

AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2011

Number XX

Democracy in Hard Times: Suriname

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Executive Summary. In mid-2010 the majority of Surinamese people perceived only a mild economic crisis in their country, and few had experienced personal or family job loss. At the same time, Surinamers reported high levels of support for democracy in the abstract, but much lower levels of satisfaction with the way it works in their country. Analysis reveals that economic evaluations and democratic attitudes are strongly linked in Suriname, as tends to be the case in the Americas as a whole. While support for democracy in the abstract is not influenced by perceptions that the country is in crisis, the data suggest it is affected by general evaluations of the national economy. Moreover, satisfaction with democracy is lower among those with more negative general and crisis-specific economic perceptions. Nonetheless, in spite of the effect of the comparatively mild economic crisis on some citizens' democratic attitudes, the Surinamese continue to be strongly supportive of this form of government. This report constitutes part of a subseries examining the region-wide economic crisis and democratic attitudes within selected countries included in the 2010 AmericasBarometer.

The Insights Series is co-edited by Mitchell A. Seligson, Amy Erica Smith, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister with administrative, technical, and intellectual support from the LAPOP group at Vanderbilt.

In light of the recent economic crisis, the 2010 round of the AmericasBarometer survey set out to determine the impact of hard times on democracy.¹ In 2011, the *Insights* series began a subseries entitled *Democracy in Hard Times*, providing short reports on this subject in several countries.² This report on Suriname constitutes part of that subseries; it focuses on Surinamese citizens' perceptions of and experiences with the economic crisis, and on the correlation between these and support for and satisfaction with democracy in 2010.

Formerly a colony of the Netherlands, Suriname gained its independence peacefully in 1975. Its democratic start was stunted by a military coup in 1980, which led to a seven year period of autocratic rule under Desiré "Dési" Bouterse. Elections were held again in 1987, but the civilian government was forced to hand over the reins of power to the military once again in 1990. Democracy has continued uninterrupted since 1991 and today Suriname is a constitutional, parliamentary democracy. Interestingly, in August 2010, shortly after the AmericasBarometer surveys were conducted, Bouterse was elected president by the National Assembly. This was in spite of national charges against him for murder stemming from his days as the military ruler of the country (*Associated Press Online* 2010; *BBC News* 2010) and a conviction for drug trafficking

While Suriname faces many challenges, the economic crisis was relatively minor in this country, and the Surinamese continue to show high support for democracy.

by the Netherlands (*The Economist* 2010; Wallis 2010).

According to its citizens, the most serious problems facing Suriname are housing, unemployment, and corruption.³ Though perceptions of corruption in Suriname are the lowest in the Americas, the issue became particularly salient in 2007, when a fraud conspiracy was exposed in the Finance Ministry involving public and private employees (*EIU ViewsWire* 2007, Joynes 2010).

Furthermore, Suriname suffers from high levels of economic inequality, as well as ethnic and racial divisions. The

country has significant Indian, Javanese and Chinese immigrant populations. In fact, the Hindustani population (27%) accounts for the largest ethnic group in Suriname, followed by Creole (18%), Javanese (15%) and Maroon (15%).⁴

These issues might signal democratic weaknesses in Suriname. The following report will demonstrate, however, that Surinamers strongly support democracy. While those who perceive negative economic conditions are generally less supportive and satisfied, overall public attitudes toward democracy in Suriname are robust in the face of those and other problems facing the country.

Suriname was included in the AmericasBarometer for the first time in 2010. In that round, 43,990 individuals from 26 countries

Note: Data analysis support for this report was provided by Margarita Corral (Vanderbilt University). Special thanks also to Ruben Martoredjo and Maikel Soekhnandan for their comments on this report.

¹ Funding for the 2010 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

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>.

³ In the AmericasBarometer survey, participants most often cited housing (14.5%), unemployment (10.3%) and corruption (9.8%) as the most serious problems facing the country. However, there seem to be some serious concerns not captured by the survey since 14.2% of citizens' complaints fell into the "other" category.

⁴ Statistics come from the 2004 census as reported by the U.S. Department of State, see <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1893.htm>

in the Americas were interviewed, with a nationally representative probability samples selected from each country. The 2010 survey of Suriname asked 1,516 people about their experiences, concerns, political attitudes, and socioeconomic and demographic profiles, among other topics. Importantly, the survey was conducted in April and May of 2010, in the midst of the parliamentary election campaign that resulted in the election of President Bouterse. Thus, the results presented here reflect the state of Surinamese public opinion in the final days of the administration of outgoing President Ronald Venetiaan, and prior to further economic troubles experienced in early 2011. The full description of the sample design in Suriname is available at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/suriname/Suriname_2010_Tech_Info.pdf.

Perceptions and Experiences in Hard Times

Suriname has a small but expanding economy. While GDP growth was strong between 2003 and 2008, hitting 6.0% in 2008, growth dropped to 2.5% in 2009,⁵ in an atmosphere of global economic decline. How did Surinamese citizens perceive this slowdown in their economy?

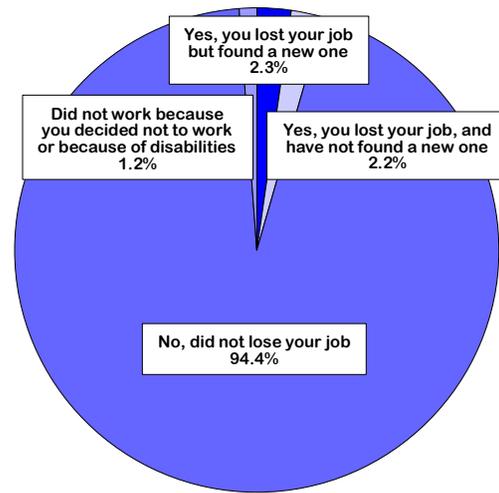
The first thing to note is that, though Suriname's economy slowed, it did not contract as in much of the Americas. In fact, Suriname showed the fourth-highest level of GDP growth in the region, after Uruguay, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic.⁶ Moreover, Figure 1⁷

⁵ Economic growth statistics come from the IMF's 2010 *World Economic Outlook* report.

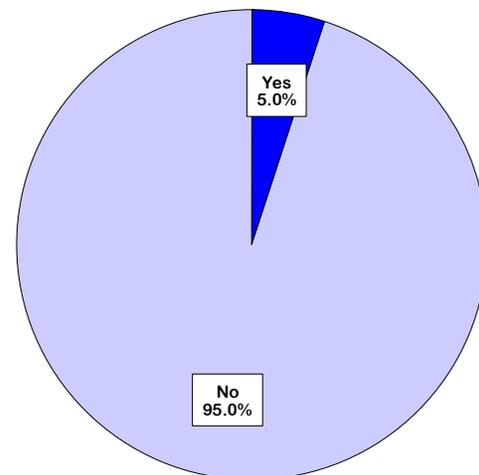
⁶ Suriname's GDP growth rate is from the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, <http://websie.eclac.cl/infest/ajax/cepalstat.asp?idioma=i>. Growth rates from other countries are summarized in Seligson and Smith (2010).

⁷ Based on OCUP1B1: "Have you lost your job in the past two years? (1) Yes, you lost your job but found a new one, (2) Yes, you lost your job and have not found a new one, (3) No, did not lose your job, (4) Did not work because you decided not to work or because of disabilities." and OCUP1B2: "Besides you, has anyone in your household lost

Figure 1. Job Loss in Suriname, 2010



Have you lost your job in the past two years?



Has anyone else in your household lost a job in the past two years?

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

shows that 94.4% of those surveyed attested that they had *not* lost their job in the past two years, while only 5.0% of respondents said that someone else in their household had lost a job in the past two years.⁸ In total, only 9% of households reported that a member had lost his

his or her job in the past two years? (1) Yes (2) No" Non-response in Suriname was 3.1% for OCUP1B1 and 1.8% for OCUP1B2.

⁸ All analysis was conducted with Stata 10.

or her job in the past two years, the lowest level of job loss in the AmericasBarometer 2010 survey.

Because the economic decline in Suriname has been relatively mild, we would not expect citizens to perceive a serious economic crisis in the country. This is in fact the case. Figure 2⁹ shows that only 14.9% of Surinamese citizens perceived a serious economic crisis in their country. The majority, instead, perceived a crisis but reported that it was not very serious.

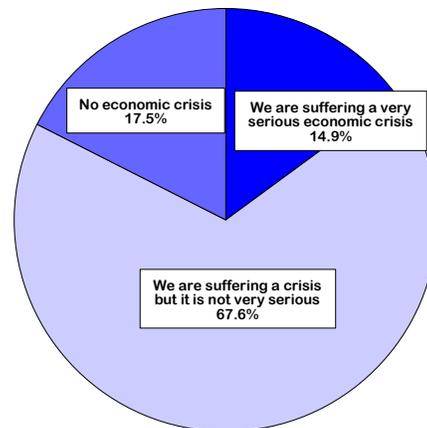
Whom did the Surinamese blame for the crisis? Figure 3¹⁰ shows that the largest portion (37.0%) blamed the current administration. It is important to note that, at the time of the survey, Ronald Venetiaan of the New Front party was serving his third term as president. Venetiaan served his first presidential term from 1991 to 1996, which marked Suriname's return to democracy after a year-long military intervention. He then served two straight terms from 2000 to 2010. At the time of the AmericasBarometer surveys in the country, Venetiaan was concluding his most recent term in office and legislative elections were in progress. Considering that the largest portion of the Surinamese blamed his administration for the economic crisis, it is not surprising that in the 2010 parliamentary elections, Venetiaan's party won only 14 seats in the National Assembly, down from 23 in the previous term.¹¹

⁹ Based on CRISIS1: "Some say that our country is suffering a very serious economic crisis, others say that we are suffering a crisis but it is not very serious, while others say that there isn't any economic crisis. What do you think? (1) We are suffering a very serious economic crisis, (2) We are suffering a crisis but it is not very serious, or, (3) No economic crisis." Non-response in Suriname was 3.7%.

¹⁰ Based on CRISIS2: "Who is the most to blame for the current economic crisis in our country from among the following: (01) The previous administration, (02) The current [Venetiaan] administration, (03) Ourselves, the Surinamers, (04) The rich people of our country, (05) The problems of democracy, (06) The rich countries, (07) The economic system of the country, or, (08) Never have thought about it, (77) Other." This question was only asked of the 79.4% of respondents who perceived a crisis.

¹¹ http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2299_E.htm

Figure 2. Percentage of the Population who Perceived an Economic Crisis in Suriname, 2010



Perceptions of Economic Crisis in Suriname

Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

It is worth noting that the smallest percentage of Surinamese respondents placed the blame for the economic crisis on problems of democracy.

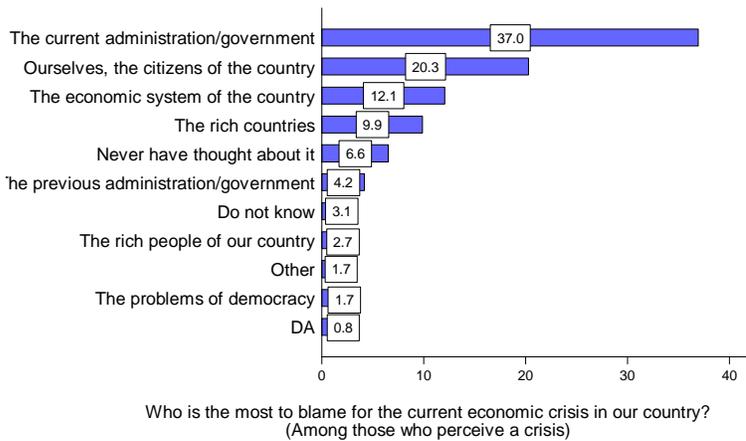
Economic Crisis and Support for Democracy

Did the economic crisis hurt Surinamese citizens' opinions of their political system? One question that the AmericasBarometer survey uses to measure democratic attitudes is derived from a classic statement by Churchill on democracy: "Democracy may have problems but it is better than any other form of government." Interviewers present respondents with this *Churchillian* statement and then ask them to what extent they agree or disagree on a scale from 1 to 7.¹² Their responses have been recoded here on a 0-100 scale for ease of presentation, where higher numbers indicate greater support for democracy.

The lack of survey data from previous years in Suriname makes it impossible to compare

¹² Non-response to this question was 4.9% in Suriname and 4.7% across the sample as a whole.

Figure 3. Who is to Blame for the Economic Crisis in Suriname?, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

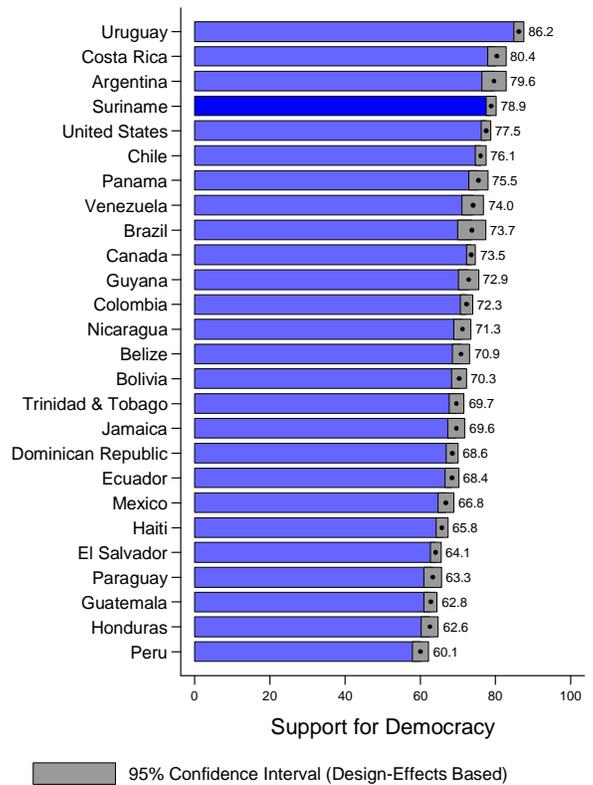
support for democracy in the country across time. Therefore, we do not know if support for democracy has declined since the start of the economic crisis. However, when we do a cross-country comparison, we see that the Surinamese are among the strongest proponents of democracy across the Americas (Figure 4). Suriname ranks fourth in support for democracy, as measured by this item, marginally higher than Chile and the United States.

In order to determine more accurately if there is a relationship between the economic downturn and support for democracy in Suriname, we conduct regression analysis using individual survey responses. We include traditional socioeconomic and demographic control variables: sex, level of education, place of residence and wealth quintiles.¹³ We also include satisfaction with President Venetiaan,¹⁴ perceptions of an economic crisis, and

¹³ For more information on the wealth indicator, see: Córdova, Abby B. 2009. "Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth using Household Asset Indicators." AmericasBarometer *Insights available at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>*.

¹⁴ This variable is labeled as "current president" in Figure 5 since Venetiaan was the ruling president at the time of the AmericasBarometer surveys in Suriname.

Figure 4. Support for Democracy across the Americas, 2010

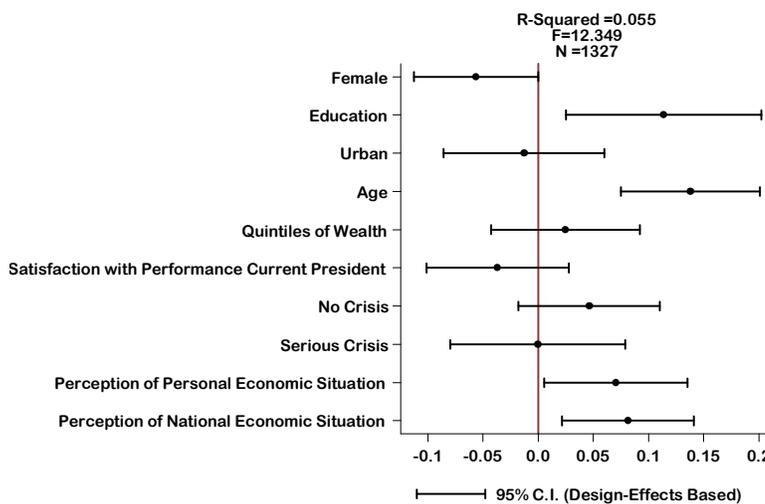


Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

perceptions of the personal and national economic situations.

Figure 5 shows the extent to which these variables predict support for democracy in Suriname. Each variable included in the analysis is listed on the vertical (y) axis. The impact of each of those variables on support for democracy is shown graphically by a dot, which if located to the right of the vertical "0" line indicates a positive effect, and if to the left of the "0" line a negative effect. If the effects are statistically significant, the confidence interval lines stretching to the left and right of each dot do not overlap the vertical "0" line (at $p < .05$ or better). If the confidence intervals overlap the vertical line, the effects are statistically insignificant. Since coefficients are standardized, the magnitude of each effect indicates its relative strength.

Figure 5. The Impact of Perceptions and Experiences with the Economic Crisis on Support for Democracy in Suriname, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Figure 5 shows that education is positively correlated with support for democracy. The more educated a person is, the more likely he or she is to support democracy. This result is consistent with previous studies of democracy in the Americas, and once again reinforces the notion that education is one of the most effective ways to build a political culture that is supportive of democracy (Seligson and Smith 2010). Additionally, men and older individuals tend to be more supportive of democracy, which is another result that holds true across the Americas.

Finally, Figure 5 shows that the perception of a serious economic crisis has no significant relationship to Surinamese citizens' support for democracy. However, perceptions of the national economic situation and one's own economic situation do predict support for democracy. Therefore, the crisis may have had an indirect impact on support for democracy by creating negative perceptions of the national and personal economic situations. At the same time, the fact that perceptions of crisis as such had no impact on democratic attitudes may be due to the limited nature of the economic downturn in Suriname.

Support for Democracy vs. Satisfaction with Democracy

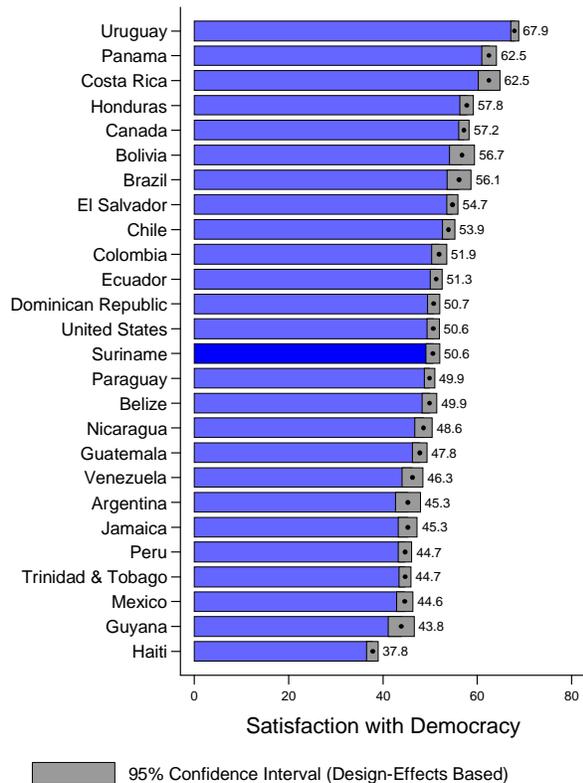
Surinamers show strong support for democracy, but how satisfied are they with this form of government? When we analyze satisfaction with democracy,¹⁵ we immediately recognize a significant difference between these two measures. While Suriname scores 78.9 points on support for democracy, it only scores 50.6 points on satisfaction with democracy. In addition, Figure 6 shows that, in comparison with other countries in the Americas, Suriname falls substantially lower on this item than it does on support for democracy. Suriname sits in 14th place out of 26 countries surveyed, compared to fourth place when considering support for democracy.

What accounts for Surinamese citizens' lower levels of satisfaction with democracy? In order to determine what factors correlate with satisfaction, we again conduct regression analysis using individual survey responses. We include the same traditional socioeconomic and demographic variables as above. We also include perceptions of corruption, since citizens identified this as one of the most serious problems facing Suriname. Finally, we include satisfaction with the current president (who at the time was Ronald Venetiaan), perceptions of an economic crisis, and perceptions of the national and personal economic situations.

In Figure 7, we see that sex and age are not significantly correlated with satisfaction with democracy, unlike in the case of support for democracy. Whereas education had a positive

¹⁵ PN4. In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy works in Suriname? (1) Very satisfied (2) Satisfied (3) Dissatisfied (4) Very dissatisfied. Following the LAPOP standard, this variable is recoded on a scale from 0 to 100, where "0" represents "very dissatisfied" and "100" represents "very satisfied." Non-response in Suriname was 3.4%.

Figure 6. Satisfaction with Democracy across the Americas, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

relationship with *support* for democracy, it has a marginally significant negative correlation with *satisfaction* with democracy. Wealth, in contrast, has a marginally statistically significant positive relationship with satisfaction with Surinamese democracy. Surprisingly, perceptions of one’s own economic situation have no significant correlation with democratic satisfaction. Even more surprising is the fact that those who perceive higher levels of corruption show slightly *higher* levels of satisfaction with democracy.¹⁶

Finally, three factors that are correlated with satisfaction with democracy are perceptions of a serious economic crisis, perceptions of the

¹⁶ This slightly positive relationship appears only in models including both satisfaction with the president and perceptions of corruption. In models of satisfaction with democracy that include only perception of corruption and the socio-economic variables, the relationship is positive but far from statistically significant (p=0.86).

national economic situation, and satisfaction with then-President Venetiaan. It is important to note that these three factors likely overlap. For example, perceptions of a serious economic crisis are likely to have a negative impact on one’s perception of the national economic situation. Moreover, those who perceived a crisis were more likely to be dissatisfied with then-President Venetiaan, since most people who perceived a crisis blamed his administration for it. That said, in the case of the regression analysis here, we examine each of these three variables while controlling for the others and still find that each exerts its own significant effect.

Overall, satisfaction with democracy is relatively vulnerable to national economic conditions and presidential performance. Though the economic crisis did not appear to directly affect support for democracy in Suriname, the results shown here suggest it had a negative impact on Surinamers’ satisfaction with this form of government.

Conclusions

In this report, we examined Surinamese citizens’ perceptions of and experiences with the economic crisis and how their economic evaluations relate to their support for and satisfaction with democracy. First, we found that in mid-2010 the crisis had not had a major impact on Suriname. Almost all Surinamese had retained their jobs and the economy continued to grow, albeit at a slower rate. Understandably then, we found that few Surinamese people perceived a serious economic crisis, though most perceived a mild one. A high percentage of those perceiving a crisis blamed the Venetiaan administration, possibly leading to a decrease in support for the administration’s party in the 2010 legislative elections a few months later.

Did perceptions of a crisis cause Surinamers to be less supportive of democracy? Although we could not make a comparison across time due to a lack of data, we found that the Surinamese are

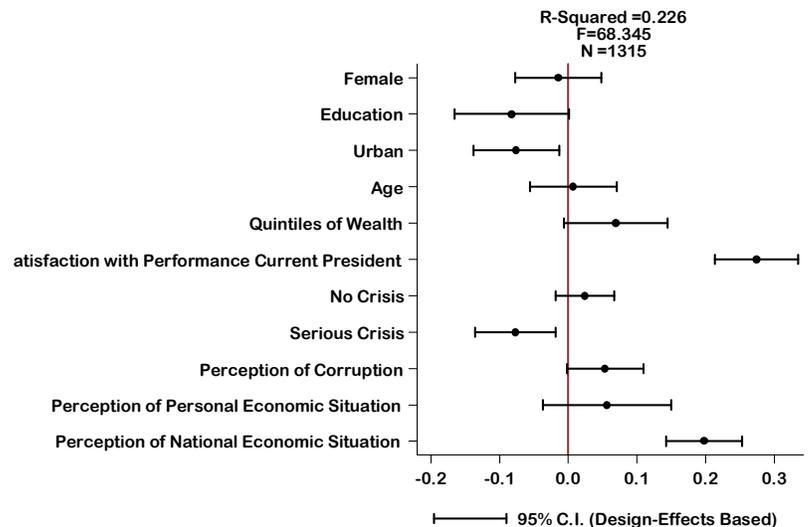
among the most supportive of democracy in the Americas, and their perceptions of a crisis were not directly linked to their support for this form of government. However, such a link was found between general economic perceptions and democratic support. Since perceptions of shocks and crises are strongly related to general perceptions of the economy, the crisis may have had some indirect effects on democratic opinion in Suriname.

Finally, we noted that the Surinamese are only moderately satisfied with democracy, in spite of their robust support for it. Given Suriname's recent transitions from military rule, the salience of corruption as an issue, and other problems, this may be due to a general sentiment that democracy is incomplete. That is, the evidence here suggests that Surinamers strongly support democracy but feel their system falls short of expectations in a number of ways.

To reflect for a minute on the transition from military rule, it is worth noting that scholarship suggests the nature of this transition might be at least partially responsible for the comparatively low levels of satisfaction with democracy in Suriname. Bouterse drafted a new constitution for the nation before forfeiting his authoritarian power. This constitution is still in force today in Suriname. Several scholars have argued that elite bargaining or pacts that result in a transition may negatively impact citizens' perceptions of the resulting democratic system (Hague and Harrop 2004; Posner 1999; Hagopian 1990). Therefore, though citizens show strong support for democracy as an abstract concept, they may be less satisfied with the functioning of Suriname's democratic system.

Since the 2010 AmericasBarometer surveys were conducted in the country, much has changed in

Figure 7. The Impact of Perceptions and Experiences with the Economic Crisis on Satisfaction with Democracy in Suriname, 2010



Source: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

Suriname. In addition to a change in leadership, the country has experienced a 16 percent devaluation of its currency and significant tax increases (Kuipers 2011). This has led to further “hard times” in Suriname. We hope that future surveys will be able to investigate the changes in public opinion that may have occurred as a result of the events of the past year. Given the results here, we might expect that support for democracy will have remained fairly robust despite these new economic challenges but that satisfaction with democracy may have dropped further.

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Appendix 1. Predictors of Support for Democracy in Suriname

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Age	0.138*	0.031
Education	0.114*	0.044
Perception of Country's Economic Situation	0.081*	0.029
Perception of Personal Economic Situation	0.070*	0.032
Female	-0.056*	0.028
No Perception of a Crisis	0.046	0.032
Satisfaction with Current President	-0.037	0.032
Quintiles of Wealth	0.025	0.033
Urban	-0.013	0.036
Perception of a Serious Crisis	-0.000	0.039
Constant	0.006	0.033
<i>R-Squared</i>	0.056	
<i>Number of Observations</i>	1,327	

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at * $p < 0.05$

Appendix 2. Predictors of Satisfaction with Democracy in Suriname

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Satisfaction with Current President	0.274*	0.030
Perception of Country's Economic Situation	0.200*	0.027
Education	-0.082	0.041
Perception of a Serious Crisis	-0.076*	0.029
No Perception of a Crisis	0.241	0.021
Urban	-0.075*	0.031
Quintiles of Wealth	0.069	0.037
Perception of Personal Economic Situation	0.056	0.046
Perception of Corruption	0.053	0.027
Female	-0.014	0.031
Age	0.007	0.032
Constant	0.004	0.037
<i>R-Squared</i>	0.226	
<i>Number of Observations</i>	1,315	

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at * $p < 0.05$