

## TWO DECADES OF SOCIAL WEATHER REPORTING IN THE PHILIPPINES<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

*For over two decades, Social Weather Stations (www.sws.org.ph), a non-stock, non-profit private scientific institute, has been generating a steady stream of survey-based national statistics on the quality of life (QOL, which is intended to include the quality of governance),<sup>2</sup> and public opinion in the Philippines. Its historical background<sup>3</sup> is the development of QOL-measurement principles (1974-75), the demonstration of the use of social surveys to construct new QOL indicators (1981-84), and the successful combination of independent, open opinion polling with QOL-measurement (1984-85). Since 1985, SWS has been serving as an independent source of pertinent, accurate, timely and credible data on Philippine economic, social and political conditions, produced mainly by a quarterly omnibus called the Social Weather Survey. The SWS surveys include innovative measures of hunger and poverty, traditional measures of gaining/losing, optimism/pessimism, victimization by crime, satisfaction in governance and in democracy, life-satisfaction and happiness, and readings of public opinion on contemporary issues, including elections. The data are regularly released to the general public through the mass media, and thus serve to place many social issues on the political agenda.*

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<sup>1</sup> Revised from a presentation made at the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference of the International Society for Quality of Life Studies, July 17-20, 2006, Rhodes University, Durban, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Mangahas (2006): “A reasonably complete survey on QOL includes *Governance* among its topics, since bad governance definitely makes people feel bad. *It is quite normal for chronically bad aspects of QOL to have priority in social science research, just as illness has normal priority over wellness in medical research.* SWS deliberately tracks *poverty* and *hunger* rather than purchasing power and nutrition, since it regards deprivation as more urgent to measure than wealth and obesity.”

<sup>3</sup> Mangahas (1994), “Institutional background of the SWS surveys,” pp.vii-xvii.

## 1974-75: The Social Indicators Project

In 1973, one year into Ferdinand Marcos's authoritarian regime, the Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP) was established, mainly to train government bureaucrats, but also to do research on development topics. One of these topics was Social Indicators. The DAP Social Indicators Project, like those in other countries, was motivated by realization of the limitations of orthodox economic indicators for depicting meaningful development.

With an ad hoc team of university-based researchers, the Project aimed to set principles for measuring national welfare, described thus:

*The term "welfare" is used here in a very broad sense. It is interchangeable with "well-being," "happiness," "quality of life," "state of development," and any other term which is meant to refer to the degree of achievement of the important goals of Philippine society as a whole. Mindful of these goals, and given the nation's limited research manpower and statistical resources, to what extent can the degree of achievement be quantified and made amenable to statistical monitoring over time?*<sup>4</sup>

The Project began by recognizing that *welfare has many dimensions*. It identified basic social concerns: health and nutrition; learning; income and consumption; employment; non-human productive resources; housing, utilities, and the environment; public safety and justice; political values; and social mobility.<sup>5</sup>

The Project realized that each concern should be measured not only in the aggregate, but also with consideration for (a) the fairness of sharing among people of today and (b) the adequacy of provision for people of the future. The multiple concerns, and the aspects of *equitable sharing* and *provision for the future* under each topic, constitute the many dimensions of welfare.

The Project recommended certain indicators for these dimensions. In addition to those already generated by the Philippine statistical system, it proposed new ones -- disability due to illness; human capital created by schooling; net beneficial product; families below a food threshold; an index of housing adequacy; an air pollution index; an index of perceived public safety; indices of political mobility and efficacy; and indices of occupational mobility and perceived social mobility. Finally, the Project did a pilot social survey of 1,000 households in one province to examine the feasibility of gathering primary data to construct the recommended new indicators (Mangahas 1977).

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<sup>4</sup> Mangahas (1976), p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Given that the country was under martial law, it was particularly important to the researchers to be able to include *political values* as an important concern (Jurado 1976).

## **1981-84: The Social Weather Stations Project**

In 1981, the DAP established a regular research department for the first time, and put on its agenda a project to produce new, survey-based social indicators. It was named the Social Weather Stations Project, on the idea that surveys can serve like observation posts to monitor social conditions, much as meteorological stations monitor weather conditions. This Project produced a number of survey reports for internal consumption of the government, which, the researchers thought, were well-received, at least at some levels. However, its monograph, *Measuring the Quality of Life: A 1982 Social Weather Report* (Mangahas, Miranda and Paqueo, 1983) was suddenly suppressed, without explanation, only two weeks before scheduled public release in early 1983.

In Fig. 1 are some results of the suppressed Metro Manila survey, which asked people to compare the current (1981) state of the nation with the state prior to September 1972. The survey had found mostly favorable opinions on church-state relations, political stability, credibility of leadership, integrity of elections, and reduction of alien economic influence and subversive activity. But it also found mostly unfavorable opinions on inflation, crime, corruption and the burden of taxation. The discovery that the government could not tolerate even partially unfavorable research findings was a great blow to the research department's morale; within a few years it was completely disbanded.

[Fig. 1 here]

## **1984-85: The BBC socio-political opinion surveys**

In 1984 and 1985, the Bishops-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development, a civic organization of Catholic bishops and businessmen, as well as some labor leaders and academics,<sup>6</sup> conducted two nationwide socio-political surveys, with technical support from social scientists who had also been with the DAP Social Weather Stations Project. The 1985 BBC political poll and a sponsored national study of public attitudes towards the legal profession were done together on a survey omnibus. Among the key findings of the two surveys were that majorities of two-thirds disapproved of the presidential powers to legislate by decree and to detain persons by executive fiat, regardless of the courts.<sup>7</sup>

Although the BBC surveys also had some QOL items, public interest focused almost entirely on the findings on public opinion on matters of politics and governance. This demonstrated the value of blending QOL monitoring with opinion polling in young

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<sup>6</sup> Aside from the bishops, the other BBC members need not be Catholic.

<sup>7</sup> The BBC report (1985) laid its cards on the table: "While it aims to be objective in describing the pulse of society, an openly-disseminated survey does not play a neutral part in the social process. An open survey plays an active part in enhancing the democratic quality of the social process. This is the intention of the BBC surveys of 1984 and 1985."

democracies (Møller, 1997; Guerrero and Mangahas, 2004). The BBC's ability to present these findings in public during the Marcos regime, before both domestic and foreign media, was undoubtedly due to the immense political influence of Jaime Cardinal Sin.

### **1985-present: Social Weather Stations**

In 1985, Social Weather Stations -- taking its name from the DAP Project, in which four of its seven co-founders were involved -- was formally registered, for the general purpose of serving as an independent source of pertinent, accurate, timely and credible data on Philippine economic, social and political conditions. The SWS mission is to measure, by means of statistical surveys, critical components of Philippine development, and also to bring these measurements to public attention.

The first SWS project, over 1986-87, was a series of four national political surveys jointly with the Ateneo de Manila University, a prestigious private Catholic institution.<sup>8</sup> These surveys, and all succeeding ones by SWS, used the same methodology as the BBC surveys and thus extended the time-series.

The four SWS-Ateneo surveys were originally intended to lead up to the then-scheduled local elections of 1986 and presidential election of 1987. However, in late 1985 Marcos suddenly decided to set a "snap" presidential election for February 1986 -- even claiming that the BBC survey pointed to him winning it, which was false. The snap election's result was highly controversial, with the official count putting Marcos over Corazon Aquino, but the parallel count of the National Movement for Free Elections, the official citizen's arm, putting Aquino over Marcos. After two weeks, the issue was settled by People Power, that drove Marcos into exile.<sup>9</sup> The re-opening of democratic space in 1986 in the Philippines led to an early flowering of opinion polling in the Philippines relative to its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Since 1986, the SWS surveys have proceeded at an increasing pace -- 13 surveys in the rest of the 1980s, 159 surveys in the 1990s, and 126 surveys over 2000-06. All the SWS datasets are statistically representative of the populations studied; almost half of them have been done at the national level.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Ateneo and SWS (1986); the four surveys were supported by the Ford Foundation. After the joint project, the Ateneo opinion polls continued up to 1992, and the SWS polls up to the present.

<sup>9</sup> In the first SWS-Ateneo survey, in May 1986, two-thirds of the respondents said they had voted for Aquino in the snap election. Nonetheless, to a question on the basis for legitimacy of Aquino's presidency, the most popular answer was People Power, rather than that they considered her the actual winner of the election.

<sup>10</sup> The SWS Survey Data Bank of Philippine surveys, as of August 30, 2007, includes 321 datasets (of which 143 are national in scope), containing 37,789 question items excluding backgrounders, based on 330,146 interviews.

**Scope of the Social Weather Reports.** Aside from its regular, periodic releases to media, SWS presents a public annual review of key findings of its surveys in the past twelve months. To illustrate, in January 2006 SWS reported that economic well-being was in a bad state, and that the rosy GNP figures should be ignored. These were based on surveys of hunger, poverty, and past trends and expected future trends in quality of life (Figs 2-5).<sup>11</sup>

The January 2006 review showed an upward trend in victimization by common crimes, based on direct survey questions about victimization (Fig. 6). It revealed that public satisfaction with executive governance was at a historical low (Fig. 7). Most Filipinos have long been dissatisfied with the national administration's performance in fighting inflation, corruption, and crime (Fig. 8). Satisfaction with its performance in foreign relations has been typically positive, but satisfaction with how much it helps the poor is rather volatile and was negative at the end of 2005 (Fig. 9). Satisfaction with how democracy works has been on the low side, but preference for democracy over authoritarianism has been strong nevertheless (Fig. 10). Notwithstanding all the bad news in 2006, public morale and equanimity were in good order, going by the periodic survey items on life-satisfaction and happiness (Fig. 11-12).

[Figs. 2-12 here]

Aside from its core or regular time-series indicators, the quarterly Social Weather Surveys obtain public opinion on contemporary issues. The survey review of January 2006 pointed out that enthusiasm about the United States was below its traditionally high level. It saw that the private sector's new Coalition Against Corruption, organized in 2004, as likely to be sustainable, due to strong support in the annual SWS survey of businessmen. On the political side, SWS reported that the 2004 election cheating scandal was still an important issue, and that the prospects for public ratification of amendments of the Constitution were very poor, especially for any amendment, such as switching from the Presidential to the Parliamentary system, that would allow for extension of the President's term in office.

**The enlightenment model.** The SWS approach involves a deliberate switch from the *technocratic model* to the *enlightenment model*, as in many other parts of the world (Land 1996). The technocratic model saw the production of relevant data as the main problem delaying the discovery of solutions to social problems. *The enlightenment model, on the other hand, sees the first task as putting social issues on the political agenda by supplying data for public debate through the mass media.* This, according to Vogel

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<sup>11</sup> The SWS techniques for measuring Self-Rated Poverty and Hunger on a quarterly basis are global innovations (Mangahas, 1995 and 2004). The tracking of past and expected trends in QOL are based on SWS renditions of the familiar survey questions, used in many countries, which ask respondents to compare their conditions twelve months ago, and twelve months in the future, to present conditions.

(1997, p. 104) is actually “the original purpose of social indicators: to send signals to governments, business, other organizations and the general public.” Hence the SWS mission statement is phrased in a definite order: data should be generated, firstly, to stimulate the eye; secondly, to influence the heart; and finally to guide the mind. The SWS media releases are now being issued to the general public on a near-weekly basis through the mass media, and are heavily cited not only by journalists but also by many social and political analysts from academe, government, the business sector, civil society organizations, and other institutions. The very high success rate of SWS in predicting elections has undoubtedly been an important factor in establishing the credibility of its surveys.

Interestingly enough, most criticisms of the Social Weather Reports come from government officials, whose seeming function is to do the opposite: to send non-signals to the general public, and to put sensitive topics away from public debate as much as possible. Many officials argue that SWS survey-based measures are “merely perceptions” and hence different from reality. Official statistical agencies often insist that national sample sizes must be in the tens of thousands, which are affordable only once every few years, rather than the gold standard of one thousand respondents, practiced in the international barometers.<sup>12</sup>

SWS believes that the path towards effective social indicators is as much institutional as it is technical. It has demonstrated that the non-governmental research sector has a strong capability for monitoring national well-being. It recommends that private research institutes be pro-active in the generation of social statistics for public use (Guerrero and Mangahas, 1989). These institutions should aim to develop statistical indicators that are *meaningful, communicable, credible, frequent, and sustainable*.

*Meaningfulness.* Critical concerns, such as poverty and hunger, should be regularly on the agenda. The rise in families suffering from involuntary hunger, from 2003 up to the present, demonstrates, more than ever, how misleading is per capita GNP as an indicator of economic well-being. In a democratic society, political well-being and the quality of governance are very important aspects of the QOL.

*Communicability.* In order to promote public debate, social indicators should be easy to understand by the general public, and not only by social scientists. Short statements posted to media are much more effective than traditional scientific papers.

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<sup>12</sup> The standard Social Weather Surveys use face-to-face interviews of 1,200 voting-age adults divided into random samples of 300 each in the four broad geographical areas of Metro Manila, the Balance of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao (sampling error margins of  $\pm 3\%$  for national percentages and  $\pm 6\%$  for area percentages). Within each area, provinces, cities/towns, and barangays (villages) are selected with probabilities proportional to size, to arrive at 240 primary sample spots. In each spot, five households are selected by interval sampling. Then one respondent per household is randomly selected from among qualified adults within the household by means of a probability selection table.

Scientists should be prepared to communicate over radio and television, which are much more effective media than print.

*Credibility.* Being able to predict how citizens will vote is the globally-accepted litmus test for quality survey research. SWS does surveys in every national election, and is quite successful in predicting the results (Mangahas, 1998; Guerrero and Mangahas, 2004). It established its institutional credentials, even when still a relatively young institution, by obtaining membership in prestigious cross-country survey networks such as the International Social Survey Program, the World Values Survey, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and Asian Barometer. Its key persons became active members in the World Association for Public Opinion Research and the International Society for Quality of Life Studies.

*Frequency.* SWS believes that QOL indicators should aim to match the periodicity of the main competition, the orthodox economic growth indicators based on the National Income Accounts (NIA). In 1986-91 the Social Weather Surveys were semestral; since 1992 they have been quarterly, or as frequent as the Philippine NIA.

*Sustainability.* The SWS business model has made the Social Weather Reports financially sustainable (Mangahas and Guerrero, 2002). An enterprising non-profit can attain sustainability by exploiting the cost-effectivity of the omnibus approach in surveying and by actively engaging in survey research contract work, especially where quality-of-life indicators play a role. Using subjective indicators, wherever possible, also helps to lower costs, since they do not require extensive questionnaires.

**Alternative statistics for democratic discourse.** SWS says (Mangahas, 2006): “Generating and publicizing *alternative statistics* is an activity that helps to put its subject matter higher on the agenda of public and private policymakers. SWS data on regular topics like hunger, poverty and governance and on special topics such as corruption, the legal profession, domestic violence, and disadvantaged groups are consciously meant as *Statistics for Advocacy*, and not for mere academic study. ...

“Democratic Discourse, in the modern world, has particular need for scientific opinion polling during times of crisis. ... If SWS polling becomes controversial, we accept it as part of the trade. We are not creating controversies, but simply letting the light of day shine on them, in keeping with the final verse of the SWS Hymn:

‘Yan ang aming hangarin  
Demokrasya’y pagtibayin.  
Instrumento ng masa  
Sa kanilang karaingan  
SWS ay tinatag  
Layon nitong magampanan  
Na ang baya’y magising sa katotohan”

which means

*It is our goal  
To strengthen democracy.  
A means for the masses  
To air their needs,  
SWS was set up  
To perform its task  
Of awakening the nation to the truth.*

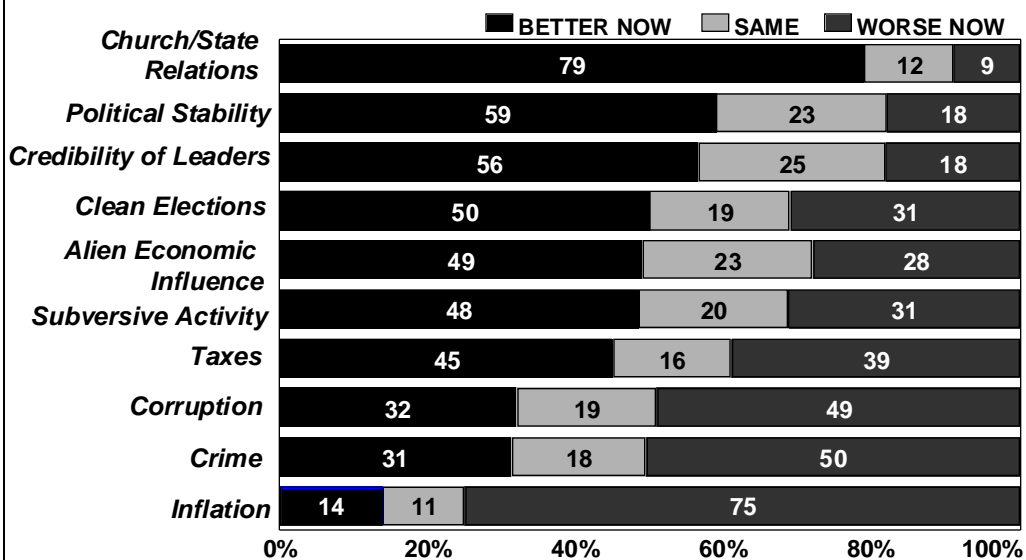
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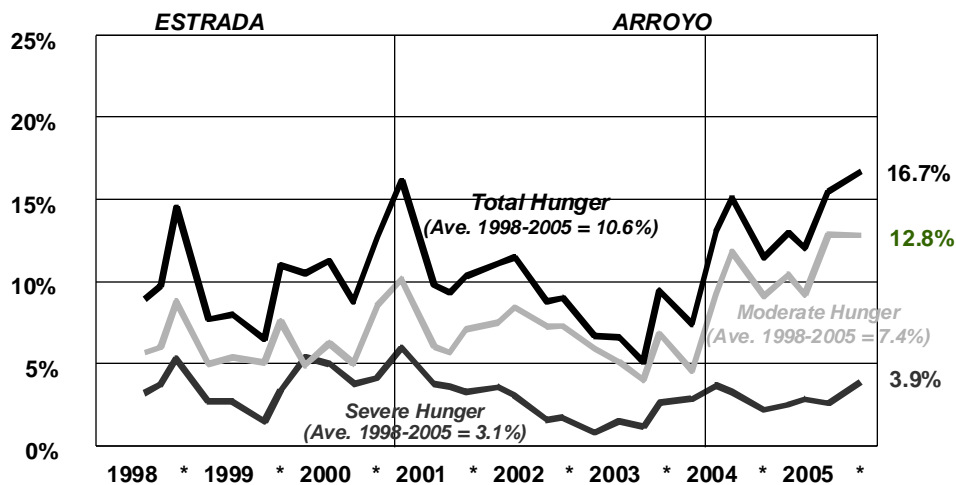


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**Fig. 1. Suppressed 1981 Metro Manila survey which asked for a comparison of the current state of the nation with that prior to declaration of Martial Law in September 1972.**

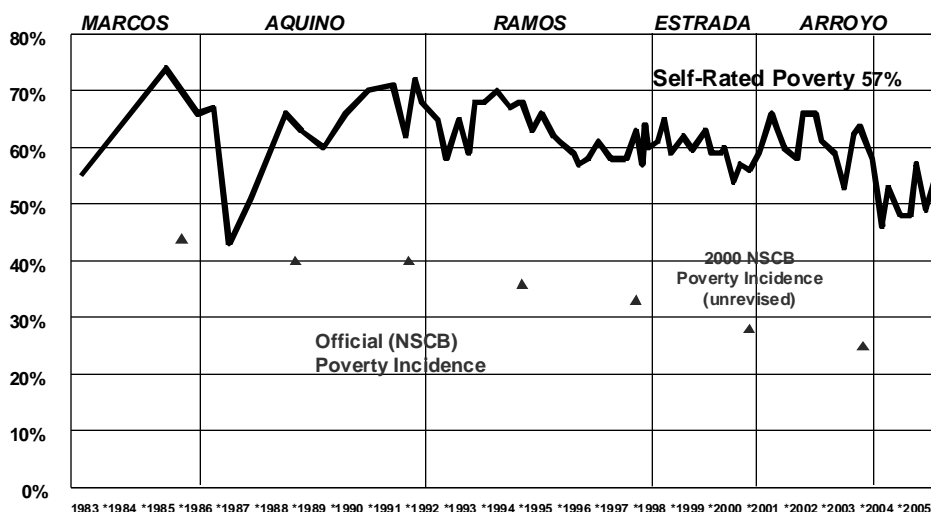


**Fig. 2. Hunger went from a record low in mid 2003 to a record high in late 2005**



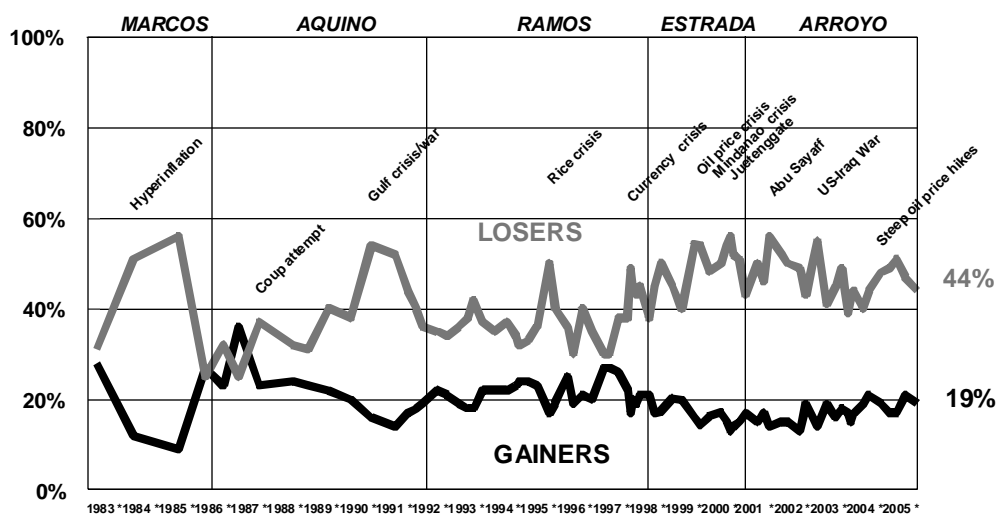
*Note: Don't Know and Refused responses are not shown. Moderate Hunger for December 2005 includes 0.5% unstated whether Moderate or Severe.*

**Fig. 3. Self-rated Poverty is volatile; the recent trend is up**



**SRP Question:** Where would you place your family in this card? (Not poor, On the line, Poor)

**Fig. 4. Quality of Life Losers have exceeded 40% for the past 7 years**

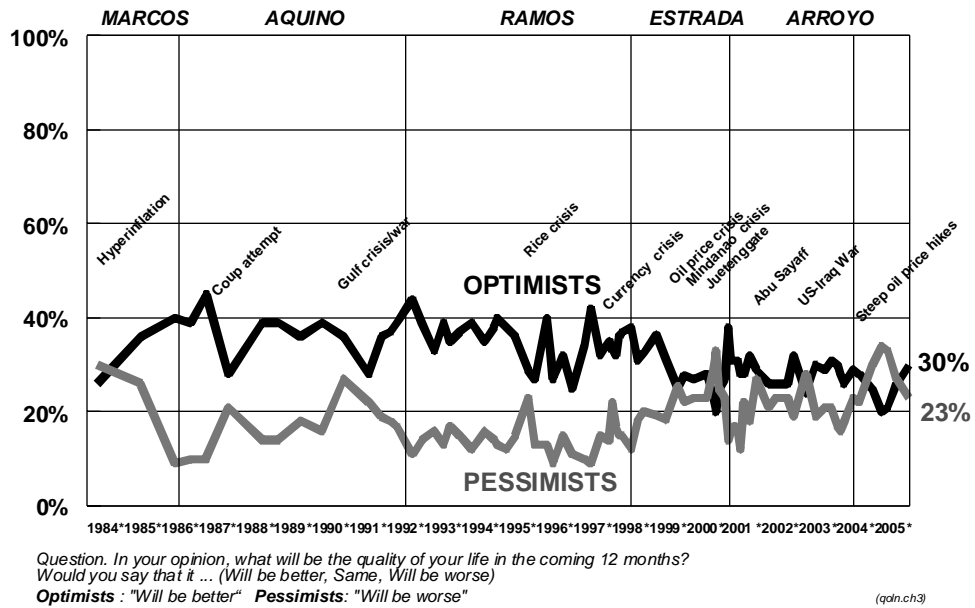


Question : Comparing your quality of life these days to how it was 12 months ago, would you say that your quality of life is ... (Better now, Same as before, Worse now)

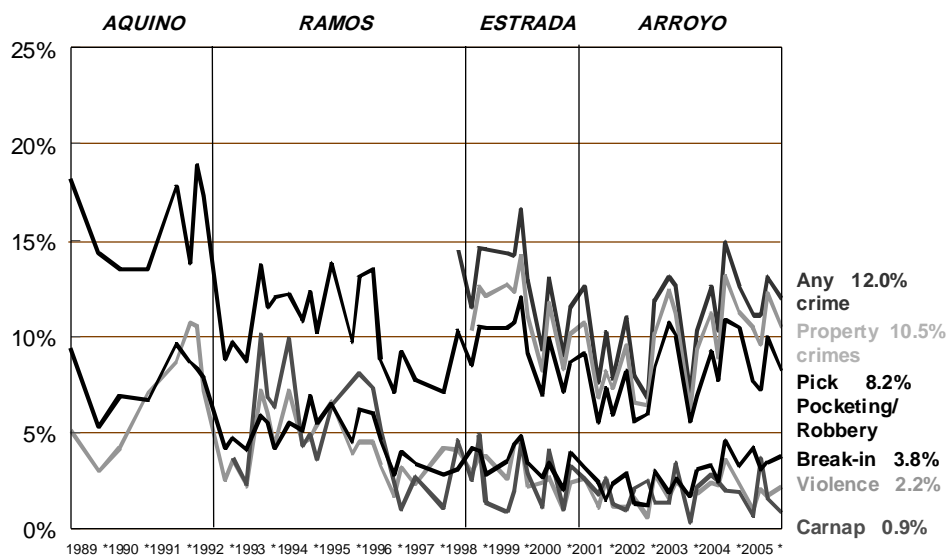
**Gainers :** "Better now" **Losers:** "Worse now"

(gdp.ch3)

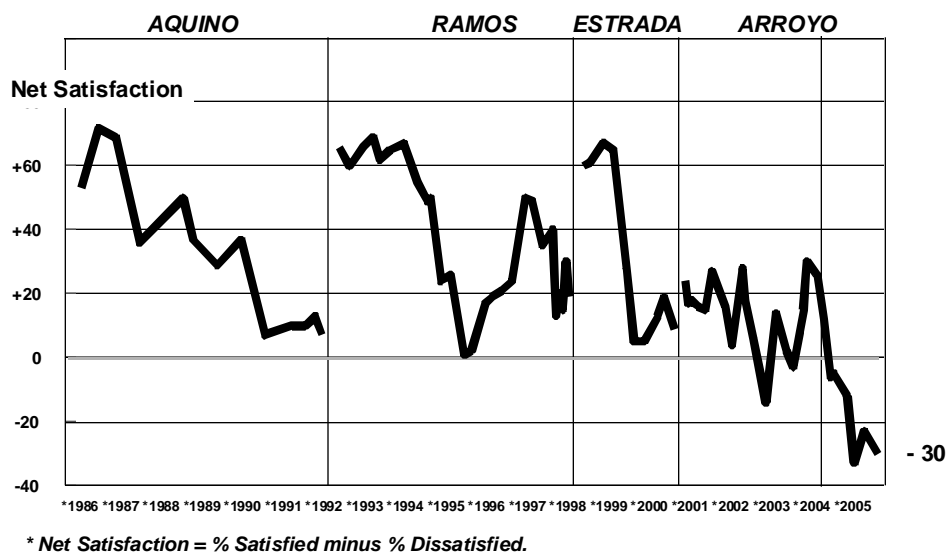
**Fig. 5. Quality of Life Pessimists were a record 34% in March 2005**



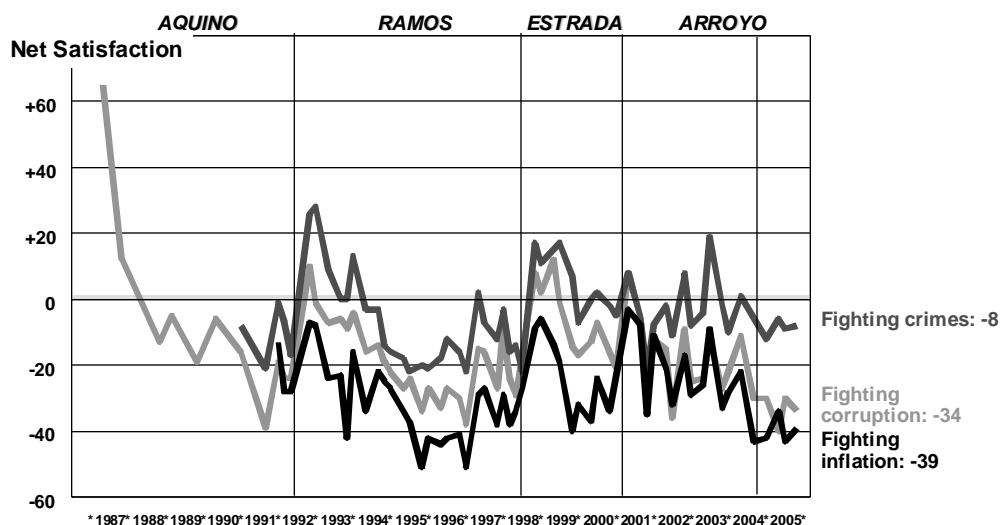
**Fig. 6. Household victimization by common crimes has been rising since 2001 (reference period: past 6 months)**



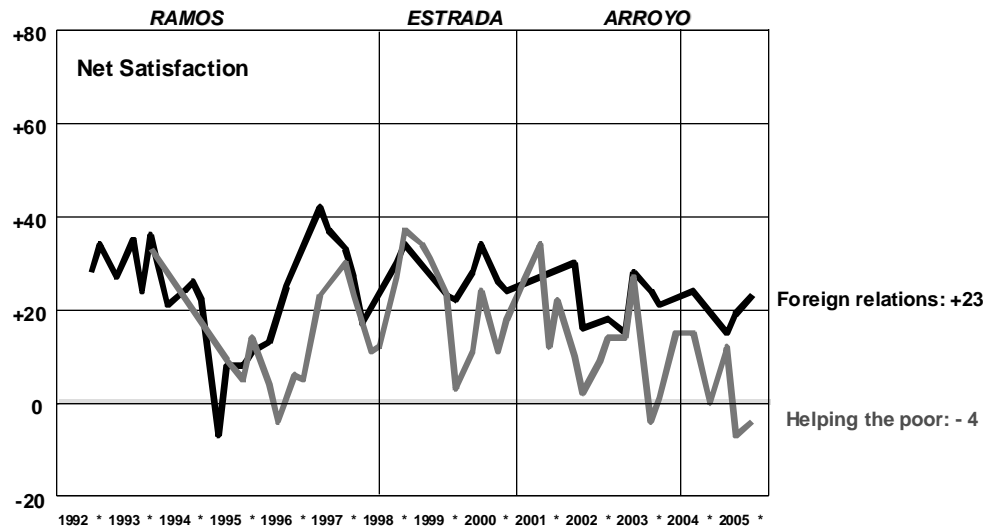
**Fig. 7. Governance: Satisfaction with a president has never been so low, for so long**



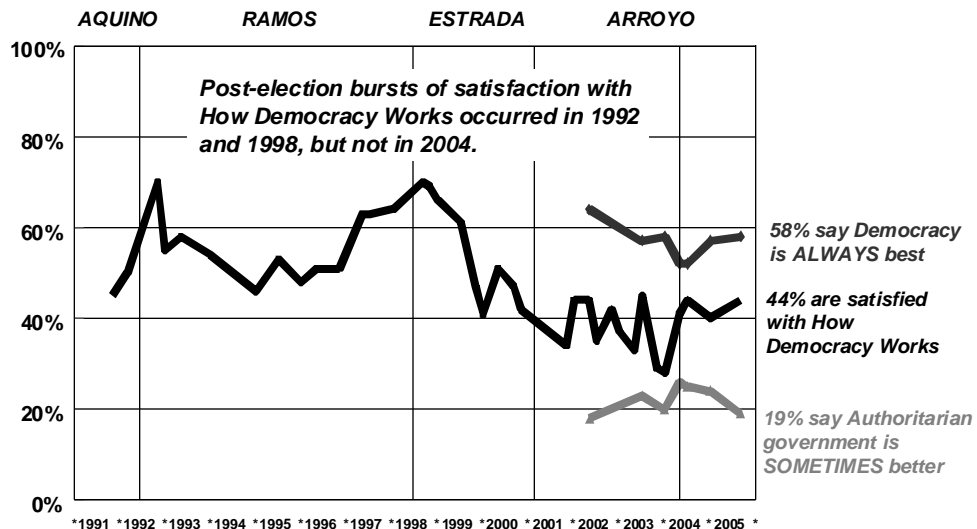
**Fig. 8. Most are dissatisfied with national administration performance on fighting inflation, corruption, and crime**



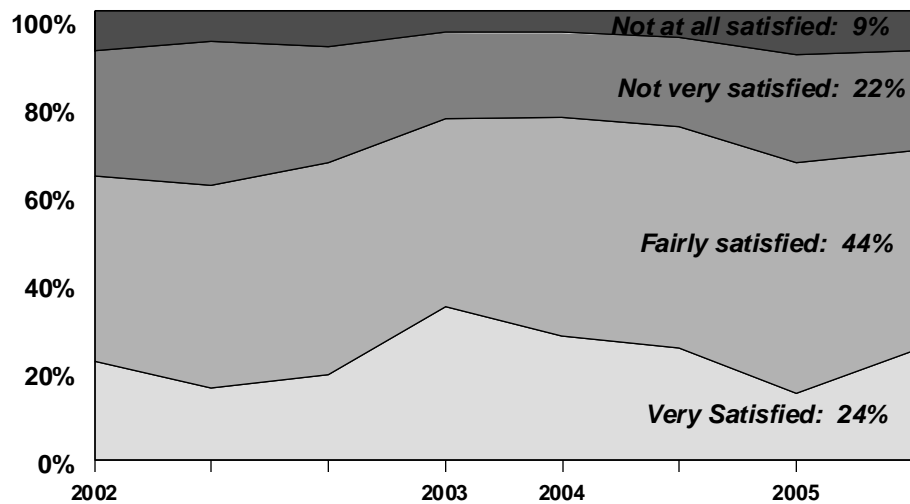
**Fig. 9. Satisfaction with the national administration is positive on foreign relations; it has become negative on how much it helps the poor**



**Fig. 10. Satisfaction with how democracy works is low, but preference for democracy is still strong**



**Fig. 11. Two-thirds are very/fairly satisfied with life.**



**Fig. 12. Three-fourths feel very/fairly happy**

