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# Predicting Coups? Democratic Vulnerabilities, The AmericasBarometer and The 2009 Honduran Crisis

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Long range weather forecasting is probably little more accurate today than it was in the heyday of the *Farmer's Almanac*. Meteorologists today can certainly tell farmers with a high degree of certainty whether it will rain tomorrow, but they are far less confident about the prospects for rain next week, and have almost no ability to predict next month, let alone next year. Weather forecasters can tell very well whether the conditions are ripe for thunderstorms or tornadoes, but they cannot specify which towns or areas will get rain or suffer tornadic winds, or what hour the storms will come. Social scientists are in the same boat; hardly anyone predicted the fall of the Berlin wall or the breakup of the Soviet Union, and Wall Street "experts" are infamous for their ability to "predict" two out of the last five downturns. Indeed, expert predictions are more often wrong than right, as a recent comprehensive study on the subject reveals (Tetlock 2005).

While successful predictions of specific events in the distant future (e.g., rain a year from now, a riot) are most likely beyond our scientific abilities for the foreseeable future, there is some hope that political scientists may well be able to detect weaknesses, or vulnerabilities of countries to system-challenging forces. In this special *Insights* paper, we look for signs of such vulnerabilities, drawing on the LAPOP AmericasBarometer data for Honduras.

The events, which are still unfolding as this paper is being written, are punctuated by the ousting and exile of elected President Manuel Zelaya Rosales by the Honduran military. A non-binding plebiscite, or poll, had been called by Zelaya to determine popular support for a national constituent assembly to reform the constitution. Opponents suspected that the plebiscite would somehow be used to eventually override the constitutional prohibition against presidential succession, thus paving the way for an eventual reelection of Zelaya. Formal opposition to this poll was rendered by the Honduran Attorney General, the Honduran Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the Honduran Supreme Court, and the National Congress, the latter having passed a law prohibiting such plebiscites within 180 days prior to national elections, which had already been scheduled for November 29, 2009. Zelaya rejected each of these barriers to the plebiscite and pushed the military to carry it out. When the military refused, Zelaya fired the head of the military, who was subsequently reinstated by the Supreme Court. The Attorney General and later the Supreme Court issued a warrant for Zelaya's arrest. Soldiers detained him in the early morning hours of June 28, 2009 and unconstitutionally

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exiled him to Costa Rica. International actors widely criticized the arrest and exiling of Zelaya. As conflict between the his supporters and opponents spread into the streets, mediation efforts began under the auspices of Nobel Peace laureate President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica.

Prediction of such events, and the ability to accurately guess their eventual outcome is certainly beyond our social scientific abilities. Yet, there is strong evidence in the AmericasBarometer surveys carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) that Honduras has been unusually vulnerable to political instability.[1]

## Long-Term Views of Symptoms of Instability: the 2004 AmericasBarometer Survey

A look back at the first of the AmericasBarometer surveys, carried out in 2004, is instructive. In a recent Cambridge University Press book, published only months *before* the June events, the authors of this *Insights* study found serious warning signs of political instability (Booth and Seligson 2009). In the book, Booth and Seligson pursued the recent growth in interest in the empirical examination of the concept of political legitimacy (see, for example, Gilley 2009), a concept widely used in political science since its "invention" by Max Weber's classic 1919 lecture (Weber 1965). They argued that democratic political stability depends heavily on political legitimacy as perceived by citizens. Only on rare occasions does the mass public engage itself in the overthrow of democracies. Most such events are carried out by elites (Bermeo 2003). Yet elites are aware of the climate of political attitudes held by masses and thus elites can often perceive the degrees of freedom within which they can act. Thus, while it is inconceivable that the Canadian military would detain and exile the prime minister of his country, such an action in Honduras was carried out in a far more permissive atmosphere.

Booth and Seligson, using the 2004 AmericasBarometer data, found that political legitimacy in Honduras was very thin. Specifically, they created an index based on the ratio of citizens who were, in Booth and Seligson's terms, "triply dissatisfied" as a percent of all voting aged citizens versus those who were "triply satisfied." In essence, they isolated citizens who were either above mean on all three dimensions or below the scale means on all of three key dimensions of legitimacy: support for democracy, support for national institutions, and evaluation of the government's economic performance. What they found is that while that ratio was only .08 in Costa Rica, the most democratically stable country in the series, it was 1.57 in Honduras, over 19 times the level of Costa Rica (see Table 1). They concluded that Honduras was a case that demonstrated "greater risk for unrest, political turmoil, and support for antidemocratic regimes than [did] the other countries based on this indicator" (Booth and Seligson 2009 148). The study also found that the preference for electoral democracy over unelected strongmen was lower in Honduras than in any of the other countries in the sample (Booth and Seligson 2009 204). In addition, support for "confrontational tactics" was higher in Honduras than in any of the other countries (Booth and Seligson 2009 190).

The final piece of evidence from the 2004 AmericasBarometer is especially relevant. Booth and Seligson (2009 186) found that justification for a military coup in Honduras in 2004 was higher than in any other country studied; 56.2% of the voting aged population would have justified a coup.

[1] Funding for the AmericasBarometer has mainly come from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of additional support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University.

| Table 1. Ratio of Triply Dissatisfied to Triply Satisfied Citizens, Eight Latin American Countries | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **2004*** | **2008**** |
| **Honduras** | **1.57** | **6.17** |
| Guatemala | 1.37 | 3.23 |
| Nicaragua | .53 | 1.12 |
| Mexico | .38 | .59 |
| Colombia | .26 | .22 |
| El Salvador | .21 | 1.39 |
| Panama | .11 | 1.67 |
| Costa Rica | .08 | .18 |

* Calculated from Booth and Seligson (2009), Table 8.2 (ordered by 2004 results).
**Calculated from LAPOP 2008 survey.

## Recent Evidence from the AmericasBarometer

In 2008, the AmericasBarometer covered 24 countries and included over 40,000 interviews. To assess the potential for political instability, the ratio of triply dissatisfied to triply satisfied citizens was calculated as was done for 2004. Table 1 shows that in 2008, the ratio of triply dissatisfied to triply satisfied citizens had increased in seven of the eight nations covered in the Booth and Seligson study (Colombia was the exception). In the case of Honduras, however, the increase was huge; over four years between 2004 and 2008, the triply dissatisfied to triply satisfied ratio rose very sharply and to a very high level, from 1.57 to 6.17. Following the logic of this index, the results clearly indicate a substantially increased risk of instability.[2] Again, the index does not predict the specific events that occurred in June 2009 in Honduras, but it does suggest a climate vulnerable to democratic breakdown.

[2] Other countries in which in 2008 the ratio increased into the +1.00 range, indicating many more triply dissatisfied than triply satisfied citizens, were Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama. The latter three in 2004 had more triply satisfied than triply dissatisfied citizens (i.e. ratios below 1.00). This 2004 to 2008 shift suggests an increased potential for unrest in several countries.

Booth, Wade and Walker (2010 forthcoming), in their forthcoming fifth edition of *Understanding Central America,* compare the attitudes of Central Americans in 2008 and find Hondurans to have the highest level of support for a military coup (48%), and the highest level of agreement that the country needs "a strong leader who does not need to be elected" (39% -- more than double the support for this proposition among citizens of the four other Central American countries). Hondurans also by far expressed the highest support both for confrontational political methods, such as demonstrations and occupying buildings, and for violent rebellion against an elected government (Booth, Wade and Walker (2010 forthcoming Table 9.2). Honduras in 2008 had a very large proportion (30.1%) of citizens who simultaneously were antidemocratic and dissatisfied with institutions and who were also dissatisfied with the government's economic performance. This contrasted with only 4.9% who were triply satisfied on those same grounds.

## Honduras in a Latin American and Caribbean-wide Comparative Context

In order to place these results in the broader context of Latin America and the Caribbean, we have calculated the mean score of each country on a scale of triple dis/satisfaction (0=triply satisfied, 1=mixed values, 2=triply dissatisfied). This measure is constructed by assigning a performance score of 2, to all of those simultaneously scoring below or of zero to all those at the same time scoring above the scale midpoint on all three measures: support for democratic principles, institutional support, and evaluation of government economic performance. Those with mixed views receive a score of 1. Figure 1 presents the mean score by country. There we see that Honduras has the highest triple dissatisfaction mean of any country, confirming what we have already demonstrated in a narrower regional context.

Our triple dis/satisfaction measure allows us to identify countries with larger proportions of antidemocratic, institutionally disloyal, and economic performance-frustrated populations. Assuming that these attitudes affect the potential for political stability, we may extrapolate from the evidence in Figure 1 to identify other countries that may be at greater risk for political instability. Haiti is close to Honduras in the high proportion of triply dissatisfied citizens. Guatemala, Peru and Ecuador also have relatively high triple dissatisfaction scores in the 2008 AmericasBarometer survey. In contrast, based on their high ratios of triply satisfied to triply dissatisfied citizens, the countries that appear to be the least at risk are Uruguay, Colombia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic.

## Conclusions

We do not claim that our public opinion data can predict coups d' etat. Coups in democracies are attacks on the institutional order mounted by small groups, usually involving conspiracies among tiny numbers of antidemocratic elites. Nonetheless, as we have noted and argued elsewhere (Booth and Seligson 2009, Booth Wade and Walker 2010 forthcoming), having large populations of disgruntled citizens may encourage elites to risk antidemocratic adventures.

How might thiscome about? Opinion polls throughout Latin America regularly report levels of public dis/satisfaction with the performance of government and the economy. Elites by virtue of their social positions at the top of key political and economic institutions have other, informal channels of information as well. Thus extensive public dissatisfaction may allow elites who are weakly committed to democratic rules of the game in the first place to estimate how much public resistance or support they might face should they violate the institutional order. Against a public opinion background of multiple disgruntlements and low consolidation of democratic norms, specific catalytic events – unknowable to public opinion researchers but more evident to close observers of individual polities — could provide a trigger and an excuse for antidemocratic actions by elites. For example, Manuel Zelaya insisted on conducting a plebiscite to gauge popular support for a prospective constituent assembly, despite legislative efforts and rulings from other parts of the Honduran government. Confronting these obstacles, Zelaya tried to force the vote and then to cashier the head of the military. The action was ruled illegal. Aware of divided public support for Zelaya and absent any formal mechanism for impeachment and removal of the president in the Honduran constitution, Zelaya's elite critics and enemies in key government positions (Congress, the Supreme Court, the Armed Forces leadership) moved to oust him and justified their own unconstitutional actions by claiming that the crisis had been provoked by his unconstitutional actions.

Our public opinion data did not predict the Honduran democratic breakdown of 2009. They did, however, identify Honduras as the single case in Latin America with the highest level of triply dissatisfied citizens, with relatively low support for democracy and with high support for coups, confrontational political methods, and rebellion. Against this context of vulnerability — low consolidation of democratic norms and high dissatisfaction with government performance and institutions — local actors supplied the specific catalytic events that precipitated the breakdown. We believe that we have developed an interesting tool for predicting where such instability has a greater (or lesser) likelihood of occurring. That, we think, is an improvement in social science predictive capacity. Like the weather forecaster, we still cannot say with certainty whether there will be a tornado or precisely when the tornado will hit a particular barn, but we can say something about when the conditions are ripe for a tornado to drop out of the sky.

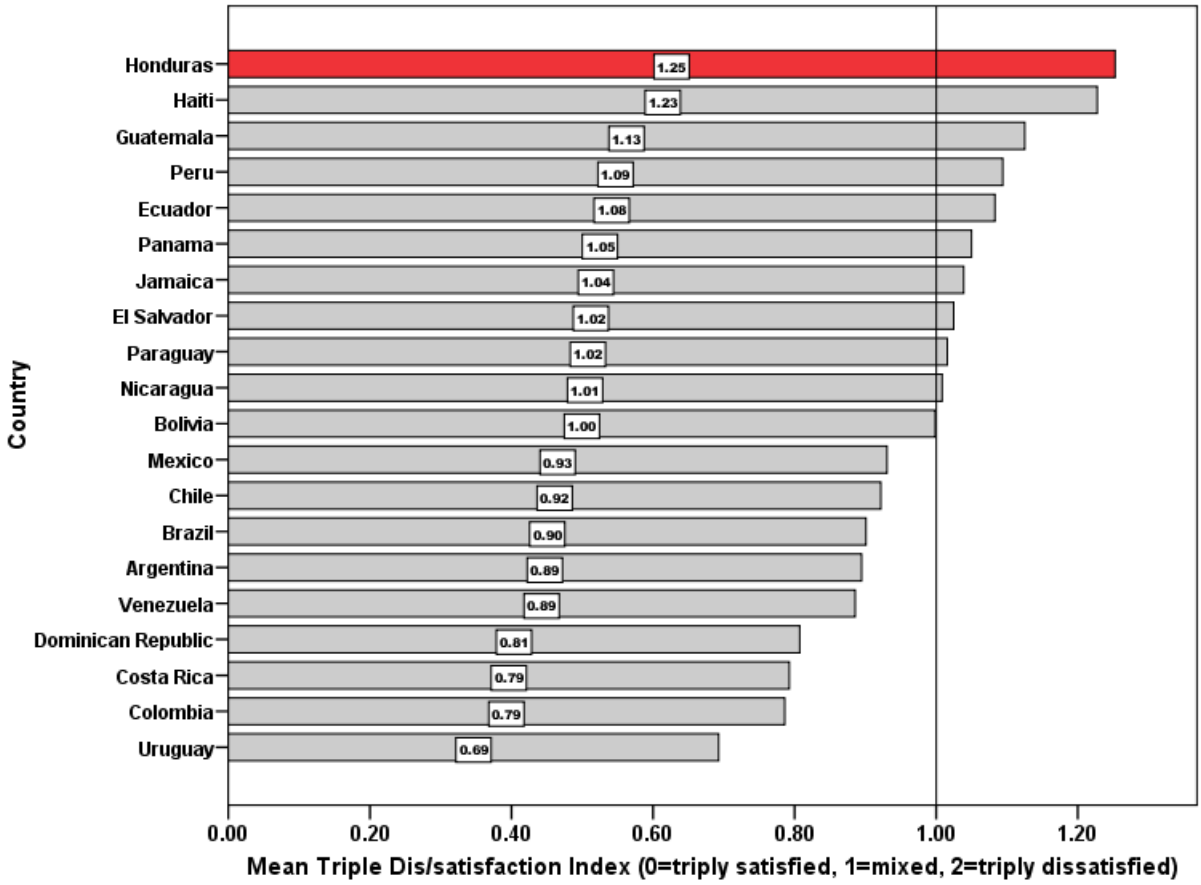


**Figure 1. Mean levels of triple dis/satisfaction, 2008.**

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