

## Faculty Profile: Political scientist works closely with Latin American leaders



Seligson

### by Ann Marie Deer Owens

When Centennial Professor of Political Science Mitch Seligson recently traveled to Ecuador, he met with President Lucio Gutierrez and his cabinet, appeared on Ecuador's version of Good Morning America, lectured and held two press conferences. Seligson's high-profile meetings reflect the importance of his research to Latin American politics, including the challenges of building stable democracies in that part of the world.

Seligson and his researchers poll citizens in various Latin American countries about their views on democratic values and behaviors related to democracy. "We help political leaders understand where there are strengths and where there are weaknesses in their governments," he said. "For example, one issue is whether women are being excluded from political participation." He also tries to measure the extent of corruption with a corruption victimization index that he developed.

Seligson founded and directed the Latin American Public Opinion Project at the University of Pittsburgh, where he held an endowed chair and taught the past 18 years. LAPOP and a significant portion of its funding have moved with Seligson to Vanderbilt. Those funds will allow continued research in this area, as well as

fully support four Latin American graduate students who will begin their doctoral studies under Seligson's guidance this term.

Vanderbilt's decision to establish a Center for the Americas as well as its longstanding commitment to Latin American studies were two motivating factors in the former Peace Corps volunteer's decision to relocate here.

Working with the Peace Corps in Costa Rica was a "life-forming experience," the Long Island native said. After earning his master's degree at the University of Florida in 1968, Seligson and his wife, Susan Berk-Seligson, signed up and spent two years working in extremely primitive conditions that included no indoor plumbing. "The Peace Corps gave Susan and me a direction in our research that has stayed with us," Seligson said, noting they developed a deep understanding of issues facing the United States' Latin American neighbors.

"We were in a coffee-farming village that was so isolated that it once took four and a half days to get Susan to a hospital when she became very sick and needed medical attention."

Seligson and his wife, who is a linguist in the Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, developed lasting friendships among the Costa Rican people and some in the Peace Corps, including Jack Hood Vaughn, the organization's second director.

Thirty years ago, when Seligson began his research, about the only place he could study democracy in Latin America was Costa Rica. Most of the other regimes were authoritarian and too dangerous for American researchers doing public opinion surveys. Now Seligson is able to conduct his public opinion surveys in every Latin American nation except Cuba.

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