

# Satisfaction with Democracy in Latin America: Understanding its Downward Trend

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## I. Introduction:

Since the 1990s, there has been a worldwide downward trend in satisfaction with democracy. The Latin American region has been the hardest hit recently, with three out of four citizens dissatisfied with the regime's performance (Foa et al. 2020). This is worrying from the point of view of democratic legitimacy (Easton 1965; 1975) and because countries with stable democratic traditions, such as Chile and Colombia, have recently suffered waves of protests and violent riots because of frustrations of the population with how democracy has worked.

How can we understand the downward satisfaction trend with democracy, especially in Latin America? To answer this question, this article will focus on the variation of satisfaction with democracy and analyze the most critical theories on what affects this variable.

## II. What is satisfaction with democracy?

Strictly speaking, satisfaction with democracy (SWD) is a standard indicator used in surveys worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Its main objective is to measure the degree of satisfaction with how democracy works in a country. It usually has four possible answers: very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, satisfied, and very satisfied.

SWD indicator comes from Easton's (1965, 1975) theory of political support and democratic legitimacy. This author establishes that citizens' political support for the political system and democracy is critical to the evolution of the political regime in a country. Initially, the author distinguished between specific support based on short-term utility-based support and a relatively immediate return. On the other hand, diffuse support is a more stable and long-term attachment to the democratic regime. SWD would fall into the second category of support for the democratic system, while indicators such as support for democracy are in the first category.

Why is satisfaction with democracy important as a diffuse support for democratic rule? Two of the most essential reasons why SWD is studied is because, first, as Linz and Stepan (1996) and Diamond (1999) theorize, a stable democracy requires that its citizens believe in democratic principles. For a

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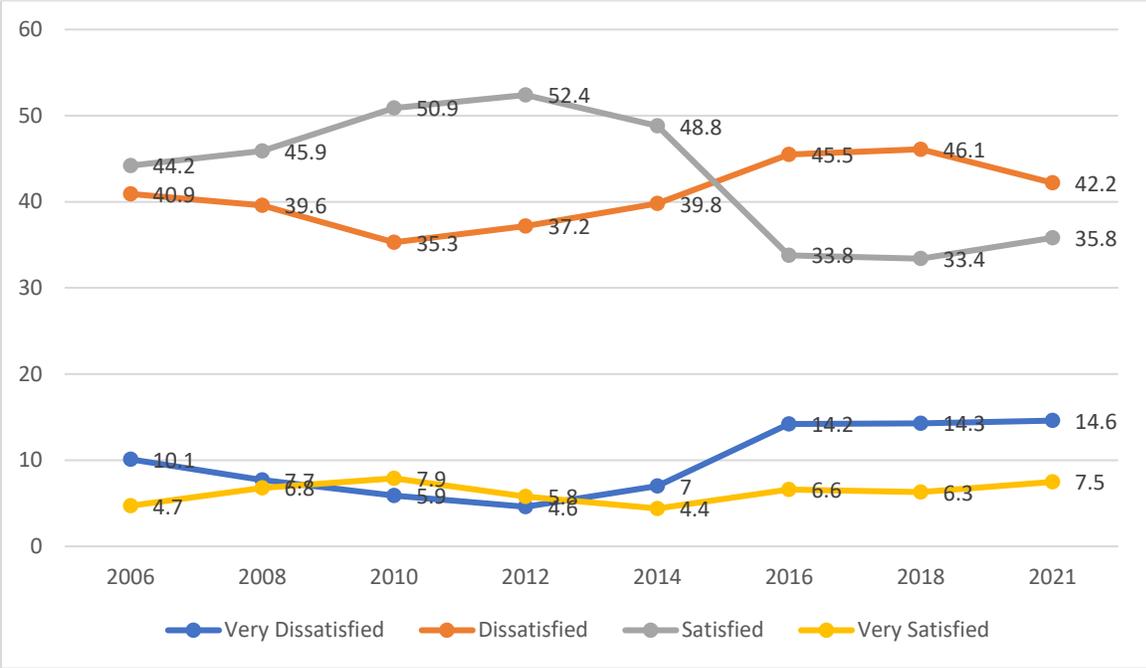
<sup>1</sup> It has been used, for example, in Afrobarometer, Asian Barometer, Americas Barometer, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), Eurobarometer, European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS), or Latinobarometer.

new democracy to be consolidated, it needs most citizens to share that belief. Thus, while consolidation and democratic legitimacy differ, they are connected (Linde and Ekman 2003). Consolidation cannot occur if the democratic regime does not have popular legitimacy or is seen as imperfect in the face of other alternatives. Finally, according to (Norris 2011), a high level of democracy within a country would indicate the regime's good health.

**III. Trends of satisfaction with democracy in Latin America**

How has satisfaction with democracy varied in Latin America<sup>2</sup>? To answer this question, I took the data provided by America's Barometer (LAPOP) and calculated the average of each response category for each year available in the database (2006-2021) to see the evolution of each response. The results are shown in Figure 1.

Graph 1. Satisfaction with democracy in Latin America 2006-2021



Source: Own elaboration based on LAPOP's data

Analyzing the results in Graph 1, there is a significant variation in SWD from 2006 to 2021. There are two clear groups: poles with very satisfied and dissatisfied options. What is observed, in general, is that while the very dissatisfied option had decreased from 2006 to 2012, since the 2014 measurement, it has risen to 14% of preferences. This is the highest percentage reached since the measurement began

<sup>2</sup> Estos resultados son una media de cada categoría de respuesta, por año, para cada uno de los dieciocho países de América Latina: Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay y Venezuela.

with the most significant number of LAPOP countries. Secondly, the very satisfied option has generally remained relatively stable over time, suffering a slight increase since 2014 of approximately 3%.

On the other hand, referring to the group with the least polar preferences- satisfied and dissatisfied see the most considerable difference over time. From 2006 to 2014, the average number of satisfied people in all Latin American countries was higher than that of dissatisfied people. Although only more than 50% of the responses for satisfaction were reached in 2010 and 2012, this was good news. However, from the 2016 measurement onwards, the ratio of satisfied to dissatisfied has been reversed. With the latest LAPOP measurement, the average satisfaction for the region reached 35% and started at 44% in 2006, while the exact figure for dissatisfaction reached 42%.

What does this look like in some of the specific cases in the region? One of the most important cases in Brazil because it is one of the countries where SWD has decreased the most. The LAPOP measurement for this country began in 2006, with 38% of individuals satisfied with democracy, while the figure for 2021 is 24%. On the other hand, one of the exceptions in the region is the case of Uruguay, where SWD has decreased less. According to LAPOP data, this country in the east of the region had 69% a figure above the average- of people who indicated that they felt satisfied with democracy in 2006. This same figure in 2021 is 62%. That is a variation of 7%.

One of the most striking aspects is that there seems to be a coincidence between when the result is flipped between those who are dissatisfied with democracy and those who are satisfied with the regime. The key is around 2014–2016. What might be explaining these trends? The following section discusses some findings from the literature and an analysis of their results.

#### **IV. Theories of satisfaction with democracy**

##### *Inequality*

Latin America's specialization in natural resources has historically led to high levels of economic inequality within countries (Leamer et al. 1999). This is important to consider because, according to previous research (Morlino et al. 2016), this is one of the key variables explaining dissatisfaction with democracy. In general terms, this is due, at the individual level, to the fact that there is incongruence between expectations of democracy -such as greater economic equality- and reality.

Nevertheless, according to World Bank data, economic inequality -measured with the Gini indicator- has decreased in the region from the 2000s onwards. Does this mean that economic inequality is not necessarily causally related to the variation in SWD? Not necessarily.

The only possibility -even before a statistical analysis- of discarding a variable, besides the fact that the literature does not report it as a relevant variable, is that it remains constant over time. Inequality in

Latin America has not remained stable; it has tended to decline. The sustained decline over time implies enough variation to drive up dissatisfaction with the regime. Although this sounds counterintuitive, one of the central aspects of Norris' (2011) theory is that, among other elements, more educated and higher-income citizens are more critical of the regime in which they live. From this point of view, all that remains is to establish whether the drop in inequality in the region is because the countries became, on average, richer or poorer, reducing the level of inequality.

### *Commodity boom*

Latin America experienced a commodity boom in the first decade of the 2000s. This implies that between 2003 and 2013, the prices of oil, mineral products, and (to a lesser extent) agricultural goods rose sharply. This meant higher inflows for countries in the region whose economies depend on these goods.

One of the most surprising things about the commodity boom that Latin America experienced during the first decade of the 2000s is that inequality decreased (Sánchez-Ancochea 2021). This is surprising because previous commodity boom research showed increased income inequality (Bértola and Ocampo 2012; Prados de la Escosura 2007).

In this regard, Sánchez-Ancochea (2021) makes key observations on the relationship between the recent commodity boom and inequality in Latin America. First, the incomes of the elite (i.e., those of the wealthiest 1%) remained stable or even increased in some countries. Second, there was a redistribution of income from the middle class to people with low incomes: the share of income received by the lower deciles (from the first to the third) increased in all countries. In contrast, that of the middle and upper middle classes decreased. Third, this overall improvement was due to the growing ability of the state to (re)distribute income to people experiencing poverty in the context of democratic pressures and the relative demand for unskilled workers. Thus, the commodity boom was better managed this time than in the past, at least in the short term. Unfortunately, however, these policies did not lead to the erosion of the region's elite-centered distribution model in the long run (Sánchez-Ancochea 2021).

## **V. Concluding remarks**

So, how can the decline in economic inequality and the increase in dissatisfaction with democracy in Latin America be linked? There is some consensus, and aggregate empirical evidence shows that Latin America's commodity boom in the first decade of the 2000s helped the countries' economic development and social progress.

However, when this cycle ended, with a mix of slower economic growth, corruption scandals, adjustment of social programs, and frozen wages, conflict within societies increased and made

governance more difficult (Morlino et al. 2016). It is no coincidence that from 2013 to date, most elections have been won by the opposition to the government in the region.

From this point of view, Latin America has not (necessarily) experienced a shift to the left or the right, but rather, of weariness with those currently governing, given the high expectations that the past era (of commodity boom) brought with it. In other words, perceptions of the democratic regime are closely linked to the economy.

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