

CPI Regional Analysis: Americas

Weakening democracy and rise in populism hinder anti-corruption efforts in the Americas

Region is failing to fight corruption despite some progress

Snapshot of the region

With an average score of 44 for three consecutive years, the Americas region continues to fail in making any serious inroads against corruption. Compared to other regions, the Americas is similar to Asia Pacific (average score: 44), but behind Western Europe and the European Union (average score: 66).

Canada is consistently a top performer on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), with a score of 81 out of 100 on this year's index.

The United States remains in second place below Canada, but dramatically drops four points since last year to earn a score of 71, its lowest score in seven years. The US hovers close to Uruguay in South America, with a score of 70, and Barbados in the Caribbean, with a score of 68.

At the bottom of the index, Venezuela remains stuck at 18, reflecting systemic and persistent corruption across the country. Venezuela is followed by Haiti (20) and Nicaragua (25) to round out the region's worst performers.

Corruption and a crisis of democracy

The number of poor performing countries in the Americas region should come as no surprise given the challenges to the democratic systems and diminishing political rights across North, South and Central America by populist and authoritarian leaders.

From President Trump (US) and President Bolsonaro (Brazil) to President Jimmy Morales (Guatemala) and President Maduro (Venezuela), the Americas region is witnessing a rise in some leaders and leadership styles that favour a number of the following tactics:

- an undermining of free and independent media, especially when coverage challenges leaders' messaging
- a silencing and control of civil society and international organisations
- an increase in voter suppression and disenfranchisement
- an increase in anti-immigrant, anti-LGBT, anti-indigenous and racist language
- a rise in public promises for simplistic and "strong hand" approaches to solving deep-rooted and complex societal problems, including corruption
- an interference with or blunt use of national institutions to weaken the system of checks and balances and increase executive power
- an increase in conflicts of interest and private influence

Unfortunately, this new reality, which is also part of a global trend, is transforming the "way of doing politics" across the region, where authoritarian-style leaders are undermining democratic practices.

Improvers

Fortunately, the picture is not as gloomy everywhere in the region. Some countries have made commendable progress in the fight against corruption.

While still low, with scores of 34 and 35 respectively, Ecuador and El Salvador both increased their CPI scores by two points since 2017. In addition, with a score of 40, Argentina increased one point since 2017 and eight points since 2015, showing some significant improvement.

In these three countries, the justice sectors are advancing investigations and prosecutions on corruption cases against high profile individuals, including some former presidents. However, these countries also share a common challenge: a need to continue strengthening the independence of their judiciary systems to ensure impartial prosecutions, and that those found guilty of corruption receive appropriate punishment.

While freedom of the media and access to information are more robust in these countries, they could be stronger. These freedoms and liberties are essential for curbing corruption and contribute to a more aware and involved society that includes minorities and vulnerable groups, and that is able to demand accountability from those in power.

In El Salvador, our local chapter, [La Fundación Nacional para el Desarrollo \(FUNDE\)](#), is working to empower citizens to exercise their right to access information. Thanks to their work, citizens can access institutional email accounts, information on hiring processes of legislative advisors, state expenditures on art and information related to victims of armed conflict, among other information.

In Argentina, our local chapter, [Poder Ciudadano](#), has advocated successfully to guarantee that asset-declarations from public officials' family members, including children and spouses, are available to the public. Thanks to the chapter's work, a regressive article of law that regulates asset-declarations was recently declared [unconstitutional](#).

Decliners

Since 2012, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua have seen a sharp decline in their respective scores, failing to make significant progress against corruption.

With a score of 25, Nicaragua dropped four points on the CPI in the last seven years. This steady decline reflects the country's political landscape and recent developments: After more than a decade in power, President Daniel Ortega controls most of Nicaragua's democratic institutions, curbing their effectiveness and independence. In recent years, the president also clamped down on the political rights of citizens, who despite a violent backlash, have taken to the streets in overwhelming numbers to protest against his authoritarian rule.

With CPI scores of 67 and 28 respectively, Chile and Mexico have experienced a five and six point drop since 2012, respectively. In the past few years, both countries experienced huge corruption scandals. These involved political leaders, including several governors in Mexico, and highly respected sectors traditionally considered free of corruption, such as the [Chilean police force](#).

[Chile Transparente](#), our local chapter, joined a special investigative commission working on the police scandal. Proposed improvements include expanding police trainings to address integrity and ethics issues, and creating an integrity commission capable of operating independently and conducting investigations.

In Mexico, basic political rights, including [freedom of expression](#) and [press freedom](#), have sharply declined. [Without a free media](#) to provide oversight to government, the ability to prevent and denounce corruption is limited.

Over the past decade, Mexico has witnessed growing social support for anti-corruption reforms. In 2015, these efforts led to constitutional reform and the creation of a new national anti-corruption system. In the past year, a broad coalition composed by [Transparencia Mexicana](#) advocated for the implementation of these reforms and the [creation of an independent attorney general's office](#).

Stagnating countries

Most English-speaking Caribbean countries score exactly the same as last year, showing complete stagnation. Despite the current administrations in Jamaica, the Bahamas and Barbados, which rose to power based on bold anti-corruption platforms, any visible improvements are still very limited.

In Jamaica, the [Petrojam scandal](#), involving the country's only state-owned oil company, shows that nepotism, mismanagement of public funds and other forms of corruption are still well-rooted in the Caribbean. Procurement and contract awarding are particularly problematic. In the Petrojam case, the company could not account for approximately US\$40 million in income between 2013 to 2018. In response, National Integrity Action (NIA), our local chapter in Jamaica, [is calling for the government to rectify these irregularities](#) and prosecute public officials as soon possible.

Countries to watch

The two largest economies in the region, US and Brazil, are key countries to watch and monitor moving forward due to the influence they play in the region and around the world.

With a score of 71, the US, dropped four points since last year to earn its lowest score on the CPI in seven years. The country is currently witnessing threats to its system of checks and balances, as well as an erosion of ethical norms at the highest levels of power.

The low score comes at a time of growing nativist populist sentiment, a [rise in hate crimes](#), trenchant political polarisation and the longest government shutdown in US history. All of these factors combined only exacerbate the [loss of public trust in America's foundational institutions](#).

With a score of 35, Brazil, dropped two points since last year to also earn its lowest CPI score in seven years. Similar to the US, Brazil has recently seen a rise in populism.

Previous anti-corruption efforts helped bring corrupt individuals from across political parties and the private sector to justice. In 2014, the [Lava Jato operation](#), which involved a network of more than 20 corporations, including the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, has since grown into one of the largest money laundering cases worldwide. To date, it involves [more than US\\$788 million dollars across nine countries in Latin America and others overseas, reaching as far as Angola and Mozambique](#).

While highlighting an extreme degree of abuse and corruption in many of Brazil's institutions, it also revealed a growing cynicism and sense of hopelessness among citizens. With several powerful leaders implicated in the scandal, the bar for opposition candidates was set fairly low.

Capitalising on this environment, President Bolsonaro rose to power with promises to end corruption. The president made it clear that he will rule with a strong hand, favouring highly populist language that threatens many of the democratic milestones achieved by the country.

Our local chapter, [Transparency International Brazil \(TI-Brazil\)](#), has developed a [mega-package of 70 measures for a new anti-corruption agenda that respect the rule of law and human rights](#).

Including input from several partners in the public and private sectors, the anti-corruption package includes proposals for institutional reforms, draft bills, constitutional amendments, draft resolutions

and other rules to control corruption and tackle its systemic roots. TI-Brazil will seek to persuade the Bolsonaro administration to adopt these recommendations when creating an anti-corruption strategy.

Recommendations

Now, more than ever, action is needed across the Americas to fight against corruption and defend democracy. Citizens, activists and reform-minded leaders throughout the region need to intensify their efforts by:

- defending the historical gains in anti-corruption legislation and democracy, particularly institutions that create checks and balances to state power
- keeping a close watch on political speech that falsely uses the fight against corruption to undermine democracy and propel authoritarian or populist individuals to power
- ensuring that free speech and political rights do not continue to decline, and speaking out against any attempts to control the media or civil society groups