AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2014

Number 108

The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2014: Democratic Governance across 10 Years of the AmericasBarometer

Executive Summary

By Elizabeth J. Zechmeister
liz.zechmeister@vanderbilt.edu
Vanderbilt University

Abstract. The 2014 LAPOP AmericasBarometer is based on interviews with over 50,000 individuals in 28 countries. This *Insights* report presents the executive summary of our newly published regional report, The Political Culture of Democracy in the Americas, 2014: Democratic Governance across 10 Years of the AmericasBarometer. In the 2014 round, a special emphasis was placed on issues related to crime and insecurity. In addition, the survey included modules related to the economy, corruption, engagement, local government, democracy, and more. Interested readers can find the full report at our website: www.americasbarometer.org. All data from the AmericasBarometer series are also available at that same website free of charge.

*This *Insights* report presents an Executive Summary that was written with input from authors of chapters in the 2014 AmericasBarometer regional report, in particular Ryan Carlin (Georgia State University), Gregory Love (University of Mississippi), Matthew Singer (University of Connecticut), and Mariana Rodríguez (Vanderbilt University).
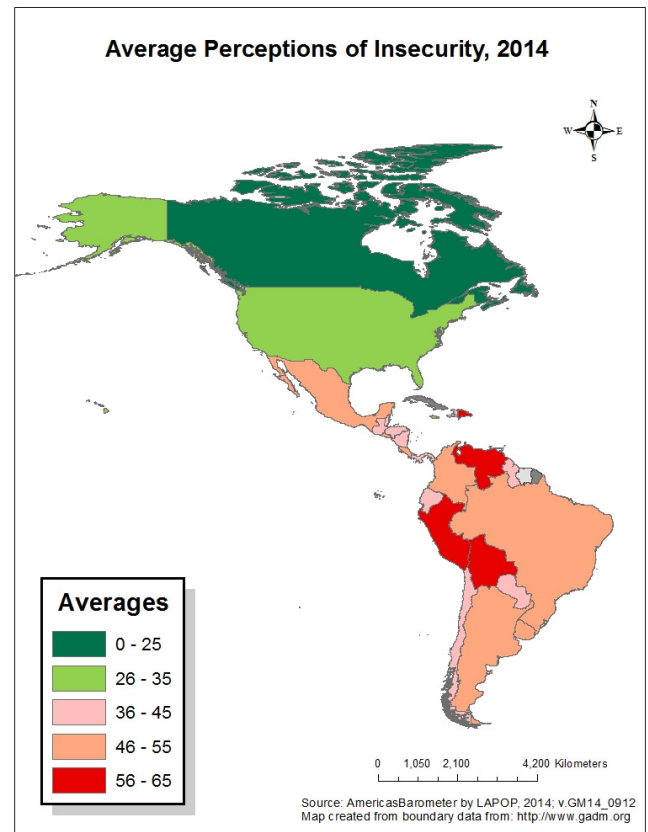
The 2014 AmericasBarometer[1] data and the corresponding regional report mark an important milestone for the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP)[2]: we are now able to assess over a decade of values, assessments, and experiences that have been reported to us though first-hand accounts by citizens across the region. The AmericasBarometer surveys, spanning from 2004 to 2014, allow us to capture both change and continuity in the region on indicators that are vital to the quality and health of democracy across the Americas.

In looking back over the decade, one trend is clear: *citizens of the Americas are more concerned today about issues of crime and violence than they were a decade ago* (see Map 1 for average feelings of insecurity in the Americas in 2014). We take this fact as a cornerstone for this report, and devote the first three chapters to an assessment of citizens' experiences with, evaluations of, and reactions to issues of crime and insecurity. We then proceed in the subsequent four chapters to address

Map 1. Feeling of Insecurity by Countries, 2014

Average Perceptions of Insecurity, 2014

Averages
- 0 - 25
- 26 - 35
- 36 - 45
- 46 - 55
- 56 - 65

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2014; v.GM14_0912
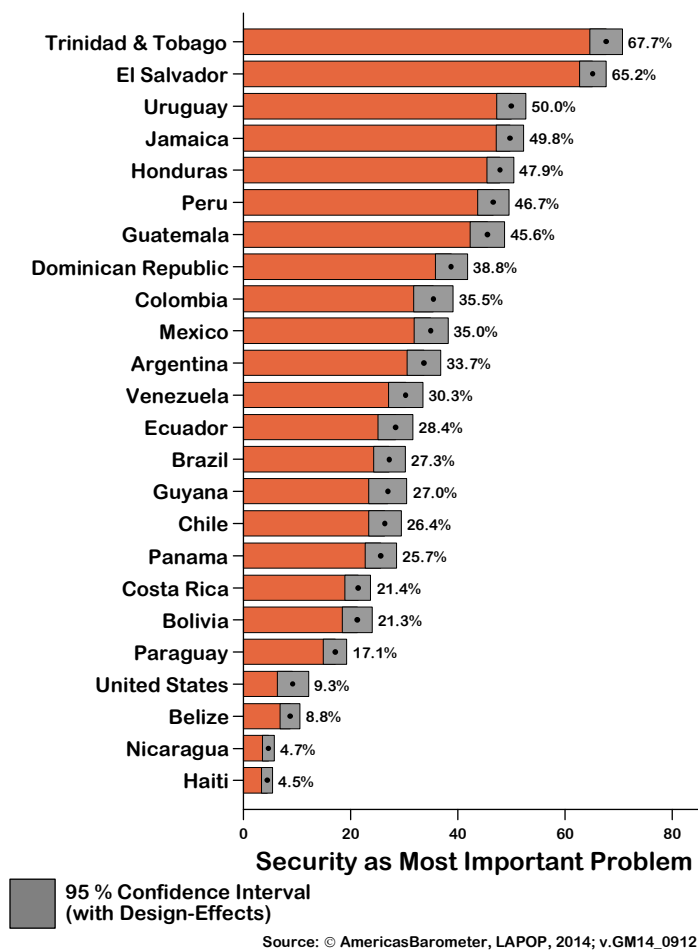Map created from boundary data from: http://www.gadm.org

topics that are considered "core" to the AmericasBarometer project: citizens' assessments of the economy and corruption; their interactions with and evaluations of local government; and, their democratic support and attitudes. In each of these cases we identify key trends, developments, and sources of variation on these dimensions and examine links between these core issues of crime and insecurity. Thus, the goal of this report is to provide a comparative perspective – across time, countries, and individuals – on issues that are central to democratic governance in the Americas, with a

---

[1] Funding for the 2014 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.

[2] Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php.
The data on which they are based can be found at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php

particular focus on how countries, governments, and citizens are faring in the face of the heightened insecurity that characterizes the region.

The first three chapters demonstrate a number of ways in which the AmericasBarometer provides a unique tool for policymakers, academics, and others interested in issues related to crime, violence, and insecurity in the Americas. Data from police reports on crime can suffer from problems that make comparisons across countries and time difficult; these include under-reporting by citizens; political pressures to adjust reports; and other problems. Data on homicides, in contrast, are sometimes viewed as more reliable, but in fact often obscure information, such as where the crime took place, and ultimately provide an overly narrow portrait of citizens' experiences, which can range across distinct types of crime: for example, from burglaries to extortion and from drug sales in the neighborhood to murders. The AmericasBarometer in general, and in particular with the addition of several new modules on crime and insecurity in the 2014 survey, provides a reliable and comprehensive database on citizens' experiences and evaluations of issues of crime and violence. Standardization of questionnaires that are administered by professional survey teams increases our ability to make comparisons across time,

Figure 1. Percentage Identifying Security as the Most Important Problem Facing, 2014

Country	Security as Most Important Problem
Trinidad & Tobago	67.7%
El Salvador	65.2%
Uruguay	50.0%
Jamaica	49.8%
Honduras	47.9%
Peru	46.7%
Guatemala	45.6%
Dominican Republic	38.8%
Colombia	35.5%
Mexico	35.0%
Argentina	33.7%
Venezuela	30.3%
Ecuador	28.4%
Brazil	27.3%
Guyana	27.0%
Chile	26.4%
Panama	25.7%
Costa Rica	21.4%
Bolivia	21.3%
Paraguay	17.1%
United States	9.3%
Belize	8.8%
Nicaragua	4.7%
Haiti	4.5%

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; v.GM14_0912

countries, and individuals and, as well, to investigate the correlates, causes, and consequences of crime, violence, and insecurity in the region.

Chapter 1 of the report documents change over time in the region with respect to citizens' perceptions of and experience with crime and violence. As noted above, citizens of the Americas are comparatively more concerned with issues related to security in 2014 than they have been since 2004. In 2014, on average across the Americas,

approximately 1 out of every 3 adults reports that the most important problem facing their country is one related to crime, violence, or insecurity (see Figure 1 for a country-by-country break down).

Interestingly, average overall crime victimization rates have held steady for the region for the last decade, with the exception of a notable spike in 2010.[3] As with just about any measure we examine in this report, we find important differences within and across countries. For example, with respect to crime victimization, Chapter 1 affirms that in 2014, urban locations are more affected by crime than rural areas and notes significant variation in general rates of crime victimization across countries, with Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, and Venezuela topping the list. Yet, *types* of crime experienced also vary across countries, which is another nuance examined in Chapter 1. For example, in Argentina burglaries are reported as quite common but extortion (blackmail) and murders are not. Brazil, as another example, ranks toward the top of the list of countries in terms of percentages of individuals reporting problems with burglaries, drug sales, extortion, and murder in their neighborhoods. Nicaragua ranks in the top half of countries on burglaries but registers the lowest reported extortion

rates in the region, and El Salvador shows the reverse to be the case, ranking in the top half on extortion rates but at the low end on reported burglaries. While crime victimization in general matters, it is important to keep in mind that the types of crimes individuals experience and witness vary significantly according to the contexts in which they live.
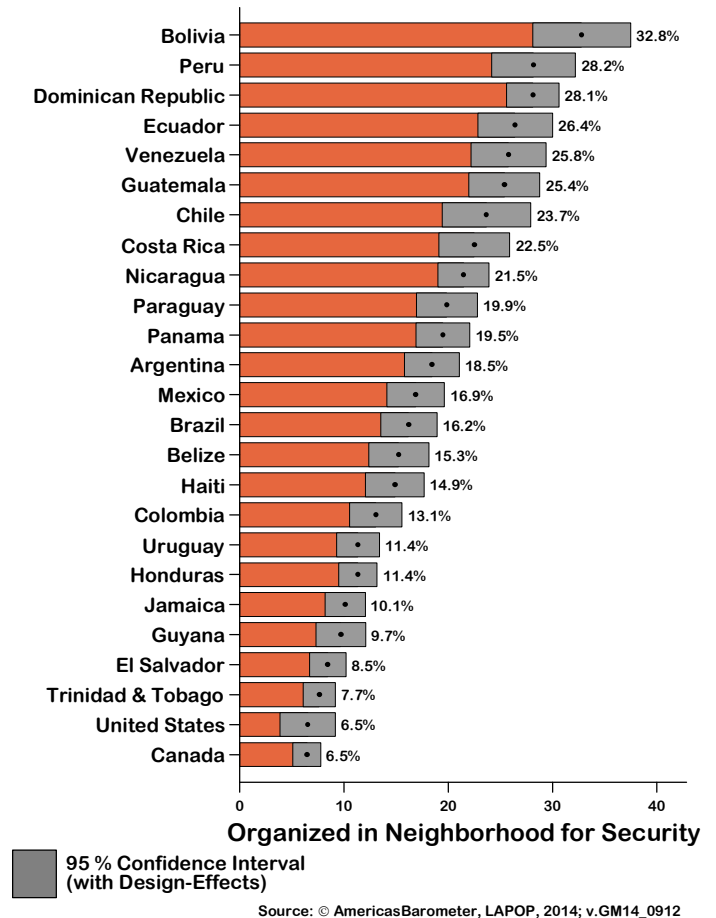
One persistent theme in this report is that perceptions of insecurity matter independently from crime victimization. These perceptions and assessments of violence in the neighborhood are fueled by personal experiences *and* by the diffusion of news about the broader context; thus, being the victim of a crime is associated with higher levels of reported insecurity, and so is paying more attention to the media. In the 2014 AmericasBarometer we added to our standard module questions asking about safety concerns in locations close to the home and daily routines (given that our data affirm, as noted in Chapter 1, that most crime is experienced in proximity to where the individual lives). Specifically, the new questions asked how worried individuals are about safety on public transportation and in schools. Slightly more than 1 out of every 3 individuals across the Americas, on average, reports either a high level of fear for the likelihood of a family member being assaulted on public transportation and/or a high level of concern for the safety of children in school.

---

[3] The trend over time with respect to perceptions of gangs affecting the neighborhood mirrors that we find for crime victimization: it peaked in 2010 and has receded somewhat in recent years, though still the average individual in the region believe his/her neighborhood is affected to some degree or more by gangs.

Chapter 2 makes the point that negative experiences with crime and heightened insecurities alter individuals' daily behaviors, interactions, and satisfaction with their lives under the status quo. We find overwhelming evidence that crime victimization and concerns about violence and gangs in the neighborhood increase the likelihood that individuals avoid certain routes that are perceived to be dangerous and, as well, increase the likelihood that individuals organize with neighbors in response to a fear of crime (see Figure 2 for cross-country percentages in organizing with neighbors for 2014).

Across the region on average, 2 out of every 5 individuals avoids walking through certain parts of their neighborhood for fear of crime. On the one hand this set of findings demonstrates that individuals proactively seek out solutions to security challenges facing their countries; on the other hand, acts such as changing one's route and organizing with neighbors can be taxing on individuals, both with respect to the effort they require and the psychological toll they exert as one adapts to life under a cloud of crime and insecurity. We indeed find, in the last analyses in Chapter 2, that many factors related to crime victimization and insecurity depress life satisfaction and increase individuals' motivations to leave the country.

Figure 2. Percent of Individuals Having Organized with Neighbors in Their Community out of Fear of Crime across the Americas in 2014

Country	Percent
Bolivia	32.8%
Peru	28.2%
Dominican Republic	28.1%
Ecuador	26.4%
Venezuela	25.8%
Guatemala	25.4%
Chile	23.7%
Costa Rica	22.5%
Nicaragua	21.5%
Paraguay	19.9%
Panama	19.5%
Argentina	18.5%
Mexico	16.9%
Brazil	16.2%
Belize	15.3%
Haiti	14.9%
Colombia	13.1%
Uruguay	11.4%
Honduras	11.4%
Jamaica	10.1%
Guyana	9.7%
El Salvador	8.5%
Trinidad & Tobago	7.7%
United States	6.5%
Canada	6.5%

Organized in Neighborhood for Security

95 % Confidence Interval (with Design-Effects)

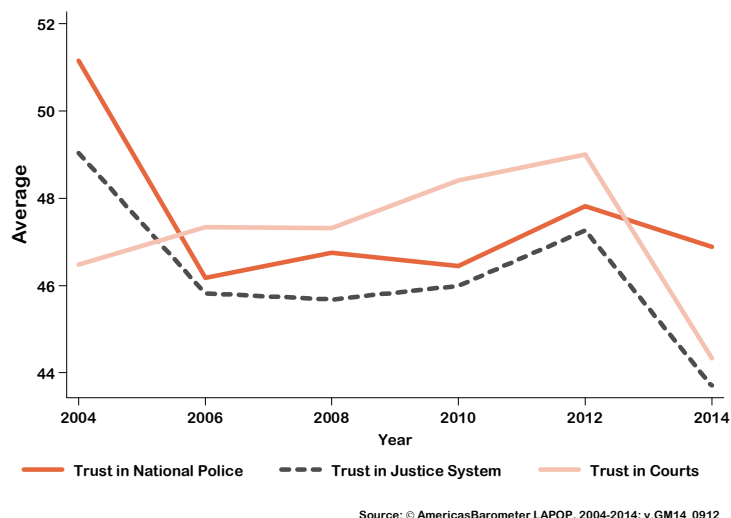Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; v.GM14_0912

What about the effect of crime and insecurity on individuals' political evaluations and preferences? Chapter 3 takes up this topic, focusing on the extent to which citizens of the Americas perceive the state as effectively upholding its charge to provide citizen safety and the rule of law. The chapter begins with a focus on law enforcement efforts at the local level. We find that poor assessments of police effectiveness in the neighborhood are quite common: nearly 1 out of 2 individuals, on

average, expresses dissatisfaction with local police performance and more than 1 out of 3 individuals report that the police would take more than an hour to respond to an average home burglary or not respond at all. Turning to evaluations at the national level, we find that in 2014, trust in courts and in the justice system have decreased to their lowest points in the past decade (see Figure 3). Perceptions of neighborhood insecurity matter significantly for satisfaction with local police efforts and, as well, for evaluations of national government capacity to effectively provide for citizen safety and maintain the rule of law. Concerns with impunity also increased in 2014, reversing a trend by which confidence in the justice system punishes the guilty had been increasing since 2006 for the region on average. Our findings show that insecurity and lack of confidence in the judicial system have important costs for incumbent political leaders.

In the face of rising insecurity and deficits in the perceived effectiveness of law enforcement, courts, and the broader justice system, we find that a majority viewpoint in the region is one that prefers a punitive approach to deter crime. This preference for "hardline" techniques to confront issues of crime and violence increased significantly on average in the region between 2012 and 2014. The importance of confidence in

Figure 3. Average Trust in the National Police, Courts, and Justice System over Time

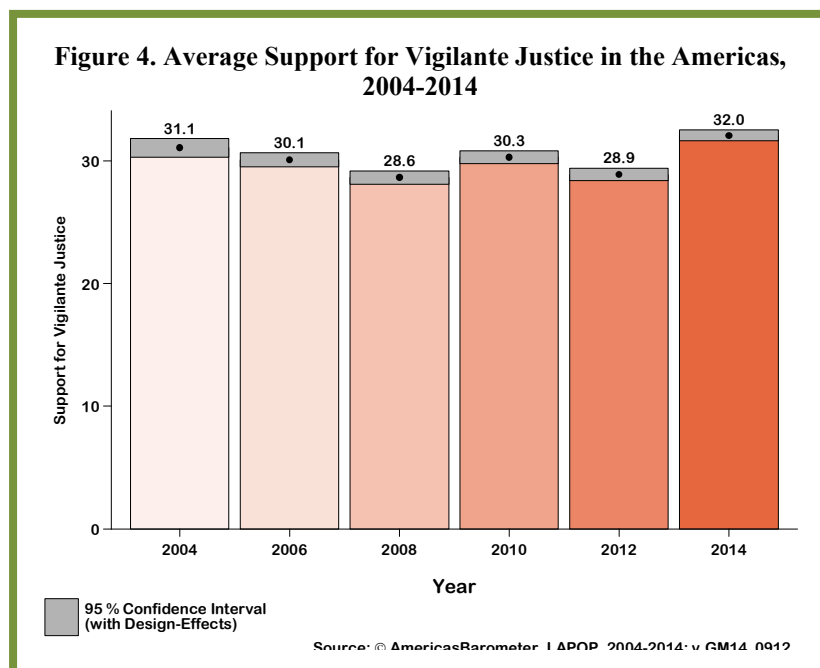Source: © AmericasBarometer LAPOP, 2004-2014; v.GM14_0912

the justice system to punish the guilty (that is, to assure against impunity) is highlighted in several analyses in Chapter 3, which document that crime victims with no or little confidence in the justice system are more supportive of punitive policies (as well as more military involvement in the fight against crime) than those who express higher evaluations of the justice system. We look not only at support for government policies to combat crime, but also at citizen support for circumventing the law and taking matters "into their own hands." Responses to this question give us insight into support for vigilante justice. We find that support for "taking the law into one's own hands" remains low on average for the Latin American and Caribbean region, but nonetheless increased significantly in 2014 compared to previous years (see Figure 4).

Chapter 3 concludes by highlighting a number of factors that individuals should take into consideration when anticipating, developing, or attempting to steer government responses to issues of crime and violence in the region. In particular, we note that despite the considerable rethinking by academics and policymakers of some hardline approaches to crime and violence, support for such tactics remains high among the mass public and in particular among those who are more insecure, are younger, and have lower levels of education.

As indicated, Chapters 4 through 7 focus on the broader set of standard dimensions of democratic governance typically considered part of the core thematic focus of the AmericasBarometer project: the economy, corruption, local government, and democratic values and support. In our analyses of these topics we considered not only major developments and notable findings for the region as a whole and over time, but we also considered the relevance of crime and violence to these dimensions.

Chapter 4 focuses on economic trends in the region and notes divergence between objective indicators of household wealth and subjective perceptions of households' financial

Figure 4. Average Support for Vigilante Justice in the Americas, 2004-2014

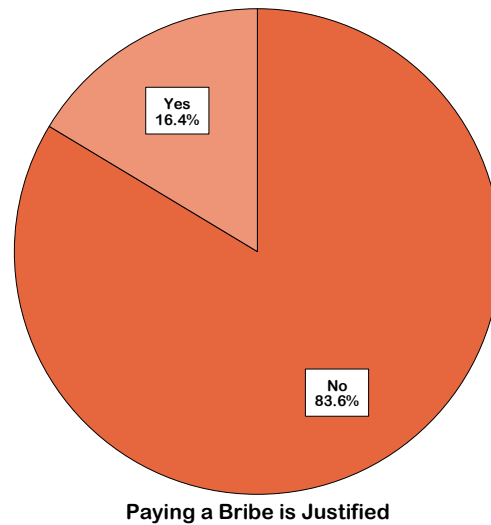Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2004-2014; v GM14_0912

situations. Objectively, the 2014 AmericasBarometer shows that citizens in the Americas own more basic household goods than they have at any other time in the last decade. That said, gaps in wealth do continue to exist across groups, such that single individuals; those who are less educated; individuals with darker skin tones; and those who live in rural areas have comparatively lower wealth. Yet when citizens of the Americas are asked about their household financial situation, the proportion of people who say they are struggling to make ends meet has not improved noticeably in comparison to previous waves of the survey. Households may own more things, but they do not feel more financially secure.

Chapter 4 also looks beyond citizens' personal finances and details how they assess national economic trends. On average, the national economy is viewed less positively than it was in recent waves of the survey. Citizen evaluations of the national economy are correlated with fluctuations in economic outcomes, but they also reflect differences in economic opportunity at the individual level as citizens who belong to economically and socially marginalized groups tend to have more negative opinions of national economic trends. Citizen views of the national economy are also weighed down by the security situation in their given country: individuals who live in high crime areas judge national economic performance more harshly.

Corruption is also frequent in many countries in the Americas. Chapter 5 shows that 1 in 5 people in an average country was asked to pay a bribe in the past year. While several countries saw corruption levels decrease significantly, these improvements are balanced out by levels of corruption victimization increasing in other countries, leaving the overall average frequency of bribery in the Americas essentially the same as in most previous waves of the AmericasBarometer. This corruption is occurring in many different locations, including interactions with the police, local government officials, the courts,

Figure 5. Do Respondents Think Paying a Bribe Is Sometimes Justifiable?, 2014

Yes
16.4%

No
83.6%

Paying a Bribe is Justified

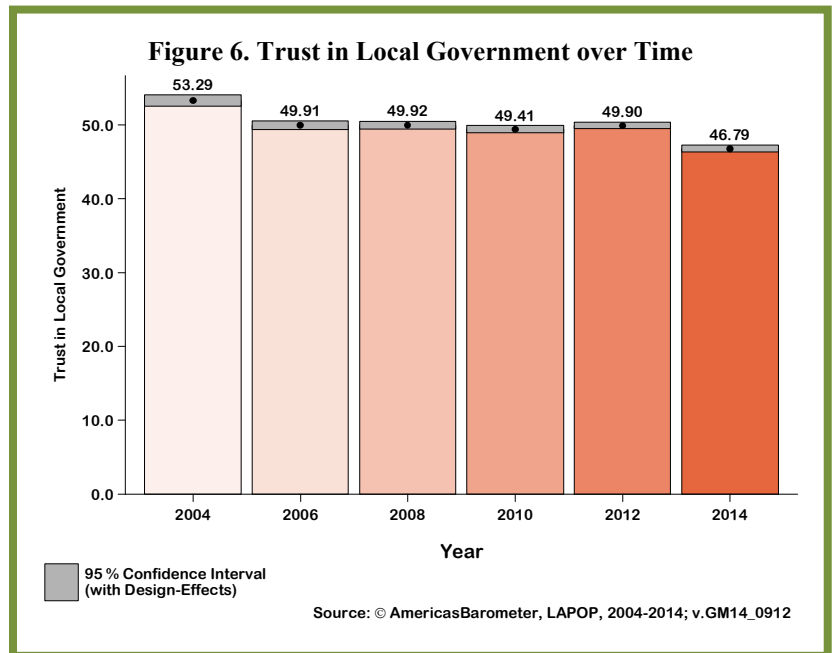Source: © AmericasBarometer. LAPOP. 2014: v.GM14_0912

and in schools, health clinics, and workplaces. Moreover, individuals who live in areas where crime is common are more likely to report that they were asked for a bribe; while we cannot use these data to determine the reason for this association, there is a general correlation between insecurity and reported experience with poor governance.

Given the frequency with which individuals are asked to pay bribes, it is not surprising that many individuals consider corruption to be common among government officials. In fact, levels of perceived government corruption have changed relatively little since the AmericasBarometer first started surveying. The one bright spot in Chapter 5 is the fact that, despite the prevalence of corruption in many places in the region, a large majority rejects the idea that paying a bribe can occasionally

be justified (see Figure 5). This is true even among those individuals who were asked for a bribe in the last year. So, while high levels of corruption are likely to have political and economic costs for the region, the AmericasBarometer data suggest that many citizens continue to reject the notion that these bribes are simply the cost of doing business.

It is typically the case that the level at which most citizens interact with their government is local. In Chapter 6 we examine political participation in municipal government; evaluations of local services; and citizens' trust in local government. In 2014, the AmericasBarometer registered a new low in the rate of municipal meeting attendance in the Americas, with only 1 in 10 attending a meeting in the past 12 months. However, this low degree of engagement was balanced by an increase in citizens making demands of local officials. We find that those individuals with the greatest and least satisfaction with local services are the most likely to make demands, potentially indicating people engage with local governments when they are either successful in attaining services or when they are most in need of them.

Paralleling the increase in demand-making on local governments in the Americas, we find a small increase since 2012 in citizens' evaluations of general local services. Overall, citizens in nearly all countries in the region give their

Figure 6. Trust in Local Government over Time

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2004-2014; v.GM14_0912

local government middling scores on local services. On average local governments appear to be neither completely failing their citizens nor providing services that can be deemed outstanding in quality. Among a set of specific local services we find a small decrease since 2012 in evaluations of public schools and a slight increase in evaluations of public health care services; however, in both cases the average scores are in the middle of the scale.

With regard to trust in local governments the 2014 AmericasBarometer finds a more pessimistic pattern. The 2014 survey registered the lowest level of trust in local governments since 2004 (see Figure 6). Andean and Caribbean countries along with Brazil have some of the lowest levels of trust in local government in the region, while Venezuela saw the largest drop in trust

between 2012 and 2014 (59.4 to 50.2). The factors that most strongly predict an individual's trust in local government are experiences with corruption, physical insecurity, and satisfaction with local services, indicating a link between institutional trust and institutional performance. We found no differences in trust among people often more marginalized in the Americas, women and people with darker skin tones (in comparison to men and those with lighter skin tones, respectively).

Our comparative report concludes with an assessment of the state of democratic legitimacy and democratic values in the Americas. Under this rubric, Chapter 7 considers support for democracy in the abstract, trust in a range of state institutions, support for the political system, political tolerance, and the attitudinal profiles that result from combining the latter two. In addition to regional comparisons for 2014, AmericasBarometer data now permit the assessment of a decade-long trend for each of these measures of democratic legitimacy. Of special emphasis in this chapter is on the institutions tasked with maintaining law and order – the armed forces, the national police, and the justice system – and how crime and violence may affect their legitimacy and, indeed, democratic support and values more broadly. Altogether, this chapter permits an inspection of the attitudinal foundations of democracy with an eye to one of its potential weak spots.

Our initial look at democracy's legitimacy in the Americas finds citizens strongly support democracy as form of government. While fairly stable over time, 2014 saw abstract support for democracy regress to one of its lowest levels in a decade. Going from this abstract notion of democracy to more particular political and social institutions changes the picture only somewhat. The armed forces and the Catholic Church maintain their pride of place as the most trusted institutions in the region; legislatures and, especially parties, continue to garner the least trust. But since 2012, trust has not increased in any major social, political, or state institution and, in most cases, it has decreased. Intriguingly, the ascent of the first Pope from the Americas in 2013 could not halt the slide in trust in the Catholic Church. The most precipitous drop was in trust in elections, a worrisome finding considering that roughly half of the countries in the 2014 AmericasBarometer held a national election in the time since our 2012 study. Among law-and-order institutions – armed forces, national police, and the justice system – public trust in the latter is lowest and has declined the most since 2012. Levels of trust in the armed forces and national police institutions appear most volatile where these institutions have recently played highly visible roles in maintaining public order. Individuals whose neighborhoods are increasingly insecure are losing trust in the police and courts. Law and order

institutions, it seems, must earn the public's trust by successfully providing the key public goods of safety and justice.

System support – the inherent value citizens place in the political system – fell in 2014 (see Map 2 for average system support in the Americas in 2014). Beliefs about the legitimacy of courts and the system's ability to protect basic rights deteriorated the most. Even within the two-year window between 2012 and 2014, several cases exhibit wide swings in support. The results of our analyses suggest system support in the Americas reflects how citizens evaluate and interact with the national and local governments. Specifically democratic legitimacy hinges on the system's ability to deliver public goods in the areas of the economy, corruption, and security. These same factors do not, however, increase tolerance of political dissidents, a key democratic value. Rather, the happier citizens are with the performance of national and local governments, the less politically tolerant they are. These contradictory results may signal a desire to insulate a high-performing system from those who denounce it. They nevertheless imply a Catch-22: improving governance may at once enhance the political system's legitimacy but lower political tolerance. Lastly, we observe a decline in the percentage of citizens in the Americas who hold the combination of attitudes most conducive to democratic stability (high system support and high political

tolerance) and a marked increase in the attitudes that can put democracy at risk (low system support and low political tolerance).

Map 2. System Support in the Americas, 2014

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2014; v.GM14_0912
Map created from boundary data from: http://www.gadm.org