



Attitudes towards politics in Latin America

A review of regional perception data



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1. Introduction

The following analysis draws on regional perception data to provide an overview of attitudes towards politics in Latin America, together with an indication of how these attitudes have evolved over time and how they may relate to regional developments in other spheres of life, with a primary focus on the economic sphere.

The study utilizes statistical tools to investigate trends and drivers of satisfaction with political regime performance in the region as well as the ways in which relevant dynamics may differ across demographic and socio-economic groups. An analysis is provided of the relative impact of “economic” versus “political” factors on political regime performance satisfaction, together with a discussion of the explanatory potential of “objectively measured” indicators versus that of “perception” indicators.

The perception data utilized in the analysis come principally from surveys conducted starting from the mid 90’s by Latinobarometro, a private non-profit organization based in Chile, which carries out an annual public opinion survey involving some 20,000 interviews in 18 Latin American countries, representing more than 600 million people.¹ Other data sources used in the analysis are referenced as relevant in the following sections.

2. Executive Summary

The analysis in the paper is structured into six sections:

- Views of politics and democracy.
- Sex and age dimensions of support for democracy.
- The age of protests.
- Drivers of satisfaction with political system performance.
- Evolution over time of satisfaction with the economy.
- A middle-class perspective.

The remainder of this section provides an overview of the main focus and findings for each of the above sections.

¹ More information on Latinobarometro can be found [here](#), along with Latinobarometro’s extensive datasets and an online analysis tool.

Views of politics and democracy

Main focus

Investigates evolution over time of satisfaction with political regime performance and its impact on overall support for democracy as a form of government.

Main findings

- Satisfaction with the functioning of the political system in Latin America reached an all-time low in 2018, with 3 in 4 people expressing a negative judgment about political life in their country.
- There is evidence that this generalized dissatisfaction may have already started to affect general support for democracy as a form of government in most countries. The proportion of people who would describe themselves as indifferent between authoritarian and democratic regimes has reached its highest-ever point at 28 percentage.
- A different dynamic is observed, however, in Venezuela and – to a lesser extent – in Nicaragua where lower-than-average satisfaction with the functioning of the political system is associated with higher-than-average support for democracy.
- These trends matter beyond Latin America. In two of the three Latin American G20 countries (Brazil and Mexico), only one in three people believes that democracy is preferable to other forms of government under all circumstances. These two countries account for over half of the total population of Latin America.

Sex and age dimensions of support for democracy

Main focus

Investigates of perceptions of politics and support for democracy varies between man and women as well as across age cohorts.

- Over the period for which data is available, women and young people have been consistently less likely to express satisfaction with the functioning of the political system and less likely to express unconditional support for democracy as a form of government than the rest of the population.
- The sex and age gap in support for democracy has remained fairly stable over time and, up to the last year for which data is available, there is no evidence that it may be widening.
- There is strong evidence, however, that young people hold very distinct views regarding the role of the state, particularly in relation to existential regional challenges such as economic inequality and citizen security.

The age of protests

Main focus

Investigates changes in political culture – particularly attitudes of deference towards authority – that may be associated with the observed rise of protest movements around the world.

Main findings

- There is evidence that attitudes of deference towards authority may be softening globally. This trend has been referred to as the “death of deference”, although such terminology implies a much more radical shift than supported by data – at least up to the period for which information is available.

- Latin America is very much part of this trend. However, it should be noted that, despite the recent decline, deference towards authority remains fairly high in the region compared to the global average.
- It is unclear how the decline in deference towards authority may be related to trends in people's predisposition to join demonstrations, in part because such predisposition seems to follow much more local dynamics.
- The Latin American country which experienced the strongest increase in people's predisposition to join demonstrations during the period under consideration is Chile. The countries that experienced the strongest decrease are Mexico and Brazil.

Drivers of satisfaction with political system performance

Main focus

Investigates different factors that may explain variations in satisfaction with political system performance, including perceptions about the economy, corruption and insecurity as well as the strength of key democratic safeguards.

Main findings

- Perceived economic performance and perceived corruption appear to be major drivers of satisfaction with political system performance. These two factors combined explain approximately 80 percent of the variation in satisfaction with the functioning of the political system across Latin American countries for the year 2018.
- There has not always been a strong correlation between perceived economic performance and perceived corruption on one hand and satisfaction with political system performance on the other hand. In fact, the analysis of time series reveals that this link only starts to consolidate after 2008, possibly as a result of shifts in perceptions and expectations caused by the 2007-2008 financial crisis.
- Comparing levels of satisfaction with the political system and levels of satisfaction with the functioning of the economy can help us investigate political system resilience. Based on this methodology, the countries characterized by the greatest resilience in 2018 were Costa Rica, Uruguay and Argentina. The countries with the lowest resilience were Bolivia, Peru and Mexico.
- The strength of democratic safeguards such as free and fair elections, the existence of checks and balances on the exercise of the power of the state, opportunities for meaningful citizen participation and a pluralistic but constructive public debate plays at best a moderate role in explaining variations in satisfaction with political system performance based on 2018 data.

Evolution over time of satisfaction with the economy

Main focus

Investigates different factors that may explain variations in satisfaction with the economy, including macroeconomic indicators such as per capita GDP growth, unemployment rates and the Gini index of income inequality as well as perception about the distributional fairness of the economy.

Main findings

- Some of the most commonly used macroeconomic indicators – such as per capita GDP growth and unemployment rate – do not appear to be especially useful in predicting the historical evolution of people's satisfaction with the functioning of the economy. There may be value, however, in further, country-specific analysis of the relation between commodity prices and the evolution of economic sentiment.
- There is virtually no correlation between the historical evolution of income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient and the historical evolution of people's satisfaction with the functioning of the economy.

There is, however, a very strong correlation between perceived inequality and satisfaction with the functioning of the economy for the period 2007-2018.

- The relationship between measured inequality and perceived inequality appears to be a very complex and dynamic one. While data is too sparse to draw firm conclusions, there are indications that this relation may have significantly changed starting from 2007.

A middle-class perspective

Main focus

Investigates the specificities of the perspectives of people self-identifying as “middle class” as well as how these views differ between “lower-middle class” and “upper-middle class” groups.

Main findings

- There are significant differences in perceptions between people who self-identity as “lower-middle” class and people who self-identify as “upper-middle” class. A nuanced understanding of the concept of “middle class” is needed to account for these differences.
- Support for democracy as a form of government is highest among people who describe themselves as belonging to the “lower-middle” class or the “middle” class. These groups express higher-than-average support for democracy as a form of government, despite lower-than-average satisfaction with the actual functioning of democracy in their countries.
- People describing themselves as belonging to the “upper-middle” class appear less likely to believe that democracy is the best form of governance under all circumstances than people describing themselves as part of the “middle-lower” or “middle” class.
- On economic matters, such as the performance of the economy and the fairness of income distribution, the perspective of people who self-identity as “lower-middle” class is much closer to that of those who consider themselves as “lower” class than to that of those who consider themselves as “upper-middle” class.
- A significant portion of people who identify as belonging to the lower-middle class live in a situation of serious economic vulnerability. At the same time, taking into account levels of dissatisfaction with the functioning of politics and propensity to demonstrate, they are the group that appears most likely to mobilize outside of formal political institutions.

3. Views of politics and democracy

A basic distinction

The analysis in this section is based on a basic distinction between “performance-based support” and “regime-based support”. Performance-based support is defined as satisfaction with the actual performance of a certain political regime at a given point in time. Regime-based support is defined as the belief that a certain political regime is in general preferable to others. Based on this distinction, we analyze separately people’s satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in their countries and people’s support for democracy as a form of government.

Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy

We use the following Latinobarometro question (P13STGBS.A) to assess the level of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (DEM SAT):

In general, would you say you are very satisfied, rather satisfied, not very satisfied, not satisfied at all with the functioning of democracy in (COUNTRY)?²

We consider respondents who gave “very satisfied” or “rather satisfied” as “satisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country”.

As illustrated in Figure 1, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Latin America has been historically fluctuating within a rather low band (29-45 percent). However, in 2018, for the first time it went below the historical fluctuation band to reach its lowest-ever value at 25 percent.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy has reached an all-time low.

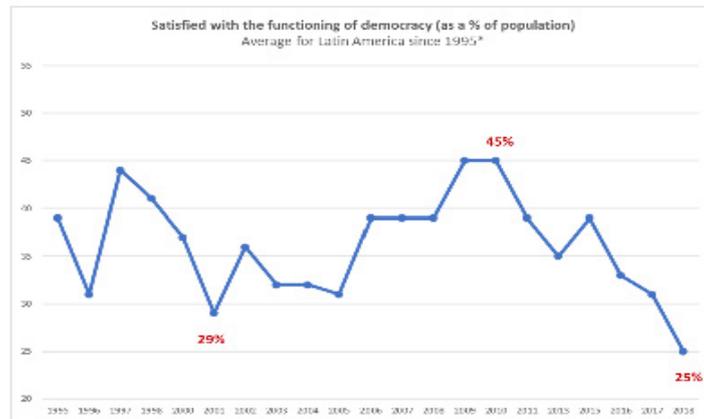
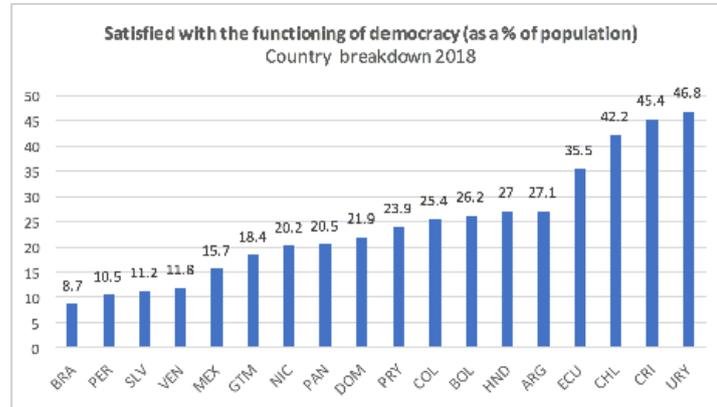


Figure 2. Variation in satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Latin American countries.



Support for democracy as a form of government

We use the following Latinobarometro question (P24ST-26ST) to assess the level of support for democracy as a form of government (DEM SUP):

With which of the following statements are you most in agreement? “Democracy is preferable to all other forms of government”, “Under certain circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable”, “For people like me, democratic and undemocratic regimes are no different”.³

²En general, ¿Diría Ud. que está muy satisfecho, más bien satisfecho, no muy satisfecho o nada satisfecho con el funcionamiento de la democracia en (PAÍS)?

³ ¿Con cuál de las siguientes frases está Ud. más de acuerdo? “La democracia es preferible a cualquier otra forma de gobierno”, “En algunas circunstancias, un gobierno autoritario puede ser preferible”, “A la gente como uno, nos da lo mismo un régimen democrático que uno no democrático”.

Support for democracy has been historically fairly high in Latin America (fluctuating between 52 and 65 percent) and remains by a very large margin the predominant position in the region. However, it has been steadily declining since 2010 and in 2018 for the first time went below the 50 percent threshold. Support for authoritarianism has remained fairly stable over the years (hovering around 15 percent), but the proportion of people that are indifferent between democratic and undemocratic alternatives has grown significantly and, at 28 percent, is almost double than what observed in the 90s.

■ **Figure 3. Support for democracy has been softening as well.**

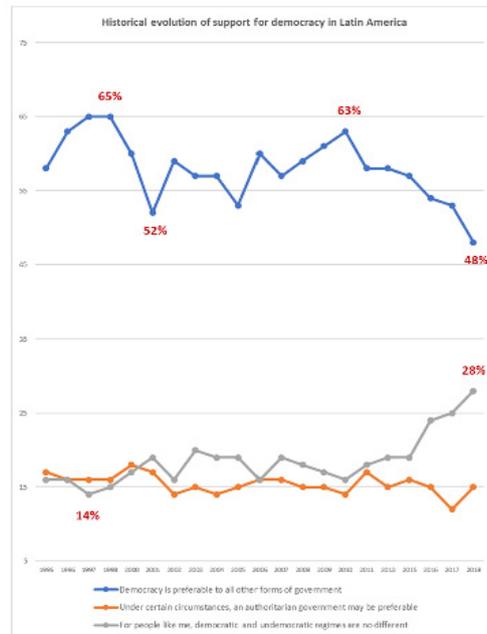
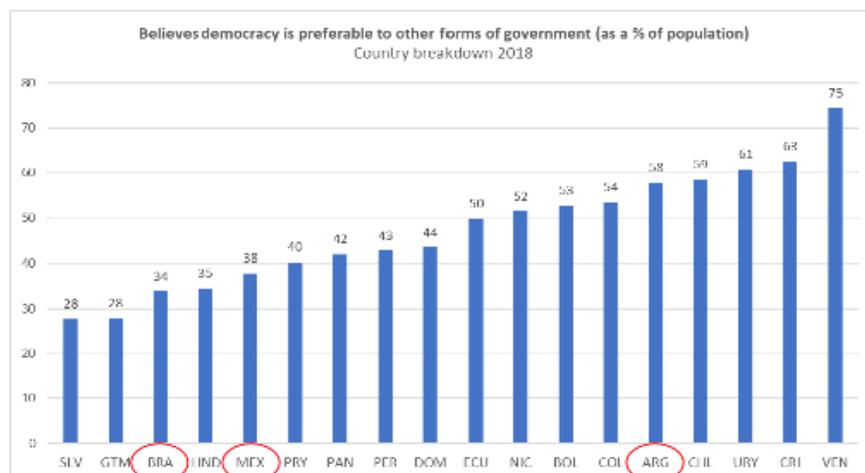


Figure 4 shows the variation in support for democracy across Latin American countries as of 2018. A key point that should be highlighted here is that weakening support for democracy in Latin America matters globally. In two of the three G20 countries from Latin America (Brazil and Mexico), only one in three people believes that democracy is preferable to other forms of government. These two countries account for over half of the total population of Latin America.

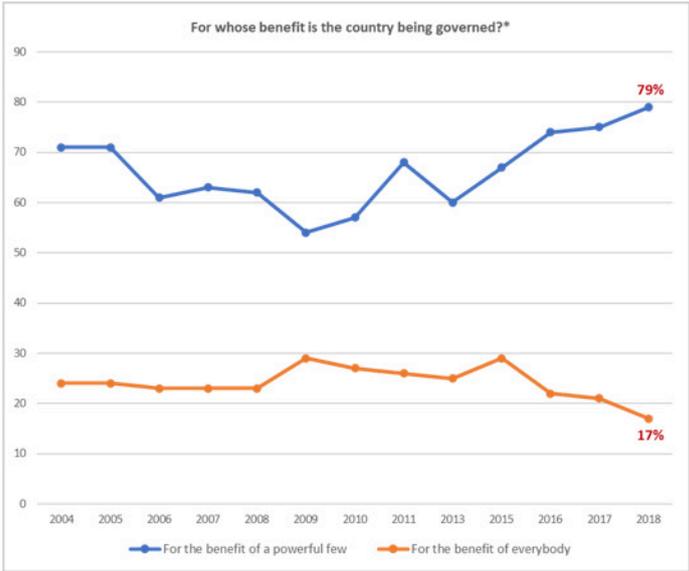
■ **Figure 4. Variation in support for democracy as a form of government in Latin American countries.**



⁴Pew (2017). "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy. But many also endorse nondemocratic alternatives". Available [here](#).

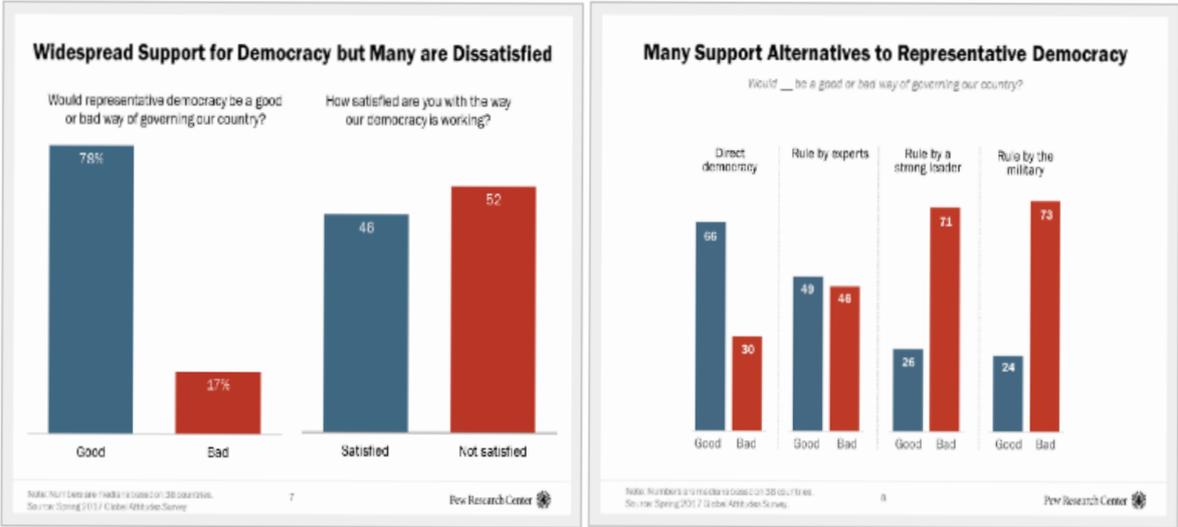
What observed in relation to satisfaction with and support for democracy is consistent with trends related to trust in government. Figure 5, for instance, shows how the percentage of people who believe their country is being governed “for the benefit of everybody” as opposed to the “benefit of a powerful few” has been increasing steadily since 2013 and has reached its highest point ever in 2018 at 79 percent. It should also be noted that what observed in Latin America is consistent with global trends as illustrated in Figure 6 summarizing the results of research conducted by Pew Research Centre.

■ **Figure 5. Declining trust in government in Latin America.**



* Based on Latinobarometro question P14ST: “Generally speaking, would you say that (country) is governed by a few powerful groups for their own benefit, or that it is governed for the benefit of everybody?” (¿En términos generales ¿diría usted que (país) está gobernado por unos cuantos grupos poderosos en su propio beneficio, o que está gobernado para el bien de todo el pueblo?)”

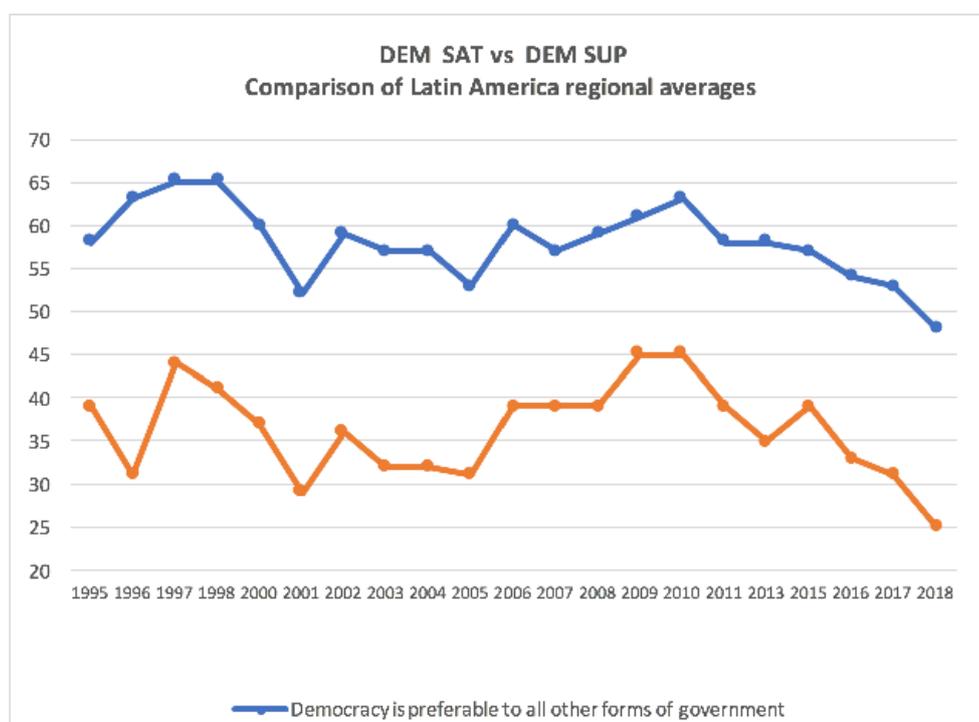
■ **Figure 6. Satisfaction with democracy and openness to other governance systems globally.**



Relationship between performance-based and regime-based support for democracy Overall support for a certain regime type is largely (although not exclusively) grounded in the daily experience of how that regime is functioning in practice. Based on the historical evolution of perception data, it would appear that growing dissatisfaction with the actual functioning of democracy is starting to spill over onto general support for democracy as a form of government. Figure 7 illustrates the close relation between performance-based and regime-based support for democracy, confirmed by the rather high correlation coefficient of 0.777.

However, at least two different stories can be observed in the region. For most countries, higher satisfaction with the functioning of the political system corresponds to greater support for democracy. But, as illustrated in Figure 8, for Venezuela and to a lesser degree for Nicaragua, lower-than-average satisfaction with the functioning of the political system is associated with higher-than-average support for democracy. Figure 9 shows the evolution of satisfaction with politics and support for democracy in these two countries over time, highlighting the historical moments in which these two indicators start to evolve in opposite directions.

■ **Figure 7. Spill-over effect of dissatisfaction.**

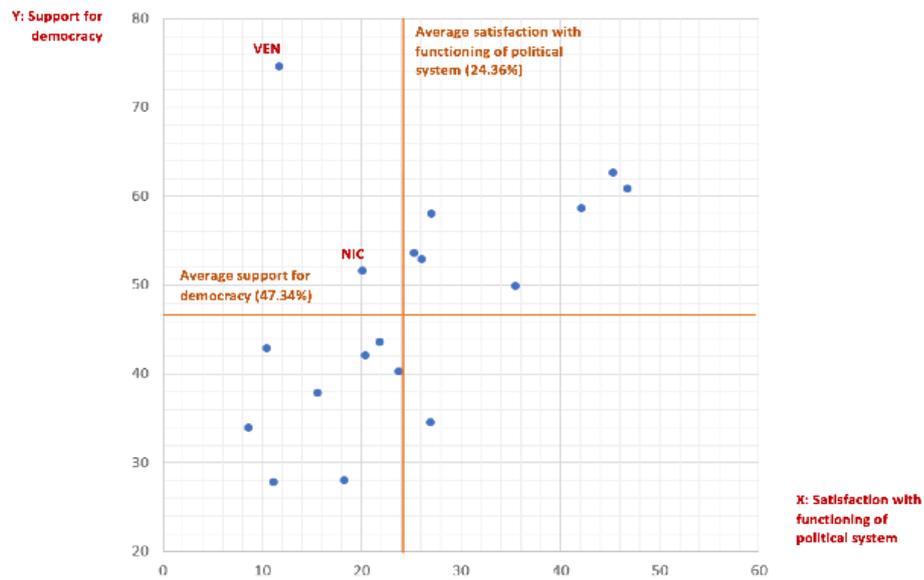


CORREL (DEM SAT, DEM SUPP - Latin America average): 0.777

THE “CRITICAL DEMOCRAT”

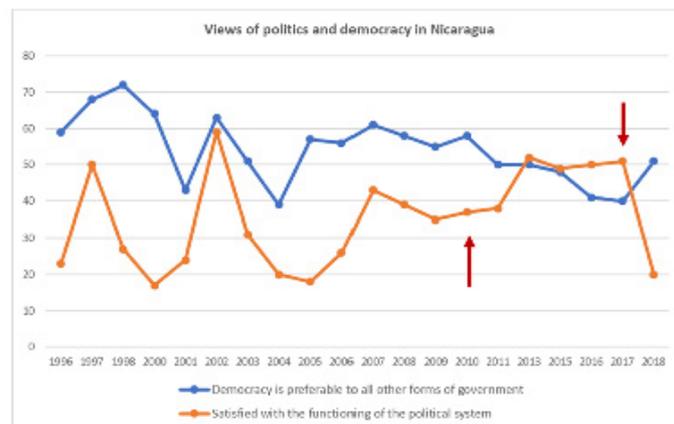
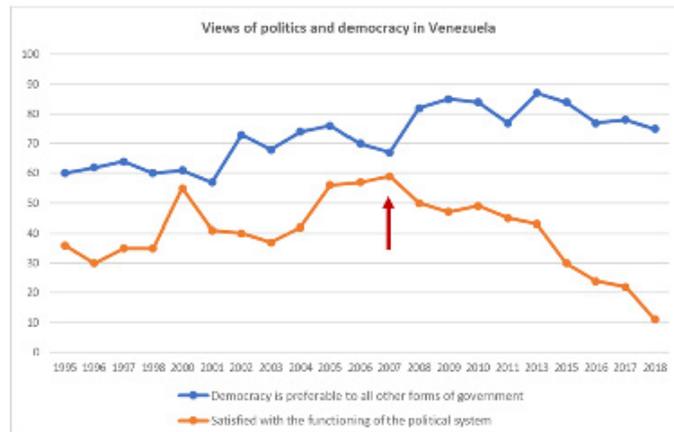
The critical democrat is defined as an individual characterized by high support for democracy as a system of governance and low satisfaction with the actual functioning of democracy. Further enquiry could look into questions such as: what are the social and economic features of this group? How has the size and make-up of this group evolved over time? Is this group characterized by specific patterns of behaviour in relation for instance to information consumption – e.g. social media engagement – or public conduct – e.g. participation in elections, different forms of associational life etc.?

■ **Figure 8. Satisfaction with political system functioning and support for democracy across countries in 2018.**



CORREL (DEM SAT, DEM SUPP - All countries): 0.497
 CORREL (DEM SAT, DEM SUPP - w/o VEN, NIC): 0.807

■ **Figure 9. The specificity of Venezuela and Nicaragua.**

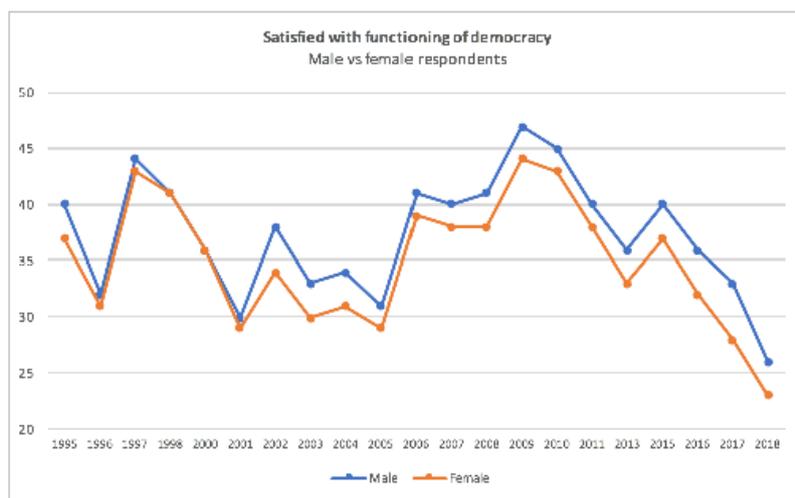


4. Sex and age dimensions of support for democracy

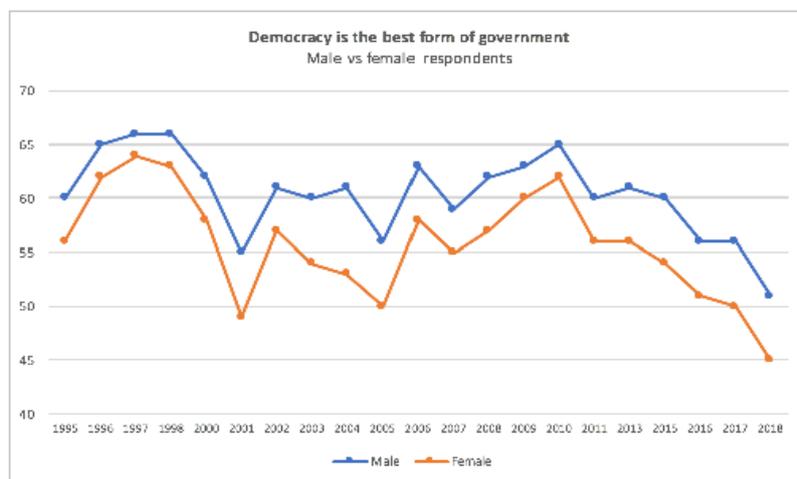
Sex dimension of support for democracy

As illustrated in figures 10 and 11, women respondents are less likely to describe themselves as satisfied with the functioning of democracy compared to men respondents and less likely to state that democracy is the best form of government under all circumstances.

■ **Figure 10. Sex dimension of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy.**



■ **Figure 11. Sex dimension of support for democracy as a form of government.**



Age dimension of support for democracy

Based on the available data, young people appear more likely to identify politics as the main problem in their country than older cohorts (Figure 12). They are also less likely than people in older cohorts to express unconditional commitment to democracy as a form of government (Figure 13). Building on similar data from around the world, a lot has been written about “young people losing faith in democracy”⁵. The analysis of time series, however, reveals a more nuanced picture, at least for Latin America.

⁵ See for instance this World Economic Forum article reporting on Munk and Foa’s paper “The signs of democratic deconsolidation” published in the Journal of Democracy.

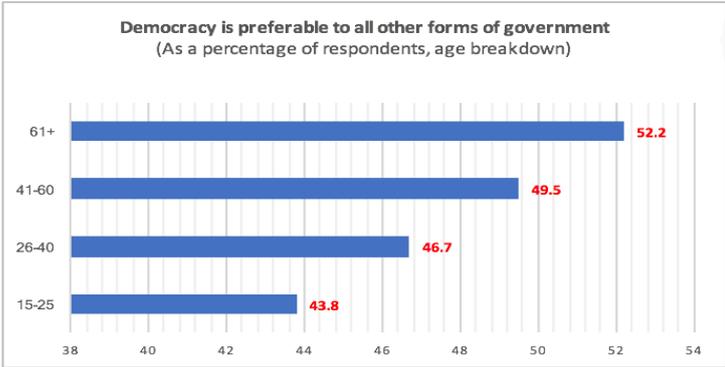
As illustrated in Figure 14, over the last 20 years, there has been a fairly consistent generational gap in support for democracy, with respondents in the age bracket 15-25 systematically less likely to view democracy as preferable to all other forms of government under all circumstances. There appears, therefore, to be a distinct lifecycle effect when it comes to commitment to democracy. There is no particular evidence, however, that the generational gap in support for democracy may be widening, at least at regional level.

■ **Figure 12. People identifying politics as the primary problem in their country in 2018.**



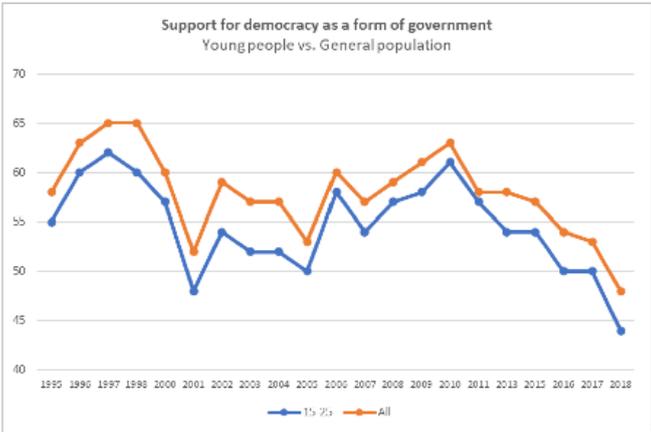
* Based on Latinobarometro question P3STGBSC: “Based on your opinion, what would you consider to be the main problem in the country?” (En su opinión, ¿Cuál considera Ud. que es el problema más importante en el país?).

■ **Figure 13a. Age differences in support for democracy (2018 data).**



* Based on Latinobarometro question P24ST-26ST.

■ **Figure 13b. Age differences in support for democracy.**



POTENTIAL LINE OF FURTHER ENQUIRY

DOCUMENTING YOUNG PEOPLE AND WOMEN’S “OWN” NARRATIVES

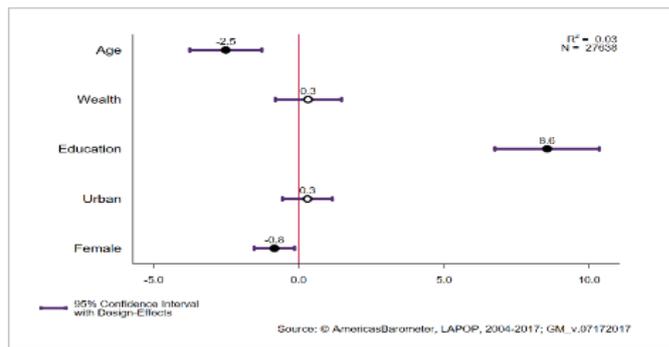
An analysis of young people and women’s perspectives of democracy conducted on the basis of general perceptions data has a number of limitations and can only start to scratch the surface of a very complex set of issues. It would be important therefore to go deeper in the future through a more sophisticated statistical analysis, but also – and very importantly – through a more qualitative and participatory process aimed at eliciting young people and women’s own interpretations of the available data.

Different expectations regarding the role of the state

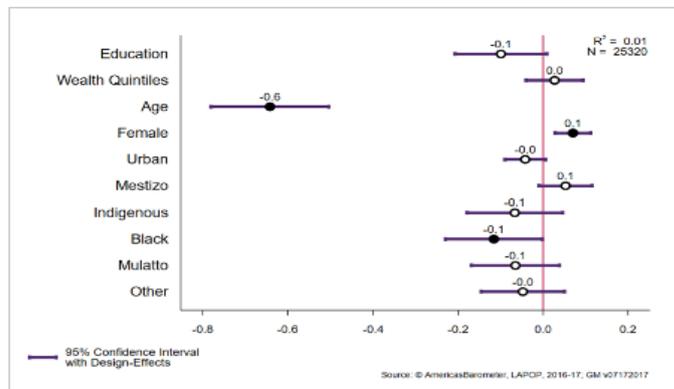
Research conducted by the Latin America Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University shows some evidence of a generational gap with respect to expectations regarding the role of the state, with younger people supporting a more “proactive” approach to critical issues (Figure 14). For instance, age seems to a very significant predictor of support for redistributive economic policies as well as harsher criminal punishment in the face of violent crime. On the other hand, sex – in and of itself – appears to be a much less decisive factor.

Figure 14. Support for a more proactive role of the state.

Socioeconomic and demographic predictors of support for redistributive policies



Source: LAPOP Insights Series Note No. 132 “Reducing Inequality in the Americas: What Factors Predict Public Support for Redistribution?” Based on agreement with the statement: “The (country) government should implement strong policies to reduce income inequality between the rich and the poor”.



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5. The age of protests

The “death of deference”

Several analysts have been linking the increase in protest movements observed during the last few years with a deep, structural shift in people’s attitudes towards authority – a shift that is sometimes referred to as the “death of deference.”

These are for instance, Duncan Green’s observations in article entitled “The How Change Happens of Climate Change”:

I’ve been thinking a lot about the ‘death of deference’ recently – it is really striking how little faith people have in political (or any other) leaders, and how unwilling they are to trust them to do the right thing.⁶

And here some additional observations in another article entitled “Why so many uprisings? Why now?”

I am intrigued by the whole question of the death of deference and erosion of what I think of as political absorptive capacity or resilience. There are always people who are unhappy with their situation or the way they are treated. My impression is that in the past they were readier to channel their grievances through formal political processes – wait for the next election or express their views through their social organizations (unions, professional associations, faith groups). That enabled the system to absorb and respond to discontent. But now, more and more people think ‘they’re all the same, just in it for themselves’. They are less prepared to channel grievance through politics. Fuses are shorter, protest more attractive. Even small grievances can generate big, angry responses.⁷

We use the following question from the World Values Survey (WVS V69) to assess support for the level of deference prevailing in a given society:

I’m going to read out a list of various changes in our way of life that might take place in the near future. Please tell me for each one, if it were to happen, whether you think it would be a good thing, a bad thing, or you don’t mind. [Greater respect for authority]

We define “Support for greater deference” as the percentage of people who believe “greater respect for authority” would be a good thing minus the percentage of people who believe “greater respect for authority” would be a bad thing.⁸ We then proceed to compare levels of support in the last WVS waves for which data is available (Wave 5 – 2005-2009 and Wave 6 – 2010-2014) in order to get a sense of trends in the different countries surveyed. In cases where “Support for greater deference” is a negative number (i.e. there are more people who believe greater respect for authority would be a bad thing than people who believe it would be a good thing), we talk about “Opposition to greater deference”.

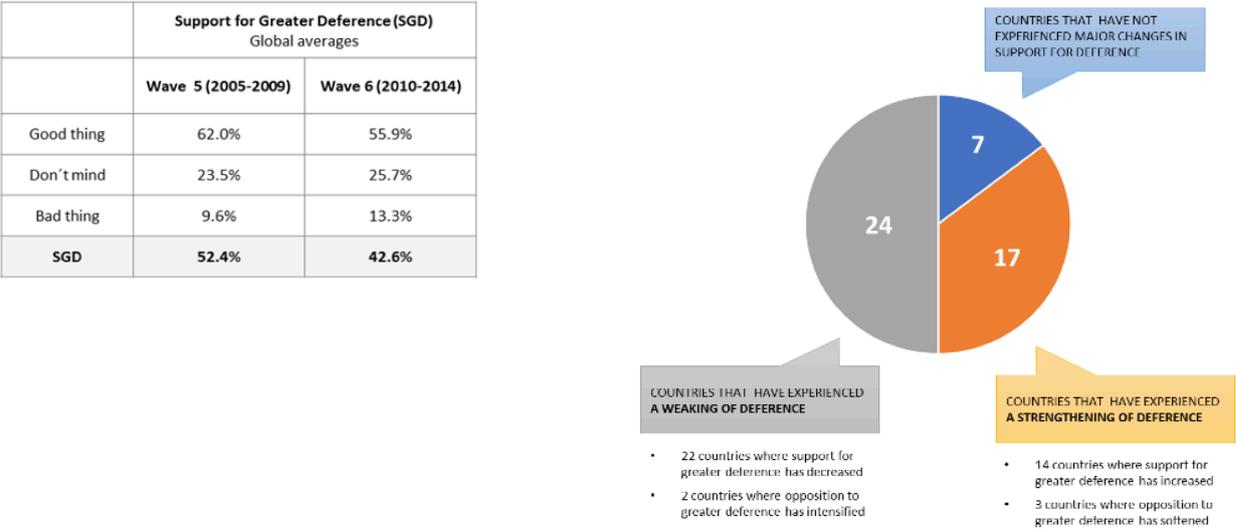
As shown in Figure 15, the available data on country-level trends seems to confirm the notion that attitudes towards authority may be changing. The average support for greater deference in the 44 countries considered went from 52.4 percent to 42.6 percent between Wave 5 and Wave 6 (corresponding to a reduction of 18.7 percent). Furthermore, a significant plurality of countries for which a comparison between waves is possible (50 percent) experienced a reduction in support for greater deference. It should be noted, however, that this support has increased in about a third of the countries considered.

⁶From poverty to power. 30 August 2019. “The How Change Happens of Climate Change”.

⁷From poverty to power. 26 November 2019. “Why so many uprisings? Why now?”.

⁸Along similar lines Christian Welzel uses responses to this question to generate an “Inverse respect for authority” index, which is used in combination with measures of national pride and devoutness to build a “Defiance” index in the context of an analysis of secular and emancipative values. [More information.](#)

Figure 15a. A weakening of support for greater deference.



In almost all Latin American countries for which a comparison between Wave 5 and Wave 6 is possible, support for greater deference has declined (Figure 16). The only exception is Uruguay which started at a much lower level than the other countries and corrected upwards toward the regional average. It should be noted however that the regional level of support for greater deference as measured by Wave 6 remains significantly higher than the global average for the same wave. The only Caribbean country for which information is available – Trinidad and Tobago – experienced a minimal drop but remains characterized by one of the highest levels of support for greater deference among all countries.

Figure 15b. Declining but still high support for greater deference in Latin America and the Caribbean.

LATIN AMERICA			
COUNTRY	WAVE 5 - 2005-2009	WAVE 6 - 2010-2014	PERCENTAGE CHANGE
Argentina	73	48	-34%
Chile	60	50	-17%
Peru	82	69	-16%
Colombia	91	79	-13%
Mexico	81	77	-5%
Brazil	73	70	-4%
Uruguay	54	60	11%
AVG	73.43	64.71	-12%

CARIBBEAN			
COUNTRY	WAVE 5 - 2005-2009	WAVE 6 - 2010-2014	PERCENTAGE CHANGE
Trinidad and Tobago	88	86	-2%

Propensity to engage in demonstrations

We use the following question from the World Values Survey (WVS V87) to investigate people’s propensity to engage in demonstrations:

Now I’d like you to look at this card. I’m going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I’d like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things, whether you might do it or would never, under any circumstances, do it. [Attended lawful/peaceful demonstrations].

We define “Propensity to demonstrate” as the percentage of people who have attended a peaceful and lawful demonstration, plus the percentage of those who might, minus the percentage of those who would never do it. Figure 16 illustrates the average results based on 44 countries for which a comparison between Wave 5 and Wave 6 is possible.

■ **Figure 16. No obvious global trend in propensity to demonstrate.**

	Support for Greater Deference (SGD) Global averages	
	Wave 5 (2005-2009)	Wave 6 (2010-2014)
	Good thing	62.0%
Don't mind	23.5%	25.7%
Bad thing	9.6%	13.3%
SGD	52.4%	42.6%

While global data point to a general softening of deference, the propensity to engage in demonstration has remained – on balance – almost unchanged. It is important to note, however, that more recent data, once they become available, may of course provide a different picture. Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 17, regional and global averages may be hiding very different country trends.

While the regional average in “Propensity to demonstrate” for Latin America has not changed much, a country-by-country analysis reveals very different experiences. Some countries – especially Chile – had a very steep increase in the propensity to demonstrate between Wave 5 and Wave 6. Others – particularly Mexico and Brazil – had a sharp decline. Trinidad and Tobago had a decline too, although – once again – there appears to be a significantly different dynamic in the Caribbean (as evidenced by the much higher number of people who may be prepared to demonstrate, in comparison with Latin American countries).

■ **Figure 17. Significant country variations in propensity to demonstrate across Latin American countries.**

	Argentina			Brazil			Chile			Colombia		
	W5	W6	VAR	W5	W6	VAR	W5	W6	VAR	W5	W6	VAR
Have done	16.3	14.1	-13%	18.2	15.9	-13%	16.7	23.1	38%	13.7	18.3	34%
Might do	37.3	42.5	14%	39.6	36.2	-9%	18.7	22	18%	38.6	37	-4%
Would never do	39.3	37.7	-4%	41.3	45.1	9%	63.5	53.2	-16%	47.6	44.4	-7%
Propensity to demonstrate	14.3	18.9	4.6	16.5	7.0	-9.5	-28.1	-8.1	20.0	4.7	10.9	6.2

	Mexico			Peru			Uruguay			Trinidad and Tobago		
	W5	W6	VAR	W5	W6	VAR	W5	W6	VAR	W5	W6	VAR
Have done	15.7	10.2	-35%	23.5	14.1	-40%	18	13	-28%	15.1	13.3	-12%
Might do	41.6	40.4	-3%	39	43.4	11%	22	26.5	20%	58.5	51.9	-11%
Would never do	39.3	48.9	24%	35.2	36.4	3%	59.1	55.3	-6%	24.3	28.8	19%
Propensity to demonstrate	18.0	1.7	-16.3	27.3	21.1	-6.2	-19.1	-15.8	3.3	49.3	36.4	-12.9

Strong increase	Moderate increase	Moderate decrease	Strong decrease
Chile	Colombia	Peru	Mexico
	Argentina		Brazil
	Uruguay		Trinidad

**POTENTIAL LINE OF FURTHER ENQUIRY
A DEEPER LOOK AT TRENDS IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS AUTHORITY**

A closer analysis of trends in support for greater deference reveals fairly distinct regional trajectories. It will be important therefore to go beyond global averages to understand the different ways in which attitudes towards authority have evolved in different parts of the world. In addition, the available data runs up to 2014 and does not take into account therefore more recent years. It will be interesting to come back to this analysis once the result of the World Value Survey Wave 7 (2017-2020) are released.

6. Drivers of satisfaction with political system performance

Identifying potential drivers

In this section, we investigate the relation between satisfaction with the performance of the political system and a country's perceived economic performance. In addition, we analyze the relation between views on the functioning of the political system and two factors that opinion polls reveal to be of major concern for the Latin American public: corruption and citizen security. We use the following strategies to operationalize these concepts.

- *Perceived economic performance*

We use Latinobarometro's question P13STGBS.B: "In general, would you say you are very satisfied, rather satisfied, rather dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the functioning of the economy in your country?" We consider respondents that gave "very satisfied" or "rather satisfied" as an answer as "satisfied with the economy".

- *Perceived corruption*

We use Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index – which measures "perceived levels of public sector corruption, as determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys"⁹ and the World Bank's World Governance Indicator on Control of Corruption which summarizes "perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain [...] [based on inputs provided] by a large number of enterprise, citizen and expert survey respondents".¹⁰

- *Perceived insecurity*

We use Latinobarometro's question P70ST: "How frequently do you worry that you may end up being the victim of a violent crime? All or almost all the time, sometimes, occasionally, never". We consider respondents that gave "all or almost all the time" and "sometimes" as answers as "worried about violent crime".

Investigating potential links

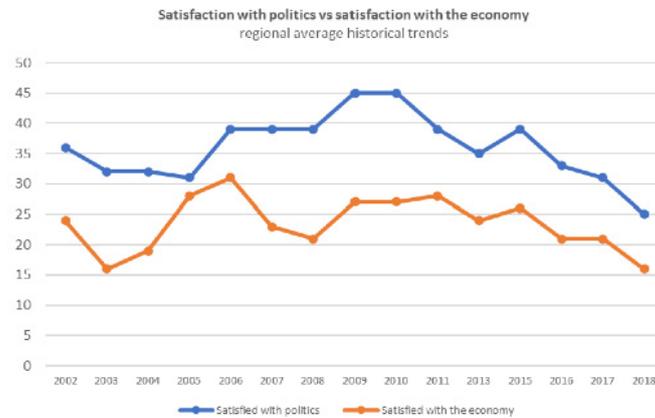
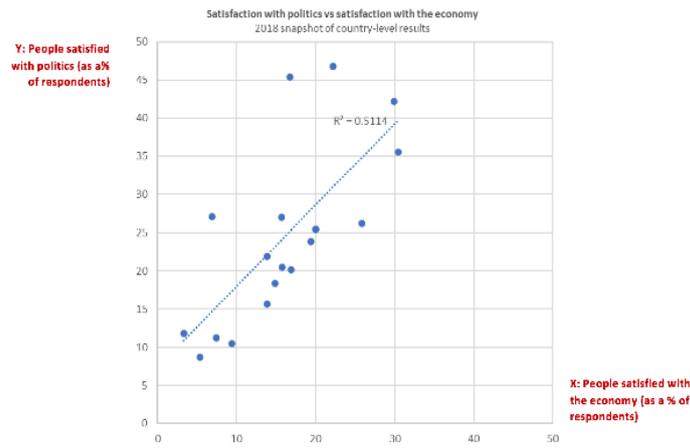
The following diagrammes illustrate that both perceived economic performance and perceived corruption are strongly correlated with overall satisfaction with the performance of the political system (with correlation coefficients of 0.656 and 0.623 respectively). Together, these two factors appear to account for a very large part of variations in satisfaction with the functioning of the political system across 18 Latin American countries in 2018, as illustrated in Figure 22. It is important to note, however, that this correlation has not always been there. Remarkably – for both perceived economic performance and perceived corruption – it only starts to appear after 2008 as illustrated by the significant increase of the correlation coefficients if only the period 2008-2018 is considered (0.864 and 0.741 respectively). While this would need to be investigated further, it could certainly be hypothesized that something deep may have changed in people's perspectives and priorities as a result of the 2008 financial crisis.

Perceived insecurity – operationalized as the percentage of people worried about violent crime – seems to have a less direct correlation with satisfaction with the functioning of the political system across the region both in terms of historical trends and in terms of variation across countries based on available data for 2018.

⁹ More information on the Corruption Perception Risk is available [here](#).

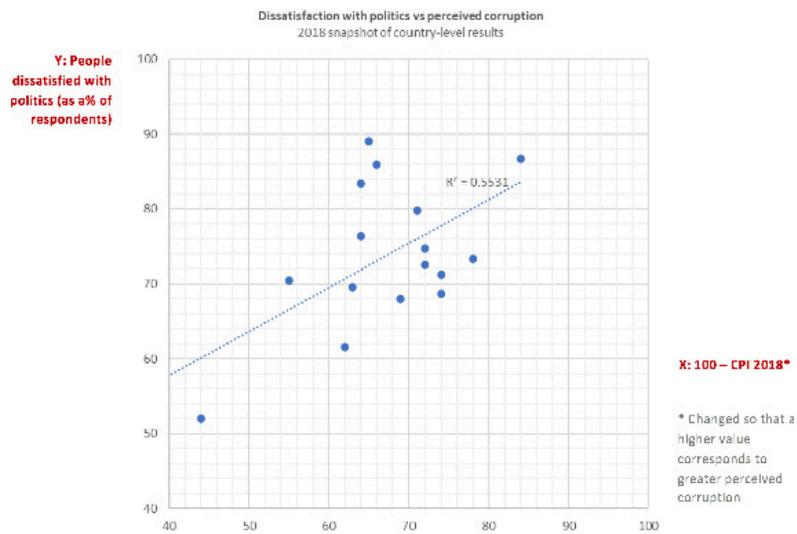
¹⁰ More information on the World Bank Governance Indicators is available [here](#).

■ **Figure 18. Perceived economic performance and satisfaction with politics.**

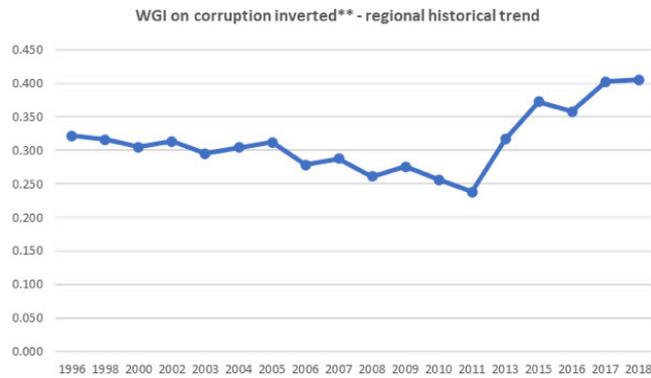


CORREL (POL SAT, ECO SAT – All countries – 2002-2018): 0.656
 CORREL (POL SAT, ECO SAT – All countries – 2008 and onwards): 0.864
 CORREL (POL SAT, ECO SAT – All countries – before 2008): 0.459

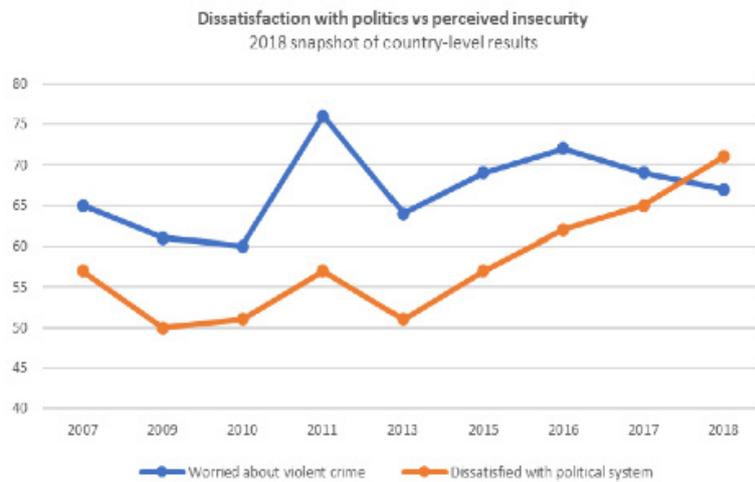
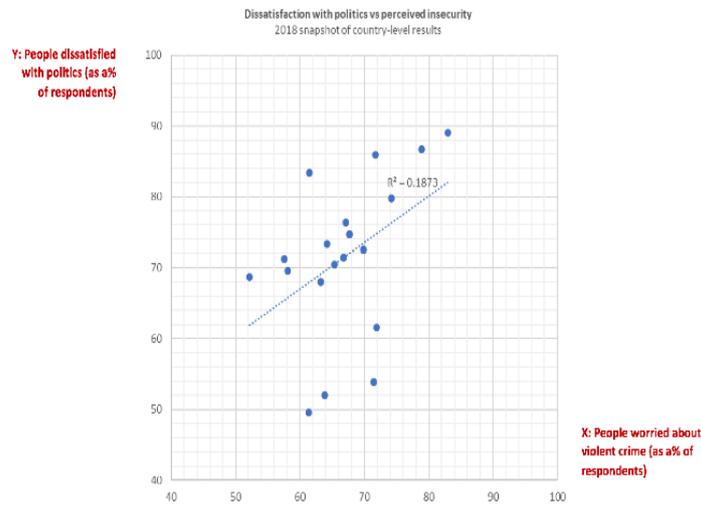
■ **Figure 19. Perceived corruption and satisfaction with politics.**



■ **Figure 20. Perceived insecurity and satisfaction with politics.**



*Inverted so that a higher value corresponds to greater perceived corruption.
 CORREL (POL SAT, PERC CORR – All countries – 1996-2018): 0.623
 CORREL (POL SAT, PERC CORR – All countries – 2008 and onwards): 0.741

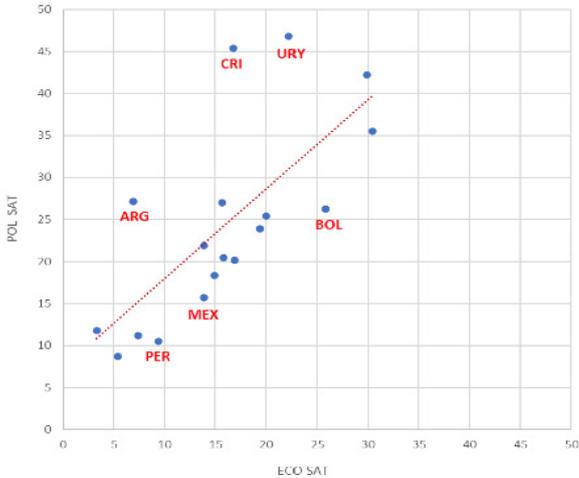


CORREL (POL SAT, PERC INSEC - All countries - 2018): 0.492

Investigating political system resilience

Comparing levels of satisfaction with the political system and levels of satisfaction with the functioning of the economy can help us investigate the resilience of a certain political system (Figure 21). Based on country level data for 2018, we can draw a linear trendline (in red in the diagramme below). This trendline can be interpreted as representing the “typical” relationship between satisfaction with the economy and satisfaction with politics. The countries above the trendline can be considered “overperformers” – i.e. countries where satisfaction with the political system is higher than it could be “expected” given current satisfaction with the economy. Conversely, countries under the trendline can be considered “underperformers”. “Overperforming” political systems could be assumed, in principle, to be more resilient to economic downturns than “underperforming” ones.

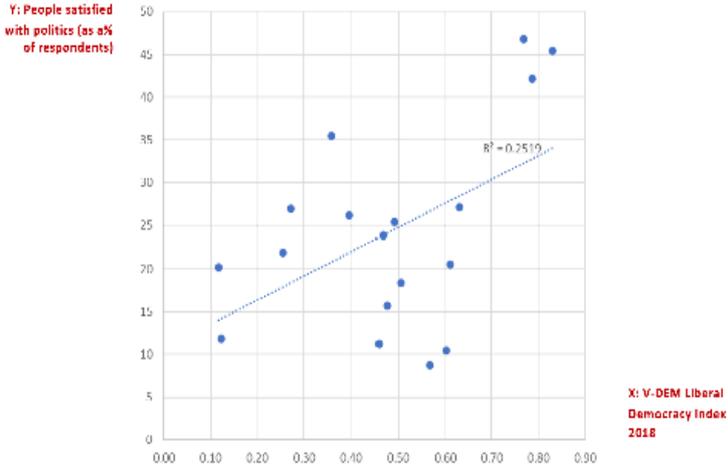
Figure 21a. Satisfaction with economics and satisfaction with politics.



Democratic safeguards and satisfaction with the functioning if politics

The Liberal Democracy Index developed by the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) Institute at Gothenburg University seeks to measure the strength of key components of democracy such as free and fair elections, the existence of checks and balances on the exercise of the power of the state, opportunities for meaningful citizen participation and a pluralistic but constructive public debate.¹¹ As illustrated in Figure 21, there appears to be only a moderate correlation between the value of this index and the percentage of people who described themselves as satisfied with the state of politics in their country. Or in other words, the available data shows only a tenuous link between strength of democratic safeguards and people’s satisfaction with the functioning of the political system.

Figure 21b. Strength of democratic safeguards and satisfaction with the functioning of the political system.



Analysis of multiple correlation

In order to assess levels of multiple correlation between satisfaction with the functioning of politics and the variables mentioned above, we perform a simple regression analysis (Ordinary Least Squares with 95 percent confidence interval). While caution should be taken in interpreting the results of a regression analysis based on so few data points, it can be noted that the model with perceived economic performance and perceived corruption accounts for close to 80 percent of the variation in the number of people satisfied with the functioning of the political system across countries in 2018. Adding measures of perceived insecurity and strength of democratic institutions, on the other hand, produces only a marginal improvement of the model’s overall fit.

Figure 22. Regression results for satisfaction with the functioning of the political system.

Y Variable	% of people satisfied w. performance of political system (country average, 2018)	
X Variable 1	% of people satisfied w. performance of economy (country average, 2018)	
X Variable 2	CPI 2018	
X Variable 3	% of people worried about violent crime (country average, 2018)	
X Variable 4	V-DEM Liberal Democracy Index 2018	

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	-3.516 (4.098)	16.922 (13.564)
Perceived economic performance	0.693 ** (0.201)	0.513 ** (0.210)
Perceived corruption	0.457 *** (0.108)	0.712 *** (0.200)
Perceived insecurity		-0.266 (0.182)
Strength of democratic safeguards		-18.809 (12.907)
R-squared	0.778	0.830
No observations	18	18

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.
 *, **, *** indicates significance at the 90%, 95%, and 99% level, respectively

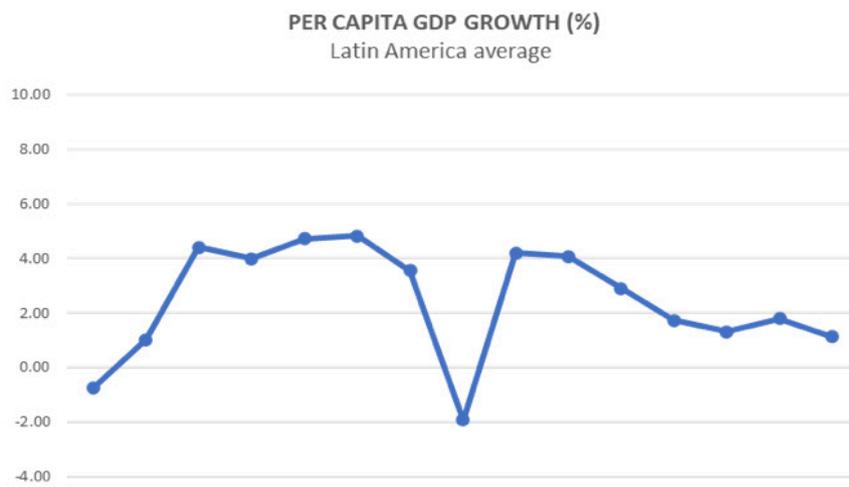
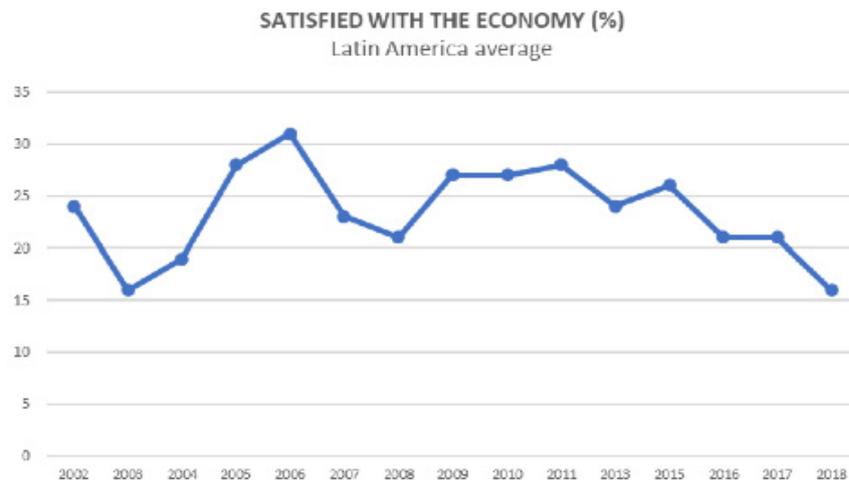
7. Evolution over time of satisfaction with the economy

Macroeconomic indicators

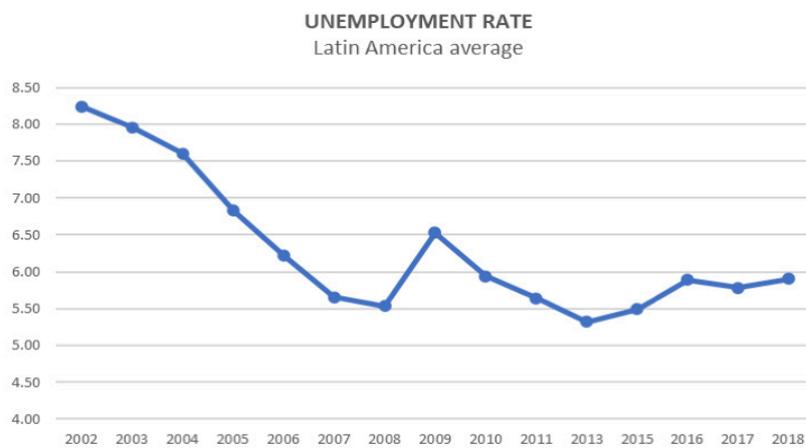
Some of the most commonly used macroeconomic indicators do not appear to be especially useful in predicting the historical evolution of people’s satisfaction with the functioning of the economy. Figure 23, for instance, shows a very limited correlation between satisfaction with the functioning of the economy on the one hand and per capita GDP growth and unemployment rates on the one other hand.

¹¹ More information on V-DEM’s indexes is available [here](#).

■ **Figure 23.** Per capita GDP growth, unemployment and satisfaction with the functioning of the economy.



CORREL (ECO SAT, P.C. GDP GROWTH): 0.242

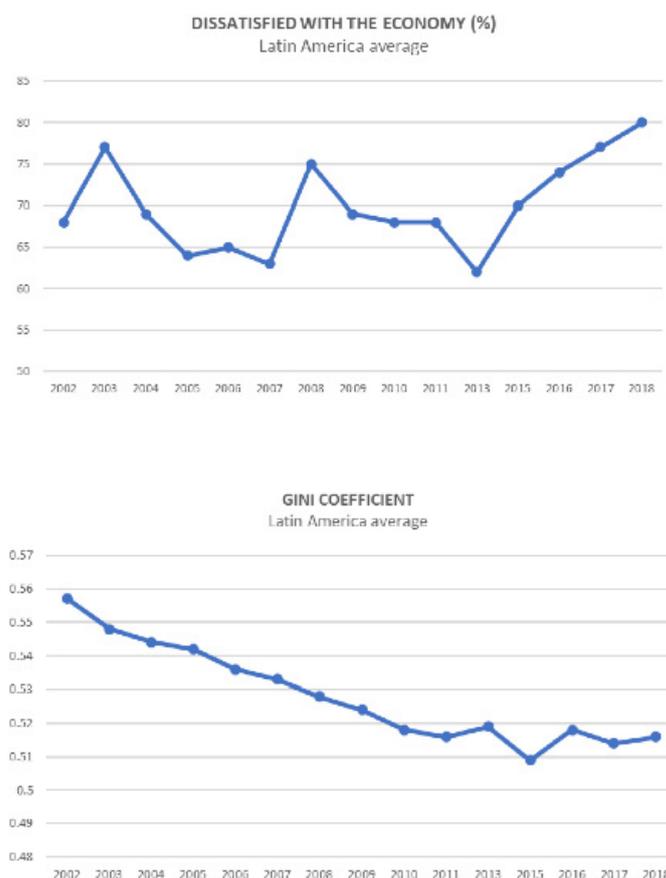


CORREL (ECO SAT, UNEMP): 0.064

Economic inequality

In order to investigate the relationship between economic inequality and satisfaction with the functioning of the economy, we first look at the relation between the Gini coefficient of income inequality and the percentage of people who declare to be dissatisfied with the state of the economy. As shown in Figure 24, there is virtually no correlation between these two variables.

■ **Figure 24. Measured income inequality and satisfaction with the functioning of the economy.**



It is well known that the Gini coefficient has several limitations as a measure of income inequality. It is also well known that what the Gini index says may or may not match what people perceive. In order to address this issue, we use the following Latinobarometro question (P23ST) to assess perceptions regarding income inequality.

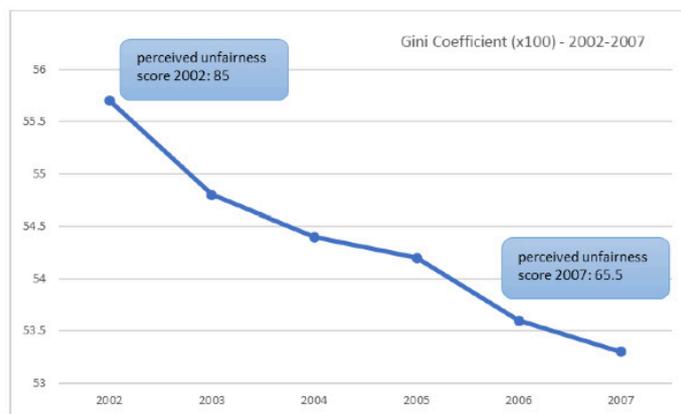
How fair do you think is the distribution of income in (COUNTRY)? Would you say it is: very fair, fair, unfair, very unfair

We calculate a “Perceived unfairness score” using the following formula: % “very unfair” responses x 1.5 + % “unfair” responses - % “fair” responses - % “very fair” responses x 1.5. Since this question was not included for all years of the Latinobarometro survey, the score can only be calculated for 2002, 2007 and all other years starting from 2009.

As illustrated in the following diagramme, the relation between measured and perceived inequality is a complex and dynamic one.

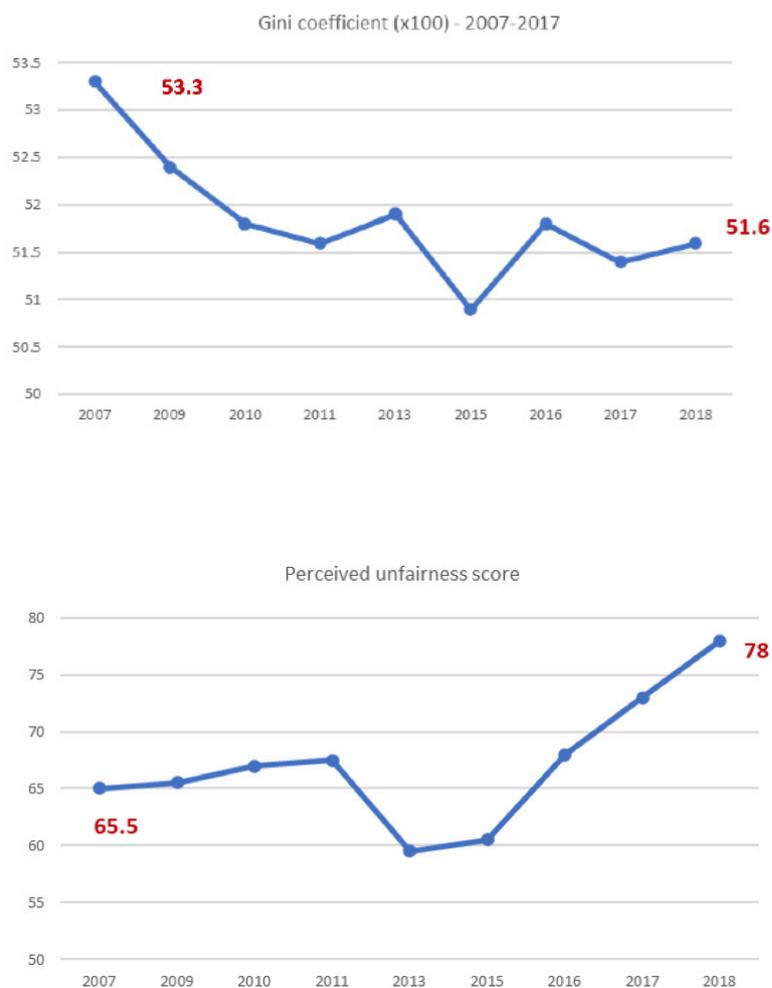
During the period 2002-2007, the average Gini coefficient of income inequality for Latin America and the Caribbean dropped from 55.7 to 53.3, corresponding to a 7% reduction. During the same time, the perceived unfairness score dropped from 85 to 65.5, corresponding to a 23% reduction (Figure 25).

■ **Figure 25. Concurrent trajectories of measured and perceived inequality.**



From 2007 to 2018, the average Gini index of income inequality for Latin America and the Caribbean continued by and large to go down - from 53.3 to 51.6, corresponding to a further 3% reduction. However, the perceived unfairness score moved in the opposite direction – rising by almost 20%, from 65.5 to 78 (Figure 26).

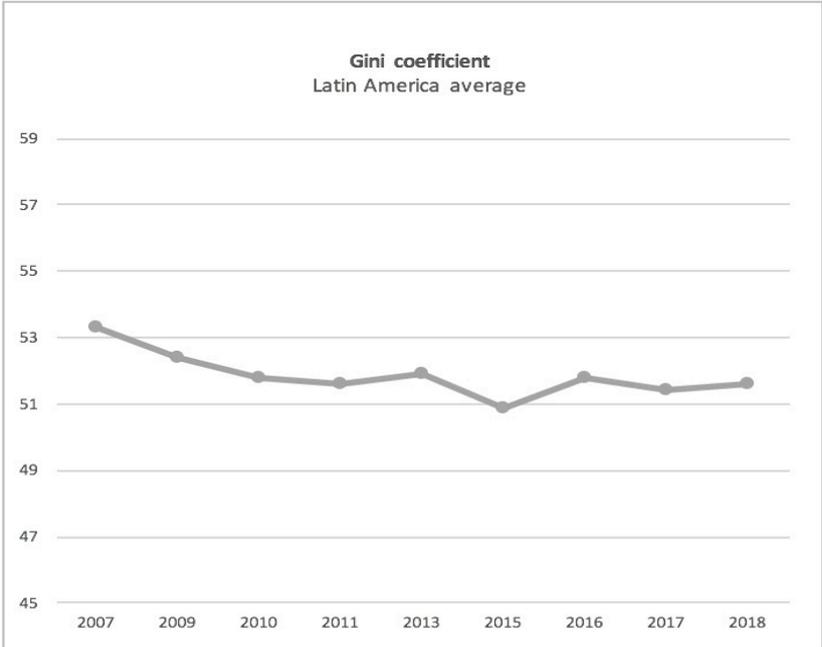
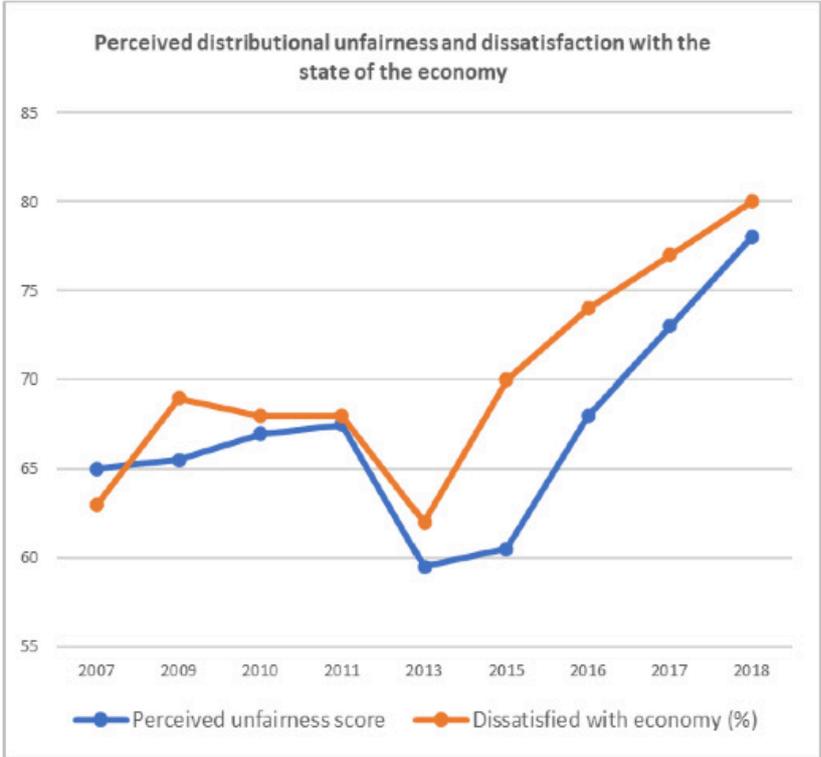
■ **Figure 26. Opposing trajectories of measured and perceived inequality.**



¹² ¿Cuán justa cree Ud. que es la distribución del ingreso en (PAÍS)? Muy justa, justa, injusta, muy injusta.

There is a very strong correlation between views on income distribution and views on the overall state of the economy for the period 2007-2018. As the Gini coefficient of income inequality was slowly inching downwards, the perception of distributional unfairness rose rapidly and with it a feeling of dissatisfaction with respect to the overall performance of the economy (Figure 27).

■ **Figure 27. Perceived inequality and dissatisfaction with the state of the economy (2007-2018).**



8. A middle class perspective

Middle class as a “natural” democratic constituency

The middle class often has sufficient education, financial, time and relations assets to be a powerful political force. However, it does not have sufficient resources to capture state institutions. For this reason, many political economy analyses have argued that middle class should be regarded as a “natural” champion of democracy. Nancy Birdsall, for instance, states that:

*Middle class is not just an engine of growth. It can also be a powerful force for the rule of law and good governance – at least, once it reaches a critical mass.*¹³

It should be noted, however, that this debate is far from settled. According to David Motadel:

Middle classes are not a priori engines of political liberalization. They can readily become the promoters of repressive authoritarianism if they fear for the loss of influence and wealth. The history of the middle-class opposition to the principles of universal freedom, equality, and civility can be understood as part of the dark side of modernity, as described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the two main figures of the Frankfurt School, in their 1947 classic “Dialectic of Enlightenment.” The middle class has always been Janus-faced. Whether it embraces liberal models of modernity or not depends on the social, economic and political circumstances.¹⁴

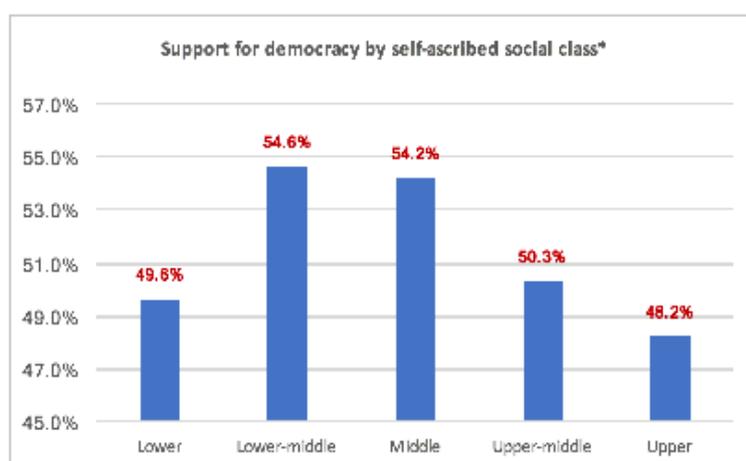
Latinobarometro data for the years 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2018 can be stratified by self-ascribed social class, using the following question (S1):

People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to a certain social class. Would you describe yourself as belonging to a social class that is... lower, lower-middle, middle, upper-middle, upper?

We use this stratification to investigate the middle class perspective on politics and economics in Latin America.

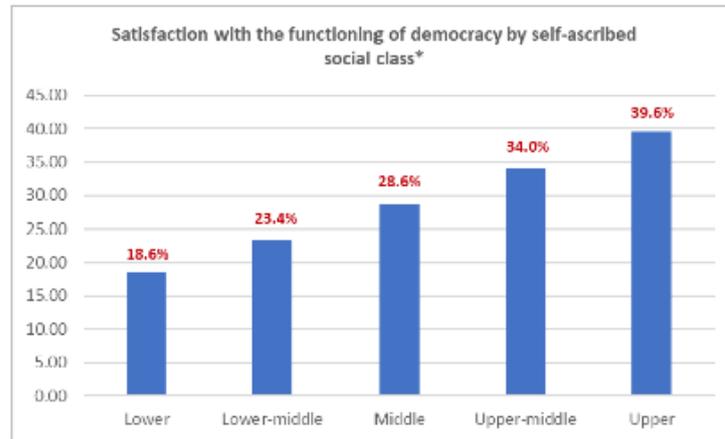
As illustrated in Figure 28, people who describe themselves as belonging to the “lower-middle” or “middle” class express higher-than-average support for democracy as a form of government, despite lower-than-average satisfaction with the actual functioning of democracy in their country.

■ **Figure 28. Self-ascribed social class and attitudes towards democracy.**



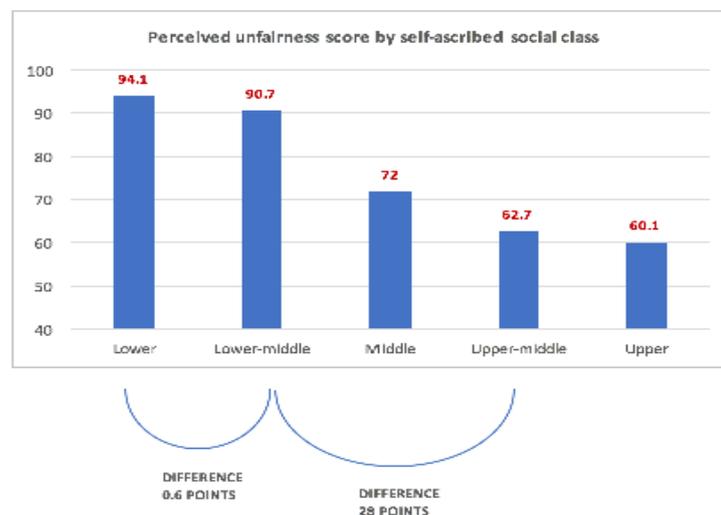
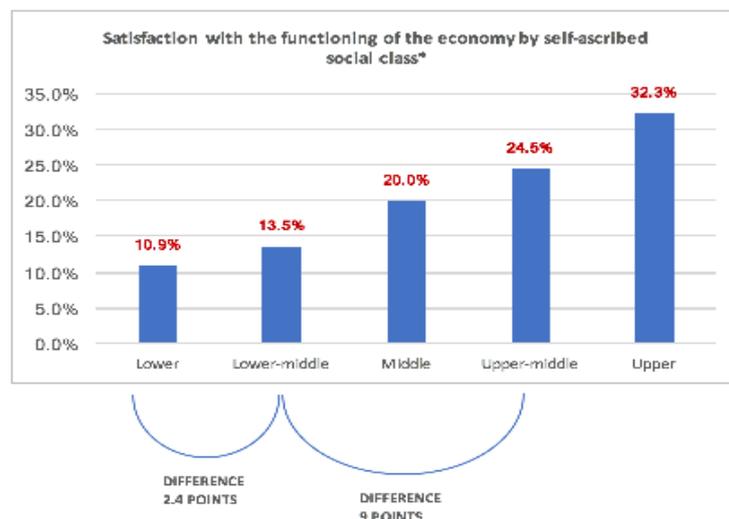
¹³ Middle-Class Heroes: The Best Guarantee of Good Governance.

¹⁴ The Myth of Middle-Class Liberalism.



On economic matters, the perspective of people describing themselves as “lower-middle” class is much closer to that of those describing themselves as “lower” social class than to that of those who consider themselves as belonging to the “upper-middle” class (Figure 29).

■ **Figure 29. Self-ascribed social class and attitudes towards the economy.**



Evolution over time of the size of the “middle class”

In order to investigate the evolution over time of the size of the middle class, we look at two statistics:

- Poverty, vulnerability and middle class rates

We use World Bank statistics on the evolution of poverty, vulnerability and middle class rates in Latin America and the Caribbean, based on the World Bank Upper-Middle-Income International Poverty Line (5,50 USD/day, 2011 PPP) and the following income brackets: for vulnerability 5.5-13 USD/day (2011 PPP) and for middle class 13-70 USD/day (2011 PPP).

- Perceived economic status

We use the following Latinobarometro question (P10NC) to investigate perceived economic status: “Imagine a scale with 10 steps, where 1 corresponds to the poorest people and 10 to the richest people. Where would you place yourself?”. We then proceed to interpret the responses as follows: 1-2 “low-income”, 3-4 “middle-lower income”, 5-6 “middle income”, 7-8 “middle-upper income”, 9-10 “upper income”.

Based on World Bank metrics, during the period 2000-2018, poverty has been almost halved in Latin America and the Caribbean, while there has been an increase of approximately 50 percent in the size of the middle class (Figure 30). However, since 2012, the rate of expansion of the middle class has drastically slowed down. In addition, vulnerability has also grown in the period under consideration – from 32.6 percent to 36.6 percent.

Figure 30. Evolution of the size of the middle class based on World Bank metrics.

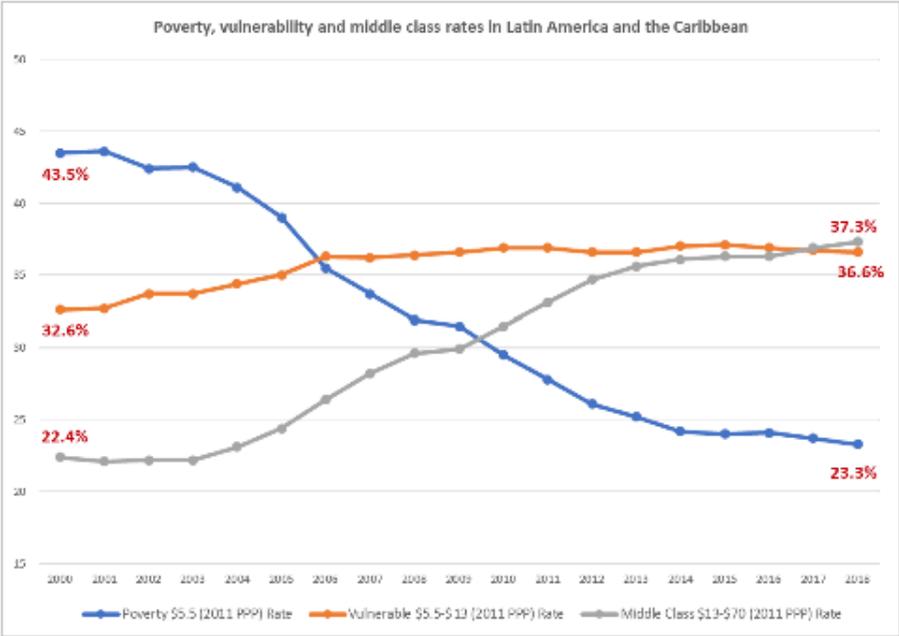
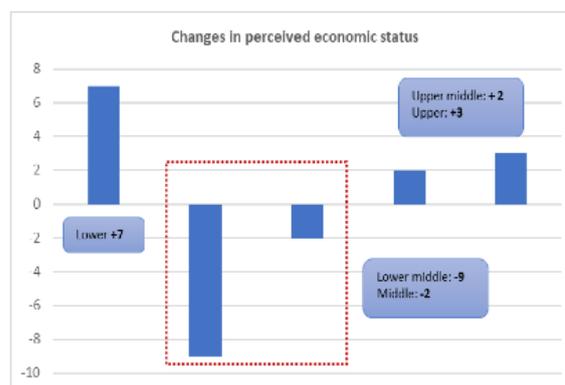


Figure 31. The disappearing middle.

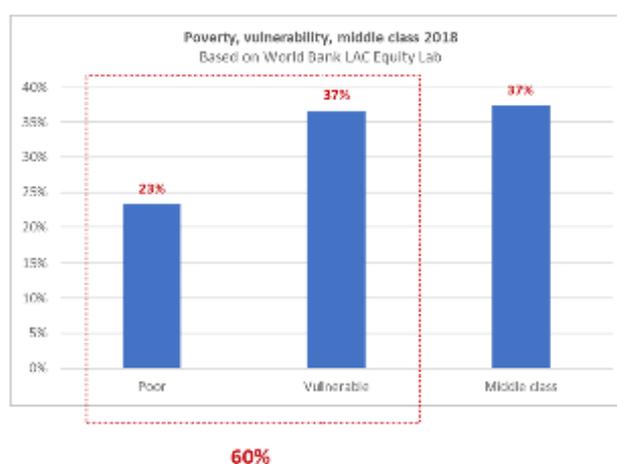
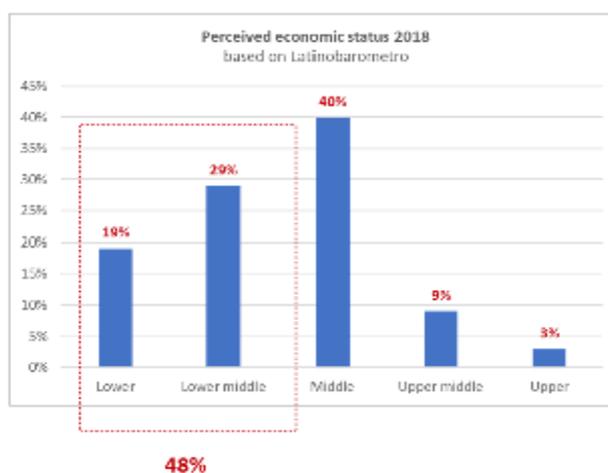
At the same time, based on Latinobarometro data, less people would describe themselves as belonging to the middle class in 2018 than in 2000 (Figure 31). In 2000, out of 100 people, 80 would describe themselves as belonging to the lower middle or middle class income bracket. In 2018, only 69 would do so. At the same time, the number of those who would describe themselves as belonging to a lower income bracket has increased from 12 to 19. The number of people who would describe themselves as upper middle class or upper class has increased too, but much less: from 7 to 9 and less than 1 to 3, respectively.

Self-ascribed economic status (percentage of respondents)					
	Lower	Lower middle	Middle	Upper middle	Upper
2000	12%	38%	42%	7%	<1%
2018	19%	29%	40%	9%	3%



By comparing the size of the middle class based on the World Bank statistics and Latinobarometro statistics regarding self-ascribed social class, we can conclude that a large percentage of people who identify as “lower-middle” and even “middle” class live in situations of serious economic fragility (Figure 32).

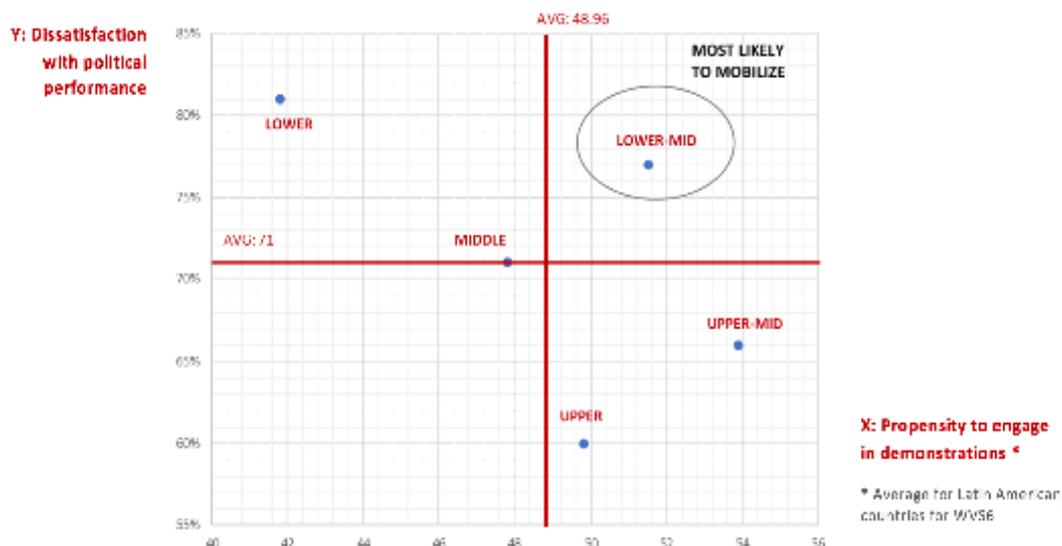
■ **Figure 32. Middle class and economic vulnerability.**



Social class and social mobilization

We combine self-ascribed social class, satisfaction with the functioning of politics and propensity to demonstrate in order to assess whether different social groups may be more likely to mobilize outside of formal political processes (Figure 33).

■ **Figure 33. Propensity to demonstrate by self-ascribed social class.**



As previously argued, people who identify as belonging to the lower-middle class live in a situation of serious economic vulnerability. In addition, taking into account dissatisfaction with politics and propensity to demonstrate, they are the group that appears most likely to mobilize outside of formal political institutions.

There seems to be some support in the data for what observed by Patricio Navia in relation to the 2019 protests in Chile: “[T]he real reasons behind the rage lie in the frustration of a population that was promised access to the promised land of middle-class status, but that has been denied such access at the gate.”¹⁵

■ **Figure 34. Sway, an interactive and complementary version.¹⁶**



¹⁵ Chile's Riots: Frustration at the Gate of the Promised Land. *America's Quarterly*, 21 October 2019.

¹⁶ Click [here](#) to access the Sway online version with additional audio notes.

