1990's remain low in the middle of this decade. If indeed trust is a difficult thing to earn, we should not be surprised by these results. But should we be alarmed? Do they portend a more perilous future for Latin America?

It is hard to say. Citizens could resign themselves to living under untrustworthy institutions by lowering their expectations. They might conclude that governments will never properly serve them, and they must rely on their own devices. This would result in further declines in political participation, but not calls for an overturning of the system. Or distrust could turn to anger, resulting in dissenting forms of participation which nonetheless stop short of full scale revolt against the democracy itself. Here, incumbency will be the greatest victim: politicians will not be re-elected, and in some cases presidents will be prematurely ousted from office via legal maneuvers. Political parties will suffer, as voter allegiances to one party or another decline and electoral volatility increases. All of this could occur within the framework of a democratic system. But if dissent turns repeatedly violent; if citizens' disgust with the political class boils over into unbridled street battles with police, then who is to say what will occur? Military intervention can never be entirely ruled out. One hopes that this worst case scenario will not materialize, and that governments will find ways to more adequately respond to the demands of a disgruntled public.

## References

Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Latinobarómetro Report, 1995-2005: A Decade of Public Opinion*. Santiago, Chile, 2005.

- Hardin, Russell. (1998). "Trust in Government," in Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi (ed.), *Trust and Governance*, 9-27. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hetherington, Marc J. (1998). The Political Relevance of Political Trust, *American Political Science Review*, 92(4): 791-808.
- Inglehart, Ronald. (1998). "Post-materialist Values and the Erosion of Institutional Authority," in *Trust and Governance*, 217-236.
- Jennings, M. Kent. (1998). "Political Trust and the Roots of Devolution," in *Trust and Governance*, 218-244.
- Levi, Margaret, "A State of Trust," in *Trust and Governance*, 77-101.
- Morgenstern, Scott. (2002). "Explaining Legislative Politics in Latin America," in Scott Morgenstern and Benito Nacif (ed.), *Legislative Politics in Latin America*, 413-444. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Nye, Joseph. (1997). "Introduction: The Decline of Confidence in Government," in Joseph S. Nye Jr., Philip D. Zelikow, and David C. King (ed.), *Why People Don't Trust Government*, 1-18. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo. (1993). On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with some Glances at Some Post-Communist Countries, *World Development*, 21(8): 1355-1369.
- Przeworski, Adam, et al. (2000). *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-being in the World, 1950-1990*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Seligson, Mitchell. *The Political Culture of Democracy in Mexico, Central America, and Colombia, 2004*. Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).
- United Nations Development Programme, *Democracy in Latin America: Toward a Citizen's Democracy*. New York: United Nations, 2004.

---

**David Pion-Berlin:** Received his Ph.D from the University of Denver and joined the UCR faculty in 1991. He is a Latin Americanist widely known for his research and writings on civil-military relations, defense, security etc. Among his publications are *Broken Promises? The Argentine Crisis and Argentine Democracy*, co-edited with Edward Epstein (Lexington Press, 2006); *Transforming Latin America: The International and Domestic Origins of Change*, co-authored with Craig Arceneaux (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), *Civil-Military Relations in Latin America: New Analytical Perspectives* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001). His articles have appeared in such journals as *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *The Latin American Research Review*, and others. Among his awards are the 1985 APSA Gabriel A. Almond Award for the best dissertation in the field of Comparative Politics, and grants from the Fulbright Commission, The Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation, The Tinker Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, and the Institute for Global Conflict and Cooperation. Currently, his research focuses on military responses to civilian praetorianism in Latin America(david.pion@ucr.edu).