The Latinobarómetro poll

The stubborn survival of frustrated democrats

Oct 30th 2003
From The Economist print edition

Despite hard times, most Latin Americans are still democrats, but they are dissatisfied with their politics and mistrustful of their institutions—and of the United States

A BARE majority of Latin Americans are convinced democrats, but they are deeply frustrated by the way their democratic institutions work in practice. Latin Americans are also becoming less pro-American. While most believe the market economy is the only route to prosperity, they are ever more disillusioned with some aspects of free-marketry, such as privatisation. Those are some of the conclusions from the latest Latinobarómetro poll of attitudes in the region, published exclusively by The Economist.

The poll covers 17 countries in Central and South America. Latinobarómetro, a Chilean organisation, has conducted similar surveys each year since 1996, so the poll captures shifts in opinion both over time and between countries.
This year’s results show some grounds for hope for democrats—and many grounds for concern. Despite five years of no overall growth in income per head in the region, one Latin American in two remains a committed democrat (chart 1, right). Just one in five believes that an authoritarian government might be preferable. Only Paraguay has an authoritarian majority. In seven countries, support for democracy has increased or dropped only slightly since 1996, but in ten it has fallen significantly. The poll suggests that roughly one Latin American in four is a potential authoritarian—what might be called “caudillo fodder”. For example, 52% of the sample agreed with the statement that “I wouldn’t mind if a non-democratic government came to power if it could solve economic problems”.

But this year’s poll is slightly less gloomy than last. Support for democracy has recovered in Argentina, which probably reflects both a strong, if incipient, recovery from the economic collapse of 2001 and the popularity of the new president, Néstor Kirchner. In Colombia, too, a popular president, Álvaro Uribe, may have boosted support for democracy. But in Ecuador, backing for authoritarianism is rising dangerously. In general, governments are slightly less unpopular than last year in South America, with an average approval rating of 41% compared with 32% last year, reflecting the popularity of Brazil’s Lula as well as that of Mr Uribe and Mr Kirchner.
Only in two small countries, Uruguay and Costa Rica, can democracy be regarded as consolidated. In Uruguay, only slowly emerging from an economic slump brought on by Argentina's woes, four-fifths of respondents continue to support democracy even though 71% say the country's economic situation is bad.

Across the region, dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in practice remains high (chart 3, above). That partly reflects economic worries: one in two of the sample say they fear being made redundant over the next 12 months. The number of respondents saying that their income does not cover their basic needs and that they have great difficulty, a subjective measure of poverty, has risen sharply (chart 4, below). Dissatisfaction also no doubt reflects the frustration of an increasingly educated population and, perhaps, a sense that democracy is not quickly creating a fairer society. Yet income is not the only factor determining support for democracy, which is lower in better-off Chile and Brazil than in poorer Peru and Honduras, for example (chart 5).
Despite the advent of left-of-centre governments in several countries, there is little evidence of a fundamental shift in economic opinion. In a dozen countries, a clear majority sees the market economy as the only route to developed-country status (chart 4), though opposition to it is high in Ecuador, Panama and Hugo Chávez's Venezuela. But almost everywhere, privatisation has fallen into ever-deeper disrepute (chart 4).

Latin Americans are also falling out of love with the United States (chart 6, below). In 2000, in South America and Mexico, 67% of respondents held a “good” or “very good” opinion of the United States. That figure has fallen to 53%, while 39% now admit to a “bad” or “very bad” opinion, up from 18% in 2000. Central America, however, is firmly pro-American: 76% hold a positive opinion, barely changed from 80% in 2000.
In general, Latin Americans are an increasingly mistrustful lot. They have long held their politicians in contempt. But until recently, they trusted such institutions as the Catholic Church, the media and, to a lesser extent, the armed forces. Now they do so much less (chart 7, right). Interestingly, however, the police are no more vilified than in 1996. Perhaps that reflects the first signs of a drop in crime (chart 7). Some 28% of respondents also thought that progress had been made in reducing corruption, with higher scores in Colombia, Nicaragua, Chile and Uruguay.