

## Latin American Publics are Skeptical About US—But Not About Democracy

March 7, 2007

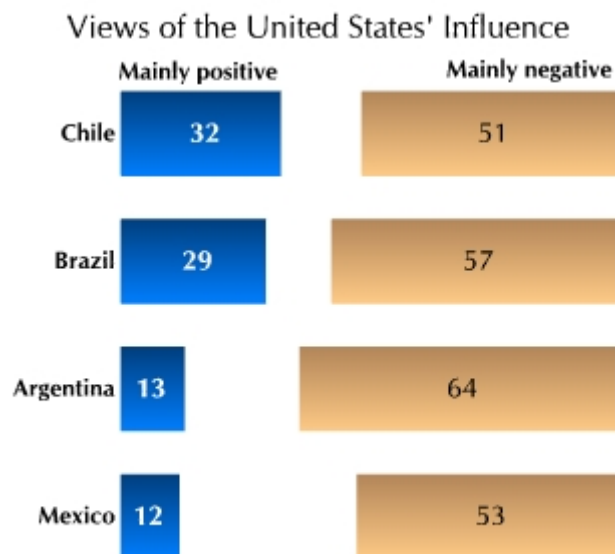


President Bush's effort to show Latin Americans that "you have a friend in the United States of America," may be a hard sell during his five-nation tour of the region: A majority of Latin Americans view the United States unfavorably, recent multinational surveys show, and most disapprove of the Bush administration's foreign policies.

*President George W. Bush speaks to the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce March 5 in Washington, D.C. (Paul Morse/White House photo)*

But though the U.S. government's image needs burnishing in Latin America, the region does not appear to embrace the radical change espoused by some anti-American nationalists. Most view themselves as political moderates and do not look very favorably on the United States' arch-rival in the region, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela.

Moreover, Latin American democracy appears to have strengthened in recent years. Majorities in most Latin American countries embrace democracy as the best form of government, rejecting the idea that authoritarianism might sometimes be preferable.

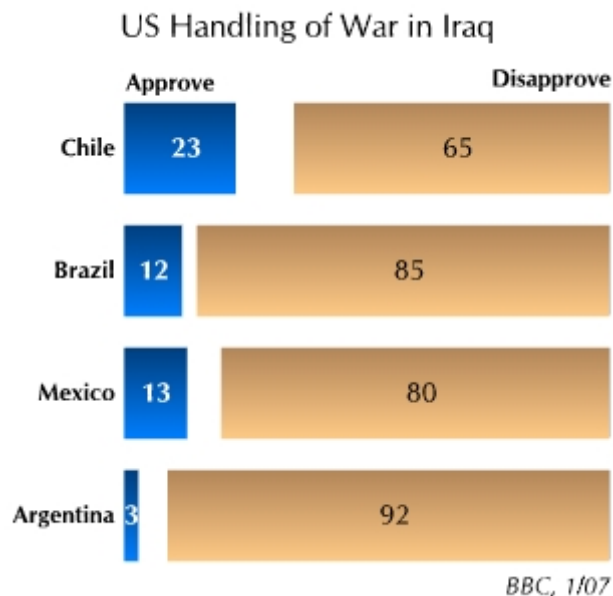


BBC. 1/07

## U.S. Role Viewed Negatively

A recent [BBC World Survey](#) conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes together with the international polling firm Globescan probed public opinion in 25 countries, including four in Latin America: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico.

The BBC study finds that in Brazil—the first country on Bush’s itinerary—57 percent say they have a “mainly negative” view of the United States’ influence in the world while only 29 percent believe it is “mainly positive.” In Mexico—where Bush winds up his tour—53 percent look unfavorably on U.S. influence and only 12 percent favorably. In Chile, a country that is one of the United States’ closest economic partners in the region, respondents say U.S. influence is negative by a margin of 51 percent to 32 percent. Argentines—traditionally among the harshest critics of the United States—agree by a margin of 64 percent to 13 percent.



This dissatisfaction with the United States in general, reflects widespread opposition to specific U.S. policies. According to the BBC poll, more than four in five Brazilians disapprove of the United States’ handling of the war in Iraq (85%), of the fighting last year between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon (82%), and of Iran’s nuclear program (80%). Eighty-three percent think that the US military presence in the Middle East has provoked conflict, rather than prevented it. Also highly unpopular in Latin America’s largest country is the United States’ treatment of the detainees at Guantánamo (76% disapprove) and its policies on global warming (73%).

Mexicans also dislike U.S. policies overseas, though somewhat less strongly than Brazilians. Regarding U.S. policies in the Middle East: four out of five Mexicans disapprove of the war in Iraq (80%) and think the U.S. military presence is destabilizing the Middle East (80%). Large majorities oppose the U.S. treatment of detainees at Guantánamo (70%) and its position on global warming (67%). More than half reject the

United States' role in the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah (58%), and its approach toward Iran's nuclear program (51%).

In Argentina, where Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez plans to lead an anti-Bush rally Friday in advance of Bush's stop in neighboring Uruguay, views of U.S. policy are strongly negative. Overwhelming majorities disapprove of how the United States has conducted the war in Iraq (92%) and how it has handled the Israel-Hezbollah conflict (85%) and the Iranian nuclear situation (85%). Most Argentines (86%) believe the U.S. military presence in the Middle East provokes conflict there. Large majorities also dislike the United States' policies on global warming (78%) and its treatment of the Guantánamo detainees (78%).

Across the Andes from Argentina in Chile, views of the United States are somewhat milder. Nonetheless, majorities disapprove of U.S. policies regarding Israel and Hezbollah (66%), the war in Iraq (65%), global warming (63%), the Guantánamo detainees (63%) and Iran's nuclear program (62%). More than two-thirds (68%) say the U.S. military presence in the Middle East is destabilizing.

Three countries included in Bush's trip were not part of the BBC survey: Uruguay, Guatemala and Colombia. However, other polls in those countries also show dissatisfaction with either the United States or President Bush.

President Bush might hope for a good reception in Uruguay, which signed a Trade Investment Framework Agreement, or TIFA, with the United States in January. But though most Uruguayans favor trade with the United States, they do not approve of Bush: 59 percent want a free trade pact with the United States, says a poll by the firm Cifra published March 4 in the newspaper [El País](#), but only 12 percent approve of Bush.

In Guatemala, the public tends to look unfavorably on the United States despite gaining access to the U.S. market through the Central American Free Trade Act (CAFTA). A poll conducted last spring by Multivex-Sigma Dos Guatemala for [Barómetro Iberoamericano](#) found that Guatemalans have a negative opinion of the United States by a margin of 54 percent to 44 percent.

The president's welcome may be warmest in Colombia, where the conservative government of President Álvaro Uribe has received U.S. aid and trade preferences in reward for its counter narcotics policies. An [October 2006 Gallup Colombia poll](#) found that Colombians were evenly split in their views of the United States: 44 percent favorable and 44 percent unfavorable.

### **Lukewarm about Bush and Chávez**

In its annual survey of opinion in 18 Latin American countries, the Chilean polling agency [Latinobarómetro](#) asked respondents to rank nine Latin American heads of state and President Bush on a 0-10 negative to positive scale. Bush's score ranged from 1.9 in

Argentina to 7 in Panama. Of the five countries included on his tour, Uruguay is the most negative (2.8). Brazilians also give Bush a low rating (3.4) as do Mexicans (4.3).

Guatemala and Colombia place the U.S. president right in the middle of the 10-point scale. Guatemalans on average give him a 5 and Colombians a 5.4.

The U.S. president's average score (4.6) in the region as a whole places him among the region's most unpopular leaders: Cuban leader Fidel Castro (4.4) and Peruvian President Alan García (4.5). Bush's average score is the same—somewhat ironically—as Latin America's most outspoken anti-American nationalist, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (also 4.6).

The Venezuelan president scores highest among his own public (7.1), as well as among Dominicans (6) and Argentines (5.6). In the countries on President Bush's tour, Chávez gets only middling scores in Uruguay (4.8), Guatemala (4.5) and Brazil (4.1)—though these ratings are higher than Bush's. He scores lower than Bush in Colombia (3.9) and Mexico (3.5).

### **Neither Left nor Right**

Latinobarómetro also gauged Latin Americans' ideological leanings and their support for democratic government. These results suggest that despite the persistence of extreme poverty and inequality under the democratically elected governments that have ruled most of the region since the 1980s, most Latin Americans have not embraced radicalism or rejected democratic governance. Most place themselves at the center of the political spectrum and believe that democracy is the best form of government.

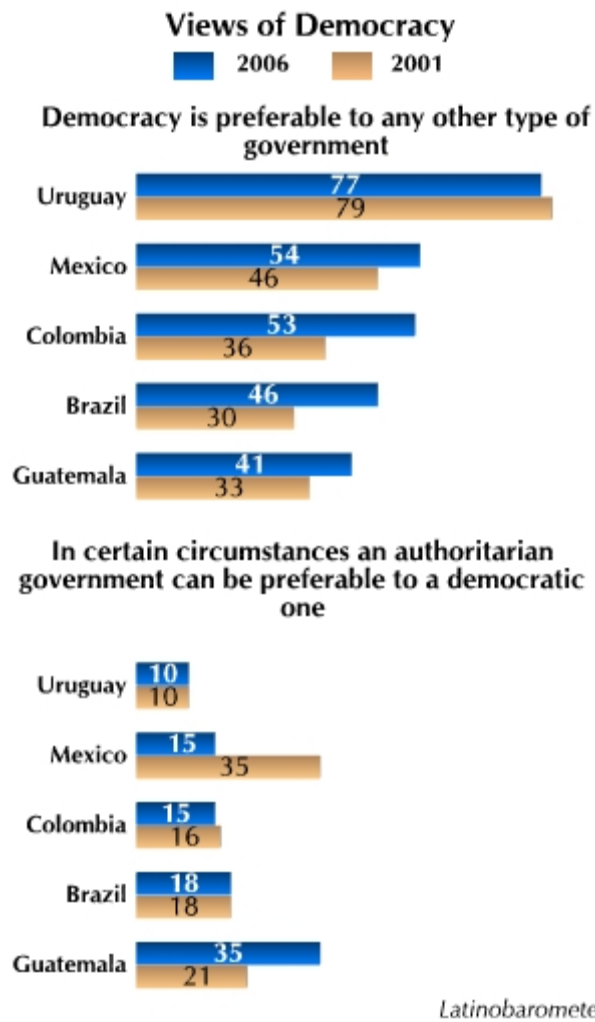
Asked to situate their political beliefs on a scale where 0 is the most leftwing position and 10 the most rightwing, Latin American respondents on average give themselves a 5.4. A plurality of 44 percent overall identify with the center (4-6) range, while a third (32%) identify with the right (7-10) and a quarter (24%) with the left (0-3).

Among the countries to be visited by Bush, Uruguayans are those who consider themselves most leftist. About a third of Uruguayan respondents (34%) identify with the left side of the spectrum (from 0 to 3) for an average score of 4.7.

Brazilians and Guatemalans are right in the middle with average scores of 5.2 and 5.3 respectively. In both countries the left and right tend to balance each other: about a third of Brazilians identify with the left (28%) and a third with the right (31%); about a fifth of Guatemalans identify with the left (21%) and a quarter with the right (25%).

Mexicans and Colombians lean slightly to the right (average score for both is 5.6). In Mexico left and right balance each other (23% and 24%, respectively). In Colombia, nearly half lean right (43%) and only a small minority left (14%).

### **Support for Democracy over Authoritarianism**



The survey posed a series of questions on Latin American attitudes toward democracy. Respondents were asked whether they supported democracy in principle and how satisfied they were with how democracy functioned in their country. They were also asked whether they felt their country's electoral process was fair.

A majority of Latin Americans support democracy in principle and that support has widened considerably over the past five years. In 15 of the 18 countries polled in 2006, half or more of the respondents say democracy is "preferable to any other form of government." No country embraces the opposing idea that "in certain circumstances, an authoritarian government is preferable." In 2001, when some countries in the region experienced economic turmoil, the idea that democracy was always preferable was accepted by majorities in only six of 17 countries polled.

Among the countries to be visited by President Bush, Uruguayans are the most supportive of the idea that democracy is best, with more than three quarters (77%) saying it is preferable to any other form of government, a percentage that has remained fairly steady since 2001. A majority of Mexicans (54%) also say democracy is best, an increase of 8 points from 2001 (46%). Colombians support this idea by only a narrow 53 percent majority, but this is a 17-point increase from 36 percent in 2001.

There is somewhat weak support for democracy in two of the countries on Bush's itinerary, however. Brazilians are among the least enthusiastic in the region. Only 46 percent say democracy is always better than authoritarianism, though this is still well above the 30 percent who believed this five years ago. Guatemalans are the most skeptical in Latin America: 41 percent say democracy is best in the 2006 survey, compared to 33 percent in 2001.

In Mexico—where the validity of the July presidential elections is still contested by the losing candidate—support for the idea that democracy is preferable has fallen from 59 percent to 54 percent over the past year. But it has increased 9 points since 2001, when 46 percent of Mexicans preferred democracy.

More disturbingly, in 13 of the 18 countries surveyed by Latinobarómetro, less than half of those polled express confidence in their elections. In the region overall, 41 percent say their countries' elections are "clean" while 49 percent say they are "fraudulent." This is, nonetheless, an improvement over 2005 when 54 percent said elections were flawed and only 37 percent said they were fair.

Only forty-four percent of Brazilians and 40 percent of Mexicans believe their country's elections are clean. Only a third of Guatemalans (32%) have confidence in their electoral process and Colombians are even more skeptical: less than a third say their electoral process is fair (29%).

Uruguayans show the region's highest level of confidence in their country's elections: 83 percent say they are clean.

Despite the widespread skepticism about elections in the region, however, Latin American respondents overall express greater satisfaction than in the past about how elected governments work in their own country, according to Latinobarómetro.

In 12 of the 18 countries polled (Panama, Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Colombia) higher percentages say they are pleased with "the functioning of democracy" in their country than did so in 2005.

On average, the proportion saying they are very or somewhat satisfied with democracy rose to 38 percent in 2006, compared with 31 percent in 2005. Average support was only 25 percent in 2001, when economic growth slowed in the region and some countries slipped into recession.

Satisfaction with how democracy in Uruguay works is up 21 points from 45 percent in 2004. A leftist coalition led by Tabaré Vázquez won the presidency in March 2005, defeating the two traditional parties that have alternated in power for most of Uruguay's history.

Satisfaction also rose in Brazil, though from far lower levels. Thirty-six percent of Brazilians say in the 2006 poll that they are satisfied with how democracy works in Brazil, up 14 points from 2005. A third of Colombians (33%) also say they are satisfied, up 4 points from the previous year as do about a third of Guatemalans (31%), up 3 points from 2005.