

Supporting Citizen-Focused Democracy

When Ecuador rewrote its constitution in 2008, it introduced a brand-new crop of potential voters and political candidates. Youths of 16 now have the right to cast ballots in elections, and those as young as 18 can run for public office.

But with political participation rates among young people in Ecuador—as in many countries, including Canada—running low, getting adolescents interested in taking part in the democratic process is a big job.

Bolivia, which adopted its own new constitution in 2009, introduced an additional regional level of government, with nine departments each having governors and assemblies. The task now is to bring all of these legislators up to speed on everything from knowing how to respond to letters from constituents to developing a regional constitution and managing natural resources.

Such reforms present challenges but also bring the promise of citizen-focused democracy, an objective that Canada supports through the Andean Unit for Democratic Governance (AUDG), a regional team created by DFAIT in 2009 and focused on democracy support, one of the pillars of our Americas Strategy.

The central office of the AUDG is in Lima, where Canada is recognized as playing a leading role in democracy support, including during Peru's transition to democracy in 2001. Its mandate also encompasses Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia. The unit engages in advocacy through special events and networking, provides regular political analysis and offers surge capacity for missions in times of democratic crisis. It also supports projects across the region, with \$500,000 in annual funding from the Glyn Berry Program, part of the Global Peace and Security Fund.

The unique thematic approach in the Andean countries is a product of DFAIT's transformation agenda. The AUDG is one of several regional units, created as part of a pilot initiative, that focus on specific issues and areas. Another such unit, focused on security, is based in Central America and the Caribbean; one, focused on arctic policy, is based in Oslo; and a third, focused on economic issues, is located in Jakarta.

"It's a new way to do foreign policy," says Catherine Vézina, who heads the unit from Lima. It includes eight members, both Canada-based and locally engaged staff (LES), who work in the political sections of the missions in which the unit operates. "It contributes to making Canada a better informed, more influential and more visible actor on democracy issues in the Americas."

Vézina says that freedom and democracy are two of the core values guiding Canada's foreign policy. They inform the move to strengthen institutions that reinforce the role of citizens: elections, parliaments, civil society, independent media and political parties.

"It's about people having a say or influencing, through their governments, decisions that will eventually touch them," she says.

The AUDG team promotes thematic coordination among the missions, Vézina explains—for example, by producing regional trend reports. Working closely with each mission's political section as well as host governments and NGOs, the team organizes seminars, special events, displays, expert visits, book launches and film screenings that advance Canada's diplomacy in support of democracy. LES, who are able to function with authority and autonomy, are prominently involved, she adds.

Canada's experience with strengthening democratic institutions is helpful in the region. In Ecuador, for example, some of the ideas for a website being designed to engage younger voters come from Apathy is Boring, a Canadian project that uses art and technology to educate youth about democracy.

The lowering of Ecuador's voting age to 16 from 18 and its minimum age for political candidates to 18 from 25 was a result of lobbying by a vocal adolescent movement in the country, says Cristhian Parreño, deputy coordinator of *Ágora Democrática*, an international NGO that Canada is supporting in its programming.

The organization's initiatives include a study on youth participation and activities to encourage young people to get involved politically. These include intergenerational dialogues, seminars and an online "virtual space" intended to be fun, attractive and educational. "We want youth participating in an informed way," says Parreño.

Terry de Vries, a program officer for *Ágora Democrática*, says that getting youth more involved in politics will benefit the entire electorate. But first it's necessary to counter the attitude that "politics are not their thing," she says. "When you talk to youth about politics, they say 'it's for the old people,' or 'it's just talking.'"

De Vries says the Ecuadorian government and political parties are taking note of the potential new audience (voting is mandatory in Ecuador for those 18 and up but optional for 16- and 17-year-olds). *Ágora Democrática* hopes to make a difference in youth attitudes by the time of the next national elections, scheduled for early 2013. "There's a lot to do," she adds.