

# VOTERS' RESOURCES AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN LATIN AMERICA

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***Abstract:** Previous studies of electoral participation in Latin America have focused on the political and institutional factors that influence country differences in the aggregate level of turnout. This paper provides a theoretical and empirical examination of the individual-level socio-economic factors that have an impact on citizens' propensity to vote. We assess the relevance of voters' resources to explain electoral participation in Latin America. We demonstrate that the demographic characteristics of voters (age and education) are strong predictors of electoral participation in Latin America. Our analysis reveals that the individual objective characteristics of the voters explain much more than individual subjective motivations and mobilization networks.*

***Key words:** electoral participation; impact; resources; demographic characteristics.*

## Introduction

Who votes in Latin America? After thirty years of uninterrupted democratic rule in most Latin American countries, we still know very little about the factors that affect individuals' propensity to vote. This question has important normative implications for democratic citizenship. Democratic theorists have repeatedly argued that political participation has a positive influence on citizens because it leads to enlightened choices in the political arena and increased civic-mindedness. Politically active persons are likely to be more developed — intellectually, practically, and morally — than passive

persons (PATEMAN, 1976; PITKIN, SHUMER, 1982). Previous studies have demonstrated that a series of institutional and contextual factors have a positive impact on turnout (FORNOS, POWER, GARAND, 2004; PÉREZ-LIÑÁN, 2001). Electoral participation increases when registration procedures are efficient, when voting is compulsory and sanctions for abstaining are enforced, and when legislative and presidential elections are held concurrently. The conventional wisdom holds that socioeconomic factors are not related with turnout in the region (FORNOS *et al.*, 2004). The studies of turnout at the subnational level have found inconsistent evidence for the impact of variables such as literacy, wealth, and population age on electoral participation. These null and inconsistent findings may be related to the ecological problems that result from analyzing aggregate levels of turnout.

In this paper, we re-assess the link between socio-demographic characteristics and turnout at the individual level with recent survey data from 18 Latin American countries.

### **Theory: Resources and Voters' Capacity**

Verba *et al* (1995) argue that voting is a unique form of political engagement that is less demanding in resources than working in campaigns, writing letters to government officials, or donating money to party activities. Although voting requires less time and money than other political activities, citizens still need a minimum of skills and resources to understand what is at stake and to gain interest in the outcome of the election.

The socio-economic status (SES) model of voter turnout has consistently shown that income and education are positively associated with electoral participation at the individual level. Individuals with a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to turn out than poorer and less educated

citizens (LEIGHLEY, NAGLER, 1992; VERBA, NIE, KIM, 1978; WOLFINGER, ROSENSTONE, 1980). These studies suggest that citizens with higher SES tend to have more free time to participate in political activities and are better informed. More educated individuals are also more likely to understand the issues at stake in the elections and to become politically interested (BRADY, VERBA, SCHLOZMAN, 1995). We expect then that the probability of voting increases when the level of education increases.

Controlling for education, the level of income should be less directly related to electoral participation, because voting requires minimal monetary resources. Still, going to the polling station may require that citizens take some form of public transportation. Even these minimal expenses may be prohibitive for the more destitute voters, especially if they are not registered to vote in the place where they live. Hence, we expect a difference in the likelihood of voting between the poorest voters and the rest of the population, but we don't expect a linear relationship between income and turnout.

Another essential individual resource is political experience. Many studies demonstrate that older citizens tend to vote more than their younger counterparts. Previous research has found strong support for this relationship at the individual level both in developed (LEIGHLEY, NAGLER, 1992; WOLFINGER, ROSENSTONE, 1980) and in developing countries (NIEMI, BARKAN, 1987). In fact, political socialization takes time. Young voters may be disoriented by the different electoral options, thereby preferring not to vote. Political experience is acquired over time as citizens face concrete policy issues (e.g. housing, taxation, health, social benefits), discuss about politics in the workplace or in their social networks, and learn about the different programs political parties propose to solve the problems they face. This process can take several years. Hence, we expect that more experienced Latin American voters

(i.e. older citizens) tend to vote more than political neophytes (i.e. younger voters).

### **Data and Estimation**

Our main variable of interest is electoral turnout. We use a dichotomous measure of the respondents who voted in the last presidential elections: 1 = yes, voted; 0 = no, did not vote. This study focuses on reported turnout rather than actual turnout, and privileges reports on past behavior rather than expectations about future voting decisions.

The key independent variables for our study are organized in three groups: capacity, motivation, and networking factors. The first group of variables captures individuals' capacity to vote. As we mentioned in the theory section such capacity is determined by the amount of resources available for potential voters. The key determinants of individual capacity to vote are socioeconomic and demographic attributes. The socioeconomic attributes include income, and education. The demographic attributes include gender and age. As control variables, we also include a series of variables measuring voters' motivations and voters' insertion in mobilization networks (VERBA *et al*, 1995). Motivation variables measure the individuals' interest for political issues, their ability to understand what is at stake in the electoral process, and the degree to which they trust the electoral process and the democratic regime. This set of variables includes questions about satisfaction with democracy, trust in elections, political efficacy, interest in politics, party identification, and political awareness. To control for the effect of insertion in networks of recruitment, we measure respondents' immersion in different mobilizing networks (voluntary associations and clientelistic networks). We also consider the position of the respondent in the labor market (employment status).

We run a logistic regression model to shed light on the effect of voters' sociodemographic characteristics on the decision to vote. The use of a logistic regression is appropriate because our variable of interest – voter turnout – is a dichotomous variable. We rely on data from the Americas Barometer 2010 for 30,075 respondents in 17 Latin American countries.

## **Results**

The findings regarding the effect of resources on individual voting behavior are revealing (see Table 1). More educated individuals are more prone to participate in electoral processes. In fact, the likelihood that individuals will vote in presidential elections significantly increases as they become more educated. Our results also offer convincing evidence in support of the argument that older individuals are more likely to vote than younger individuals. The coefficient for the variable age is positive and statistically significant in all the models presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Determinants of Voter Turnout in Latin America, Logistic Model

	(1) <b>Logistic</b> <i>b/(se)</i>
<b>RESOURCES</b>	
Income	0.007 (0.03)
Education	0.367*** (0.06)
Age	0.665*** (0.06)
Gender	-0.233*** (0.06)
<b>MOTIVATION</b>	
Satisfaction with democracy	0.070 (0.04)
Trust in elections	0.088*** (0.02)
Political efficacy	-0.004 (0.02)
Interest in politics	0.105** (0.04)
Partisanship	0.377*** (0.11)
Political awareness	0.091*** (0.03)
<b>NETWORKS</b>	
Employment status	0.500*** (0.05)
Church attendance	-0.026 (0.03)
Membership index	0.136*** (0.04)
Clientelism	0.062 (0.06)
Urban/Rural	-0.102 (0.11)
Constant	-2.338*** (0.33)
Intercept	
N individuals	22457
N countries	17

\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.001

Source: Table drawn by the authors

At first glance, all the models in Table 1 suggest that income is not a significant predictor of electoral participation in Latin America. Contrary to the expectations of the SES model of voting behavior, wealthy individuals do not necessarily vote more than poor individuals. However, we tried a different model specification that revealed that the relationship between personal wealth and electoral participation exists but it is not linear. We run the same model presented above, but this time including all the income categories as dummies, excluding the highest and the lowest income categories that served as baseline categories – (see Table 2).<sup>1</sup>

Table 2. Logistic Regressions with Income dummies

Nível de renda	Modelo complete com renda <i>dummies</i> (Base tenth decile)	Modelo complete com renda <i>dummies</i> (Base sem renda)
No Income	-0.463** (0.190)	
1st decile	-0.119 (0.164)	0.344*** (0.126)
2nd decile	-0.003 (0.159)	0.460*** (0.124)
3rd decile	-0.027 (0.157)	0.436*** (0.123)
4th decile	0.053 (0.157)	0.516*** (0.124)
5th decile	-0.044 (0.158)	0.420*** (0.127)
6th decile	-0.114 (0.160)	0.350*** (0.132)
7th decile	0.065 (0.167)	0.528*** (0.141)
8th decile	-0.040 (0.177)	0.423*** (0.153)
9th decile	-0.157 (0.189)	0.307* (0.168)
10th decile		0.463** (0.190)

\* p<0.1, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.001

Source: Table drawn by the authors.

<sup>1</sup>Table 2 presents only the coefficients of the income dummies in the full logistic regression with country fixed effects. None of the other variables in the model changed sign or significance level with the introduction of the income dummies. The full model is available upon request.

We found that there is no difference whatsoever between the different categories of income. However, those who have no income at all tend to vote less than all the other respondents. In sum, the level of income does not matter, but destitute individuals vote less than the rest of the population. Since extreme poverty is more common in some Latin American countries than in the industrialized world, this is an interesting finding which is in line with our theoretical expectation.

As for the control variables related to motivation, our findings underline the importance of trust in elections, interest in politics, partisanship, and political awareness as significant predictors of voting turnout. All these variables have significant and positive effects on electoral participation. That is, trustful, interested, partisan, and informed citizens are more likely to participate in elections. In contrast, satisfaction with democracy has no effect on individuals' decision to vote.

The control variables related to insertion in mobilization networks shows that individuals who are employed and citizens actively engaged in civic associations are significantly more likely to vote than unemployed individuals, and unengaged individuals. As we hypothesized, citizens involved in large social networks are more likely to be politically engaged and to participate in electoral processes. However, urban residence does not influence electoral participation.

In order to estimate precisely what effect the independent variables of interest have on the probability of voting, we calculated the predicted probabilities of participating in the elections. The predicted probabilities clearly show that two "resources" variables (age and education) stand out as the best predictors of electoral participation in our model. The table demonstrates that a strong socialization effect exists. Age can be considered as a proxy for political

experience. As expected from the socialization hypothesis, the youngest voters (age 18-24) are much less likely to vote than the rest of the population. The predicted probability of participating in the elections for people in this age range is only 66% – the lowest value in the whole Table 3. The likelihood of voting increases considerably for voters in the next age range (age 25-34). Respondents in that age category have a predicted probability of voting of 79%. This suggests that voters get socialized into politics quite fast in the workplace or in their social networks. The likelihood of voting keeps increasing as age increases, but the gap between the different age categories gradually diminishes.

Tabela 3. Probabilidades previstas de votação na América Latina (2010)

Value on the independent variables	Predicted Probability
<b>RESOURCES</b>	
No education	.77
Primary education	.82
Secondary education	.86
Higher education	.89
Age 18-24	.66
Age 25-34	.79
Age 35-49	.88
Age 50-64	.94
Age > 64	.97
Partisan	.83
Not partisan	.90
Women	.87
Men	.84
<b>MOTIVATIONS</b>	
Low trust in elections (1)	.83
High trust in elections (7)	.87
Low efficacy (1)	.86
High efficacy (7)	.85
Low political interest (1)	.84
High trust in elections (4)	.88
Low political information (1)	.80
High political information (5)	.86
<b>MOBILIZATION NETWORKS</b>	
Unemployed	.81
Employed	.88
No membership civic organizations	.83
Membership 1 civic organization	.86
Membership 2 civic organizations	.88
Membership +3 civic organizations	.90
Rural	.87
Urban	.85
Never exposed to clientelism	.85
Sometimes exposed to clientelism	.86
Often exposed to clientelism	.87

Source: Table drawn by the authors

The second strong predictor of electoral participation in Latin America is education. We hypothesized that turnout should increase as the level of education increases, because educated individuals are more likely to absorb complex political information and become politically interested. This is exactly what the predicted probabilities reveal. The probability of voting is only 77% for citizens who did not receive any kind of education during their life. The likelihood of voting jumps to 82% for voters who received primary instruction only. For voters who received secondary education, the predicted probability increases even further to 86%. Finally, the likelihood of voting for those who received some form of higher education is 89%. Although the probability of voting keeps increasing as the level of education increases, the biggest differences are the ones that exist between no education vs. primary, and primary vs. secondary. As with the variable age, education is also a statistically significant predictor of electoral participation in the vast majority of Latin American countries (fourteen out of eighteen).

Different motivation and mobilization variables also have an impact on the probability of participating in the elections, but the substantive effect of these factors pales in comparison with the variables “age” and “education”.

### **Why are socioeconomic factors so important in Latin America?**

The importance of voter's resources to explain turnout in Latin America contrasts with the little influence that variables such as income or education have on electoral participation in developed countries. Particularly, education is a very poor predictor of electoral participation in many industrialized countries (NEVITTE, BLAIS, GIDENGIL, NADEAU, 2009; VERBA *et al*, 1978). Why are citizens with a low socioeconomic status (i.e. destitute and poorly educated individuals) less likely to go to the polls in Latin America but not in most

industrialized countries? We believe there are three main reasons that explain this pattern. First, the gap between those that have a low level of education and those that have a high level of education is more remarkable in Latin America than in most industrialized countries. As we showed in our analysis, the citizens that are least likely to vote are those that did not complete primary education (34.5 % of the respondents in our sample find themselves in this situation). Since most citizens in developed countries crossed this minimum threshold of instruction (the vast majority of citizens at least completed primary school), it makes sense that the effect of education on electoral participation is less remarkable. Second, the size of the informal sector in the economy is much bigger in Latin American countries than in developed countries. According to Schneider (2002), the “shadow economy” represents 41% of GNP in Latin American countries, but only 18% of GNP in West European countries. Hence, unskilled individuals in Latin America are much more likely to work in the informal economy than their counterparts in industrialized countries. People working in the informal sector are less likely to be immersed in active social networks. Since, as our own analysis reveals, citizens with low social capital are less likely to participate in the elections, the likelihood that poor and uneducated individuals will turn out is lower in Latin American countries than in the developed countries. Finally, the literature suggests that voters' resources will matter less when leftist parties or labor movements are able to mobilize lower status individuals (GALLEGO, 2010).

Latin American countries have lacked precisely the type of labor parties that were created in Europe in the twentieth century to mobilize the working-class electorate (BARTOLINI, 2000). Latin American party systems have traditionally been dominated by “parties of a multiclass appeal and ideological pragmatism” (DIX, 1989, p.33). These catch-all parties do not develop

programmatic linkages with voters along existing lines of societal cleavages, and are less effective at mobilizing individuals with low socioeconomic status. Moreover, the neoliberal turn in the 1990s has considerably weakened labor movements in the region, thereby eroding a potential mobilization arena that could encourage disadvantaged social groups to go to the polls (ROBERTS, 2002). In sum, a series of structural factors help explain the divergent impact of voters' resources on electoral participation across different regions.

## Conclusions

In this article, we assessed the relevance of voters' resources to explain electoral participation in Latin America. We find that the strongest predictors of voter turnout in all of our models are two individual resources (education and age – proxy for political experience). Our analysis reveals that these objective characteristics of the voters explain much more than their subjective motivations (trust in elections, political efficacy, and interest in politics) and their insertion in mobilization networks.

The conventional wisdom regarding turnout in Latin America is that institutions matter much more than socioeconomic factors. In the most comprehensive analysis of electoral participation in the region to date, Fornos et al. (2004, p.909) indeed conclude that “socioeconomic variables, which are found to have strong effects on turnout in Western democracies, are unrelated to turnout in Latin American countries.” The present analysis demolishes the accepted wisdom. We demonstrate that the strongest predictors of turnout in the region (education, age, employment status) are all socioeconomic variables. Income also matters but the impact is not linear. Our analysis reveals that individuals in situation of extreme poverty are less likely to vote than the rest of the population.

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