

Linking Political Participation to Democratic Consolidation in Latin America

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1. Introduction

The political environment in Latin America has historically been unstable. Ever since the arrival of the Spanish in the early sixteenth century, when Europeans clashed with native civilizations and began to impose their Western-style governments on the soon to be conquered continent, the region's political institutions have truly run the gamut of highs and lows, and often have seen more failure than success in controlling their respective constituencies. While this instability makes the region a particularly interesting topic of study for political scientists, it also entails some true difficulty and theoretical imprecision when trying to establish trends and draw conclusions that accurately characterize and effectively predict the region's future, especially in contrast to scholarly work on more established, traditional forms of Western government.

Nonetheless, theories have been made and conclusions have been drawn about politics in the region, with particular emphasis on its most recent democratic history. The recent trend of democratization that began in the 1980s has been of particular interest to political scientists as they try to account for the appropriateness of democracy in the region, the capacity of democracy to address the unique circumstances facing Latin America, the types of untraditional systems that qualify as democracy, and the staying power of such a system of government in often volatile and corrupt areas. Moreover, democratization in the region has hardly changed the unstable political landscape of the past and has been accompanied by similarly volatile politics and uncertainty, as the new and continually evolving democratic institutions, electoral policies, and international pressures that come with the transition to democracy have been compounded on top of the host of other destabilizing issues that Latin American governments have typically had to deal with, like corruption, human rights issues, and staggering inequalities between social classes left over from the colonial period.

The literature on democracy in Latin America is profoundly abundant, and many subtopics and related issues have seen similarly thorough exploration. These topics include the causes and effects of decentralization seen in many countries across the region, the implementation of political institutions that place importance on and increase citizen participation, and whether or not certain political institutions that have been adapted to fit the particular circumstances of individual Latin American countries qualify to be classified as democracies. Perhaps two of the most salient topics, however, which also happen to be the focus of this paper, include the causes and effects of the considerable increase in participatory institutions throughout many countries in Latin America as well as the staying capacity of the continent's new democratic institutions, which scholars describe as the level of democratic consolidation. A quick review and summary of the relevant literature on these two topics of interest follows.

1.1 Political Participation in Latin America

As Joseph Klesner says, “with the return of democracy to those nations in South America that had suffered under military rule in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and with the opening of the Mexican one-party regime to greater competition in the 1990s, some of the most significant barriers to citizen participation in politics in those nations came down” (Klesner, 2004). It is certain that under many of the pre-democratic regimes in Latin America, political participation was discouraged both explicitly, such as denying certain parties the right to organize as Augusto Pinochet did in Chile, and implicitly, like secretly expelling political rivals as occurred during Argentina's Dirty War. The fact that many Latin American countries had lacked any sort of participatory culture in the past also likely contributed to dissuading citizens to involve themselves in the political process. Couple this with the fact that participation is often viewed as

a necessary and indispensable component of functioning democracies, and it is easy to see why the drastic switch to democracy in the region, which Samuel Huntington calls the Third Wave, has spurred intellectual interest in the concept of political participation, especially as it relates to democracy, particularly in Latin America.

Since democratization, citizens across Latin America have been exposed to increased opportunities for participation in politics. According to Carole Pateman, “participation [during the 1980s] began to become part of mainstream democratic practice—one commentator has stated that participation has ‘become an act of faith in development’—promoted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international agencies, not least by the World Bank” (Pateman, 7). This emphasis on participation in politics can be seen in many aspects of Latin American politics, mainly as a result of increases in resources and authority for local governments, but perhaps the most emblematic and successful example is the implementation of participatory budgeting—a procedure that allows and requires a cross-section of a local population to decide the ways in which municipal funds are allocated. This process, which originated in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1988, has become a model of success as well as significant case study for the theory of participatory democracy. Other examples of increased emphasis on participation by Latin American countries abound, such as the increased emphasis on local community participation in Bolivia with the passage of the Law of Popular Participation in 1994, which included provisions to distribute significantly more money from national coffers to local municipalities to use at their own discretion.

Important too are studies that consider the various causal factors of political participation, which include varying levels of resources (like time, money, and civic skills), differing political

values and institutional opportunities, and a host of other factors that constrain the ability of citizens to get involved. It is suggested that many external factors should be considered when assessing why and how some groups of people choose to participate in politics, and also that these factors are notoriously differentiated across nations and populations (Brady et al.). One such external factor might be level of education, with many studies suggesting a positive, causal correlation between education level and participation, in which more educated citizens are more likely to participate politically than those who are less educated, although a more nuanced study suggests this effect only exists after a certain level of schooling (Davies and Falletti, 30). Other factors may include age, income, and urban residency.

1.2 Democratic Consolidation in Latin America

Democratic consolidation, on the other hand, is perhaps a more slightly recent concern for scholars of Latin American politics, as such an issue is the logical next step from research concerning transition to democracy (Turner, 65). With the transition to democracy, there was much optimism throughout much of the continent as well as the world that Latin America had left behind its unstable past and would soon be on its way to joining its established democratic counterparts after a short transition period. However, two main factors seemed to prevent such a quick transition and are able to account for the many difficulties the region faced throughout the 1990s in spite of this optimism.

The first of these issues was the weakness of the political institutions that had been established both before the democratic transition created by authoritarian governments as well as those established after the transition by new and fragile states. In a report to the EU describing the challenges to democratic consolidation in Latin America, Professors Pedro Salazar and Natalia Saltalamacchia note:

Authoritarian regimes were possible because there were no solid institutions capable of inhibiting, detecting, or, as the case may be, punishing abuses of power. [...] Latin America underwent an unusual transformation: democracy was reached without building a state under the rule of law. (8)

Recent examples of such institutional weakness include the ability of Argentinean agricultural producers to paralyze the state by “closing highways, hoarding foodstuffs and calling a ‘strike in agricultural production’” and bringing President Kirchner’s approval rating to 13 percent, as well as the frequency of mob killings in places like Guatemala (Salazar, 10-12).

The second factor challenging democratic consolidation in the region is more generally the weaknesses of its civil society, which is defined as “the institutions, practices, and networks of voluntary life that are oriented toward and legitimate themselves in terms of publicness” (Baiocchi, 26). A civil society committed to the successful development and maintenance of democratic institutions is essential for democratic consolidation. This is because civil society plays an important “role in checking, monitoring and restraining the exercise of power by the state and holding it accountable, [which] can reduce political corruption [that] is pervasive in emerging democracies [and forces] government to be more accountable, transparent, and responsive to the public, which strengthens its legitimacy” (Bunbongkarn, 141). Much evidence suggests that such civil society only partially exists in Latin America, as evidenced by answers to Latinobarómetro questions which indicate only around 50 percent of the population believe democracy is the most preferable form of government, which 30 percent either not caring or preferring authoritarianism.

2. Research Question

Much of this scholarly work on participation and democratic consolidation seems to overlap, and it would hardly be far-fetched to consider whether or not a causal link exists between participation and democratic consolidation in Latin America. Intuitively, if democracy

is understood as “a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through competition and cooperation of the elected representatives,” then it makes sense to believe an increase in the availability of participatory institutions to citizens both to hold these leaders accountable as well as to choose the most appropriate representatives for their preferences creates a more stable and consolidated democracy (Schmitter, 23).

This paper purports to establish whether or not such a causal link exists between the level of ability of citizens to participate in politics and democratic consolidation in Latin American countries. I have broken the paper up into the following five sections in order to effectively explain the experimental procedure that was followed as well as the results that came out of the study. The first section will provide the definitional and historical understanding necessary to understand and answer the research question precisely. That is, it will define exactly what is meant by “political participation” and “democratic consolidation,” as well as provide more substantial evidence that changes in the ability of citizens to participate across the continent have indeed occurred. The second section will explain the importance of exploring this link and its relevance to work already done on democracy and participation in Latin America. The third will outline and provide evidence for the various hypotheses that the literature suggests about this question. The fourth will explain the experimental methodology that was followed, including how the main points of interest were operationalized. Finally, the fifth will provide the results of the experimental procedure.

3. Definitions

In the broadest sense, political participation can be considered any type of behavior exhibited in an attempt to affect political process in ways that engender favorable outcomes for

an individual's political preferences, or more basically, as a behavior oriented toward the distribution of public goods (Booth and Seligson via Davies and Falletti, 4). This can be done through either conventional methods of participation, like voting, participating in political campaigns, contacting public officials, belonging to a political party, or joining activist groups, as well as through unconventional methods, like striking, protesting, signing petitions, rioting, or boycotting.

Further pursuit of this question requires that there have been some changes in the ability of citizens to participate in politics in order for any connection between participation and democratic consolidation to be established. In this vein, it is safe to say that ample evidence from the literature on Latin American politics suggests that this assumption is a sound basis for further research. At the local level, Collier and Handlin demonstrate the proliferation of local community associations throughout Latin America, while Carole Pateman, as mentioned earlier, points to the success and replication of the participatory budgeting procedures in Porto Alegre. Decentralization of powers from national to regional and local levels of government across the continent have also introduced numerous opportunities for increased political participation in the region by providing more elected positions and institutions through which citizens can make their preferences known and affect policy. Finally, legal changes that have redefined citizenship and enfranchisement rules in certain countries have allowed more of the population to take advantage of participatory institutions. Bolivia, for instance, finally allowed its large indigenous population to take advantage of such opportunities with its Law of Popular Participation (Kohl, 93).

It is worth making explicit that this paper does not necessarily concern the amount of participation that occurs within a country, as could be evidenced by voter turnout rates and other

similar statistics, but rather a national government's disposition toward the participation of its citizens in politics. Given the importance of participation in democratic theory, the ability to participate that a government confers on its constituents is likely a more adequate indicator of democratic consolidation than solely participation rates. To understand this intuitively, if we think of exemplar countries in which the consolidation of democracy cannot be disputed, such as the United States, the strong ability of its citizenry to participate would correlate with this consolidation, while the comparatively low voter turnout in national elections would not do so as obviously.

On the other hand, democratic consolidation, in the simplest of terms, considers the likelihood of a democratic regime enduring and lasting well into the future. In a negative sense, democratic consolidation might mean avoiding breakdown and falling back into authoritarianism, while in a positive sense it might mean the "completion and deepening [of] democracy." Perhaps the most important thing to note, however, is the "expectational" aspect of this definition. That is, democratic consolidation is not something that can be directly observed and measured, as it inherently relies on the expectations of future events. This is especially important to remember when considering the operationalization of the term later on, as the inability to directly observe the variable in question requires carefully gathered and appropriate empirical data. (Schedler, 67-69)

4. Relevance and Importance

The transition to democracy followed by the adherence to Washington Consensus neoliberal reforms in the 1990s had many optimistic about the future of democracy in Latin America. Finally, it seemed, the region had overwhelmingly embraced democracy as the only legitimate form of government. Not only that, but the changes that occurred did not have roots

primarily in direct American pressure but rather in Latin American governments themselves (Salazar, 4). However, this optimism soon gave way when after nearly two decades of ostensible democracy, many Latin American countries still did not have the strong institutions and civil society needed to truly consolidate democracy and eliminate the possibility of regression into another authoritarian state. Most notably, the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 1998 seemed to signify just how truly precarious the democratic institutions in several Latin American countries could be. Thus, while many indicators early on might have pointed to a bright future for democracy in the region, such indicators must have been inappropriate or at least clouded by the euphoria caused by such dramatic change at the time.

It seems likely that a useful indicator that might effectively predict the level of democratic consolidation in Latin America would be the ability of its citizens to participate in shaping politics. After all, opportunities for participation are what allow citizens to “(1) formulate their preferences, (2) signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action, and (3) have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government, that is, weighted with no discrimination because of the content or source of their preference,” which are Robert Dahl’s three basic requirements for democracy (3). A country that provides a great degree of opportunities to satisfy the aforementioned criteria is more likely to be responsive to its citizens needs, and in turn is more likely to securely exist well into the future.

Being able to establish whether or not larger amounts of political participation can cause more democratic consolidation in Latin America will thus be able to shed some light on the future of democracy in the region, which, much in line with most of its political history, is still incredibly uncertain and questionable. Moreover, the perceived shortcomings such a form of

government has had in certain parts of the continent, most notably caused by the effects of the neoliberal hegemony that has shaped the policies and actions several of these national governments have pursued, have caused disillusionment with democratic governance among much of the Latin American population and has created sincere doubts about the staying capacity of conventional democracies in the region. If there exists a way to increase the likelihood of democratic consolidation, it is likely that the future of democracy in Latin America will be more secure. Therefore, determining a link between political participation and democratic consolidation would establish a crucial component necessary in predicting the future of democracy in one of the most historically unstable regions in the world.

5. Hypotheses

Based on the literature on these topics, two simple yet entirely distinct hypotheses could be drawn regarding the effects of political participation on democratic consolidation in Latin America. These hypotheses, which I will call Hypothesis I and Hypothesis II, can best be distinguished and characterized as a positive and a negative hypothesis, respectively. A third and less interesting hypothesis, Hypothesis III, is that political participation will show no effect on democratic consolidation in the region.

5.1 Hypothesis I

This first hypothesis suggests that an increase in the ability of citizens to participate in politics leads to an increase in the democratic consolidation of a country in Latin America. The importance of participation in democratic theory, as has been alluded to already, suggests that this might be the case. Democracy, after all, is predicated on the notion that a government can and should be continually responsive to the preferences of its citizens, all of whom are to be

considered as political equals (Dahl, 1). What better way exists in which a population can make its preferences explicitly known to those in power other than by participating in politics?

There are two main effects that seem to come out of a citizen's ability to participate politically that further suggest it has a causal relationship with democratic consolidation. The first and most obvious is that political participation will affect policy outcomes. The fact that electoral victory is ideally tied to the ability of a political candidate to affect policy in ways favorable to his constituents is one such obvious example, as are the frequent concessions in support of different causes that come after successful protests or petitions. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that political participation not only affects policy outcomes, but also that an increase in participation "is likely to lead to *superior* social outcomes because of participation's role in aggregating information and preferences," as is evidenced by the success of Brazil's use of participatory budgeting to redistribute public funds to the areas and people that most need them (Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, 4).

The second main effect that political participation seems to have is an effect on the happiness or contentment of a given population towards its respective political institutions. Theoretical literature has long suggested that political participation is valuable not only because of the outcomes it may entail but rather because of something intrinsic to political participation itself. Amartya Sen notes, "Participation can also be seen to have intrinsic value for the quality of life. Indeed, being able to do something through political action—for oneself or for others—is one of the elementary freedoms that people have reason to value" (Sen, 359). Moreover, empirical evidence seems to suggest something similar, with a study done by Rebecca Weitz-Shapiro and Matthew Winters suggesting a positive and statistically significant relationship between voting and life satisfaction (Weitz-Shapiro and Winters, 2008).

Both of these effects seem favorable to fostering higher levels of democratic consolidation within a country. That is, if democratic institutions can effectively use citizen participation as a method of aggregating population preferences and then responding to them favorably, and if citizen satisfaction is increased both because of improved political outcomes as well as the pure and simple knowledge that they are free to express their beliefs whenever they might need to, then it is also likely that any discontent which might otherwise give rise to a devolution back to authoritarianism might no longer exist or at least be hard-pressed to find support.

Some might argue that this hypothesis supposes that an increased emphasis on political participation by governments might not merely see an increase in the consolidation of a democratic regime but rather the consolidation of any type of regime. While it might certainly be the case that certain undemocratic political leaders might use participation as a means of securing their own power rather than securing the consolidation of democracy, it is important to remember that much of the participation such leaders use is more farcical than true. That is, such participation is much more of a show used to manipulate the perceptions of citizens. Moreover, it does not necessarily adhere to the definition of participation described above, in that it does not truly affect the distribution of public goods.

5.2 Hypothesis II

There is also ample reasoning, however, to predict that an increase in political participation might not lead to an increase in democratic consolidation, but rather that it could lead to the opposite. Thus, the second hypothesis suggests that an increase in the ability of citizens to participate in politics will lead to a decrease in the democratic consolidation of a country in Latin America. The abundant literature that exists which challenges democratic theory

and support for citizen participation provides the most convincing evidence to counter the initial hypothesis. These challenges as considered by Graham Smith in his book *Democratic Innovations: Designing institutions for citizen participation* will provide the framework for the following analysis.

First, critics of citizen participation claim true participation can never really exist given that differential rates of participation across social groups are found. These inequalities can most likely be attributed to varying levels among a population of some of the causal factors of participation described earlier, like time, resources, and political values. More evidence for this inequality is shown through studies which link income and education to participation and show that a strong positive correlation exists. The presumable effect of this inequality is that a certain bias towards certain class preferences might be exhibited in political outcomes, and large portions of a population might feel as though their interests are less important and underrepresented. This would have particularly ignoble implications for the consolidation of democracy, as it would likely engender ill will among these overlooked sections of society towards the democratic processes that allowed such skewed outcomes to result in the first place, undermining democratic institutional foundations. (Smith, 14)

Second, critics also claim that “citizens tend to lack the skills and competence [needed] to make coherent political judgments” (Smith, 15). An even more extreme position like that held by Joseph Schumpeter, who argued in defense of competitive elitism, says that “the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field...He becomes a primitive again” (Schumpeter, 262). While this latter position may be extreme, it is entirely plausible to consider that many citizens may not adequately understand the particular nuances of a country’s political, social, and economic issues, whether by choice or design. As

Smith notes, “when [citizens] come to vote in elections, they most certainly do not interrogate party manifestos or records in any systematic or rational manner” (16). Because of this, critics claim that involving citizens in political decisions is not entirely useful or helpful. This criticism suggests that an increase in political participation might lead to a breakdown of democracy in a given region, as unqualified individuals are entrusted to make important decisions about issues they know little about.

The third issue Smith raises questions whether or not participation even influences politics at all, with skeptics claiming that it doesn’t, and that “citizens’ viewpoints will be ignored or the process and results of participation will be manipulated by political authorities to suit their own interests” (17). This argument is strongest when considering the act of voting, in which one vote has little to no significance on the actions of politicians and their response to certain preferences. As far as democratic consolidation goes, if participation is indeed so ineffective, then citizens might see democracy as a weak form of government to effect change and thus look for alternatives.

Finally, there is the claim that increased participation puts too much of a burden on citizens and institutions, and that it is particularly inefficient when it comes to governance. Too much time and energy must be spent learning about, discussing, and arriving at conclusions about an endless amount of issues, and this burden might be too overwhelming for most. This might entail that citizens prefer to leave the political process as much as possible and give decision-making powers up to others who presumably know better about such topics than they do. Such reasoning would likely signify a negative correlation between participation and democratic consolidation.

5.3 Hypothesis III

Finally, there is the claim that increased participation will have little to no effect on democratic consolidation. Some of the criticisms of enhanced citizen participation described above may also provide evidence for this claim. For example, if citizen participation indeed does not affect politics, then it is also logical to assume that increased participation will have no effect on the consolidation of democracy in a given country. Also, if citizens find the stress of participation to be too burdensome and leave the decisions to professional politicians who still decide to work within the existing political structures, then it could be that no changes will be effected on democratic consolidation. This last hypothesis is more of a final consideration in order to achieve theoretical completeness than an actual likely outcome, as the literature does not seem to suggest that participation does not affect political outcomes.

5.4 Predictions

I found the evidence in favor of the first hypothesis to be the most compelling, and expected the empirical data to argue in its favor after running the relevant tests. This is due to the strength of its causal arguments as well as the fact that many of the criticisms in the second hypothesis can be countered with equally compelling arguments. First, differential rates of participation across subgroups, while certainly unfavorable to democratic consolidation, are likely to be eliminated by increased availability for participation. One such case is Bolivia, in which the large indigenous population was widely excluded from the political process both formally and informally, with major population centers like Santa Cruz dominating national politics that in turn affected localities in all parts of the country. The Law of Popular Participation helped to change some of this imbalance by giving localities and its citizens more

of an opportunity to effect change and hopefully decreasing discontent that might arise from inability to participate.

The claim that citizens lack the skills to competently participate in politics also seems to be misguided according to other studies, as evidenced by the success of participatory budgeting across the continent. Speaking of mini-publics, which are smaller examples of normal citizens making policy decisions, Carole Pateman, for example, notes:

A familiar criticism that is often brought up against arguments for greater citizen involvement in politics is that most individuals are not sufficiently capable of doing so or are not interested. [...] On the contrary, the empirical evidence shows that citizens both welcome and enjoy the opportunity to take part and to deliberate, and that they take their duties seriously. The findings show that ordinary citizens, given some diverse opinions, are quite capable of understanding complex, and sometimes technical, issues and reaching pertinent conclusions about significant public matters. [...] These empirical findings provide a valuable counterweight to the poor opinion of ordinary citizens found in much political science, and to the frequently heard view that many, perhaps even most, matters of public policy are best left to, or must be left to, experts. (9)

Thus fears that increased participation might lead to bad decisions that lead to the breakdown of democracy are probably unfounded. Finally, the alleged burden of participation, too, seems more of a theoretical concern rather than an empirical fact. One only needs to look at the United States, where voter turnout rates are relatively low yet questioning its democratic consolidation would be absurd.

6. Methodology

In order to establish which of these theoretical lines of reasoning most accurately accounted for the relationship between political participation and democratic consolidation, an empirical study was undertaken first to determine whether or not any significant link existed and second whether or not such a link was indeed causal. The study required (1) a clear and accurate operationalization of both support for political participation and democratic consolidation, (2)

collecting data on several Latin American countries to establish their national governments' support for political participation and level of democratic consolidation, (3) running a regression on these two variables and determining whether or not a statistically significant correlation existed, and (4) testing other variables that might account for any determined correlation and ruling them out if possible.

The operationalization of these two terms was done in a very straightforward manner. Freedom House, an American NGO that releases a yearly report called *Freedom in the World*, rates countries on a numerical scale for their levels freedom. One sub-indicator of freedom that they release data for is "Political Pluralism and Participation." Countries that score highly in this category are those which ensure that (a) "people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice" and allow for the "rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings" (b) have "a significant opposition vote and a realistic possibility for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections," (c) allow "people's political choices [to be] free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group," and (d) ensure that "cultural, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups have full political rights and electoral opportunities" (Freedom House). This adequately captures the ideas of participation mentioned above and does so in a convenient, trusted numerical format.

Democratic consolidation was measured using the Polity IV index, which is a scale that measures the institutionalization of democratic and authoritarian regimes, with a fully consolidated democracy being at one end of the spectrum and a fully consolidated dictatorship at the other. It considers a wide variety of variables that "record the key qualities of executive recruitment, constraints on executive authority, and institutionalized qualities of governing

authority,” and is a widely respected measure of the institutionalization of democracy among political and other social scientists (Marshall).

The information offered by these respective organizations was collected for nine Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela for the years 2006 and 2010. The countries were chosen for their availability of data, their vastly different political situations, and the different sorts of political changes they experiences during this time interval, with some countries somewhat drastically changing positions on the various scales. A recent time period was chosen as the effects of increased emphasis on participation by governments were more likely to have taken place, and subscores for Freedom House reports only extended back to 2006.

A regression was then run on these two variables for both time periods, with the results following in the next section. Once a statistically significant correlation was established, other confounding factors that might have explained for the correlation, like economic development (operationalized as GDP per capita) or social inequality (measured by the Gini Index), were tested and ultimately ruled out.

7. Results

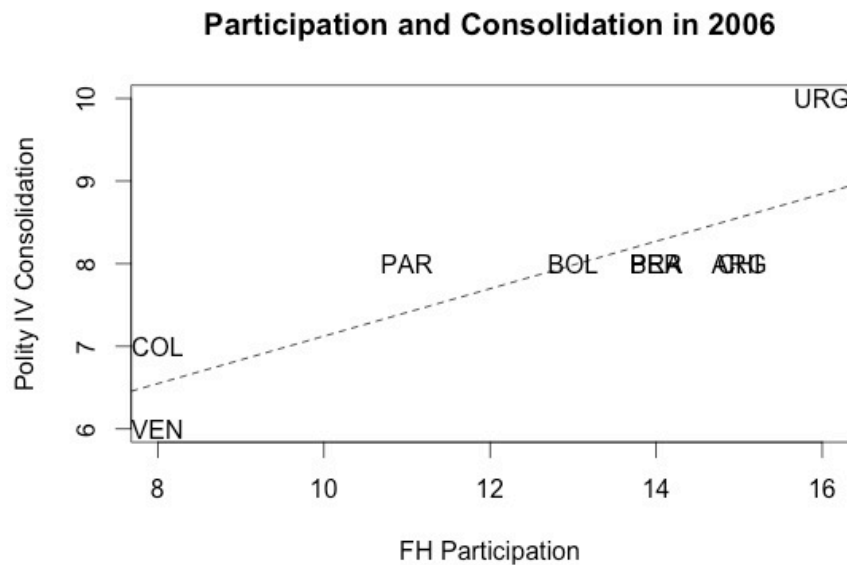


Figure 1: Participation as measured by the “Pluralism and Political Participation” subcategory of Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2010 report and democratic consolidation as measured by the Polity IV index. Higher scores indicate higher levels of each respective indicator.¹ The overlapping countries are Brazil and Peru and Argentina and Chile.

This graph in Figure 1 shows a clear and statistically significant correlation between political participation and democratic consolidation in Latin America at the five-percent level. We see countries like Uruguay, which is frequently cited as an exemplar of democratic consolidation in Latin America, also tend to place much more of an emphasis on political participation than those that are less consolidated. Comparing the changes that occur between 2006 and 2010, which are indicated in Figure 2 below, we see that countries that change positions in either of the two rankings typically move along the regression line. That is, an increase or decrease in the ability to participate is usually accompanied by a respective increase or decrease in democratic consolidation. Consider Venezuela, which saw a one-point decrease in its Freedom House participation score and also a five-point decrease in its democratic

¹ The regression formula is $\text{polityiv2006} = 4.25 + 0.29 * \text{fh2006}$, with a coefficient standard deviation of .08 and an intercept standard deviation of 0.99. The residual standard deviation equals 0.65 and the R^2 equals 0.67.

consolidation score. If we consider the changes that occurred in the Venezuelan political system during this time, most notably the passage of a constitutional referendum that took place in 2009 which severely limited the autonomy of regional governments, it makes sense to think that their participation score would lower and thus cause democratic consolidation to diminish as well. On the other hand, Chile saw a one-point increase in its participation score and also received a two-point increase in its consolidation score. Similarly, it makes sense to believe that Chile, whose socialist party came to power in 2006, would have seen such an increase in its participation score. While this certainly does not prove causation and other factors could be to blame, it does indicate that a relationship between participation and democratic consolidation might be of interest.

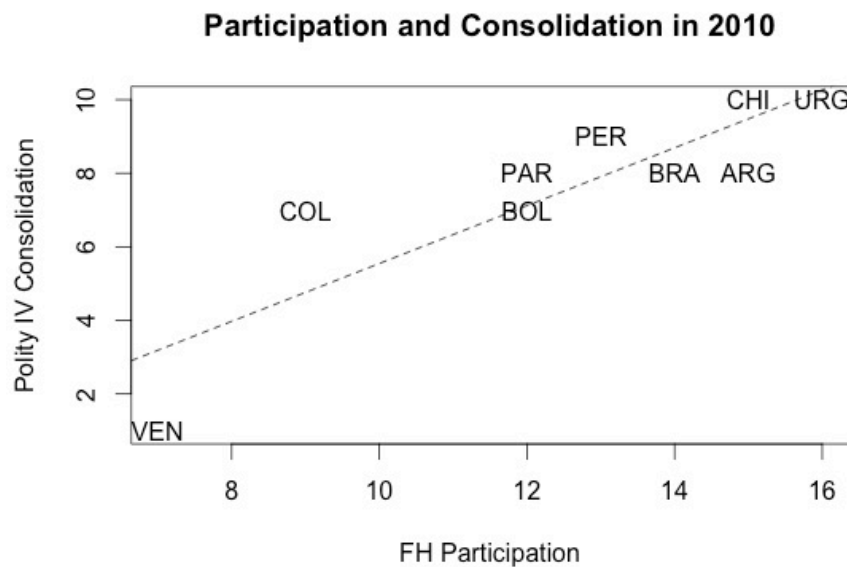


Figure 2: Participation as measured by the “Pluralism and Political Participation” subcategory of Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2010 report and democratic consolidation as measured by the Polity IV index. Higher scores indicate higher levels of each respective indicator.²

² The regression formula is $\text{polityiv2010} = -2.32 + 0.79 * \text{fh2010}$, with a coefficient standard deviation of 0.17 and an intercept standard deviation of 2.23. The residual standard deviation equals 1.45 and the R^2 equals 0.75.

In order to clearly establish that changes in levels of participation indeed played a larger role in the consolidation of democracy in Latin American countries than other factors, two potentially alternative attitudinal and structural causes of democratic consolidation, as suggested by Andreas Schedler, were tested in a similar fashion against the Polity IV scale for the year 2010.

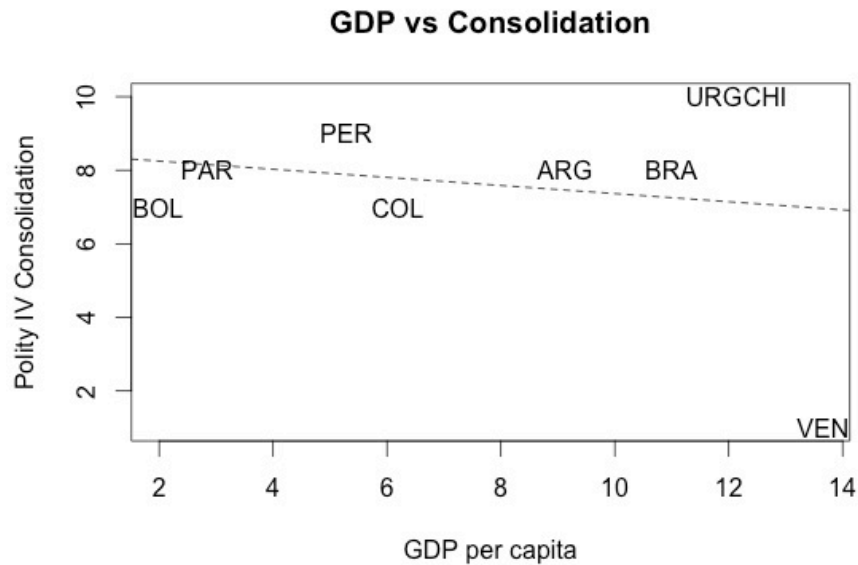


Figure 3: Gross domestic product per capita using figures from 2010 and democratic consolidation as measured by the Polity IV index. A higher score on the y-axis indicates a higher level of democratic consolidation. GDP is measured in thousands.³

One possible confounding variable might have been each country's respective economic environment. For example, one might have suggested that the decrease in Venezuela's democratic consolidation rating could be due to economic woes and hardship that fostered resentment against the established government. While this argument seems largely unfounded for the case of Venezuela (real GDP per capita remained largely the same across the entire time-span), it indeed could be a larger trend that would have to be accounted for. The economic environment in this case was operationalized as GDP per capita and was regressed against the

³ The regression formula is $\text{polityiv2010} = 8.47 - 0.11 * \text{gdp2010}$, with a coefficient standard deviation of 0.23 and an intercept coefficient of 2.13. The residual standard deviation equals 2.84 and the R^2 equals 0.03.

Polity IV consolidation ratings from 2010 as done earlier. In this model, shown in Figure 3, no significant correlation was determined between the two variables as we saw when participation was included, suggesting that participation plays more of a role in democratic consolidation than economic development.

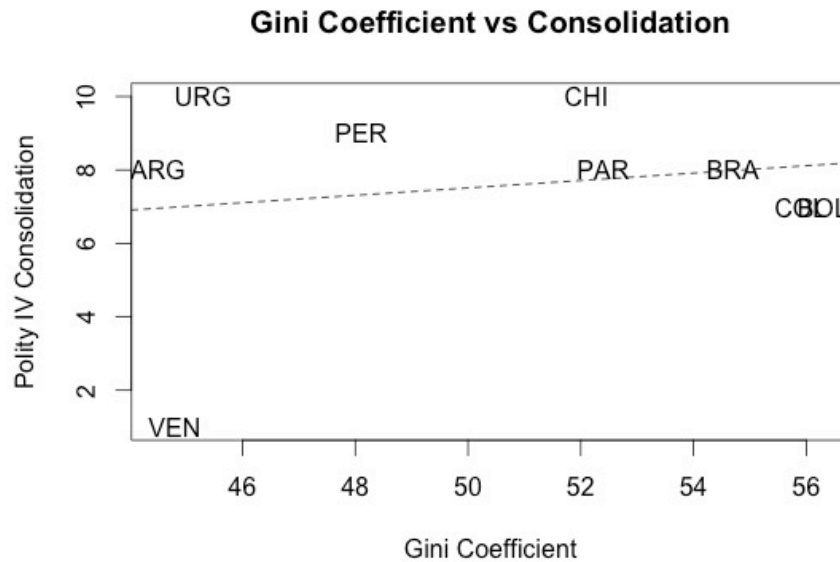


Figure 4: Gini coefficient using figures from 2010 or most recent before that year and democratic consolidation as measured by the Polity IV index. A higher score on the x-axis indicates higher inequality, and a higher score on the y-axis indicates a higher level of democratic consolidation.⁴

The other possible confounding variable that was tested was social inequality. It very well could be that unequal societies are more likely to resort to undemocratic methods, as the poor resent those in power and those in power use their resources to ensure their interests are looked out for. Social inequality was operationalized by using the Gini coefficient, a commonly used measure of income or wealth inequality. A higher Gini coefficient indicates a higher level of inequality. Again, as we saw in the test before this, no statistically significant correlation between the variables is found, in contrast to the high correlation we saw between participation

⁴ The regression formula is $\text{polityiv2010} = 2.47 + 0.1 * \text{gini2010}$, with a coefficient standard deviation of 0.21 and an intercept coefficient of 10.48. The residual standard deviation equals 2.84 and the R^2 equals 0.03.

and democratic consolidation, suggesting a strong likelihood that there is indeed a causal relationship between greater opportunities for political participation and higher levels of democratic consolidation.

One final measure was taken to ensure the confidence of these empirical findings and their ability to withstand further academic rigor. Regime fragility, rather than democratic consolidation, was compared to participation. Given that democratic consolidation is the notion that governments are highly unlikely to revert back to authoritarianism, as well as the fact that all countries in question can be considered democratic (although for a more interesting discussion see, Collier and Levitsky's "Democracy with Adjectives," 1997), regime fragility seems to provide another valuable indicator of democratic consolidation to which participation can be compared.

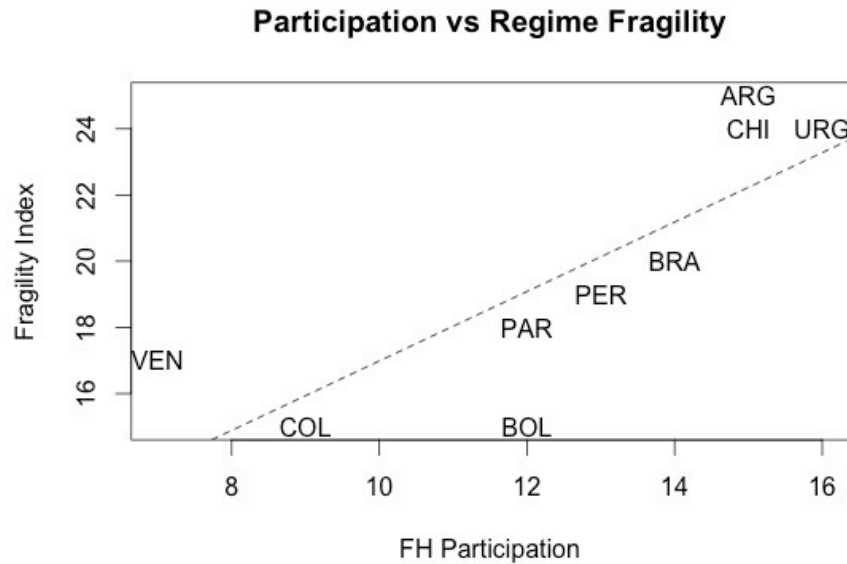


Figure 5: Participation as measured by the “Pluralism and Political Participation” subcategory of Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2010 report and regime fragility as measured by the State Fragility Index 2011. Higher scores on the x-axis indicate higher levels of participation and higher scores on the y-axis indicate *less* fragility.⁵

This scale, adapted from the Center for Systemic Peace’s State Fragility Index, places the most fragile countries at the lower of the spectrum (towards 1) and the least fragile countries towards the top (towards 25). This regression saw a similarly strong correlation like we saw when comparing participation with the Polity IV data, showing significance at the five-percent level and an R^2 of 0.64. And as before, these results were compared with other possible explanatory variables like economic development and social inequalities, again using GDP per capita and the Gini coefficient as indicators. Both of these comparisons, shown in Figures 5 and 6, failed to show a statistically significant correlation at the five-percent level and thus suggest that opportunities for political participation do indeed increase the democratic consolidation of Latin American countries.

⁵ The regression formula is $\text{fragility.index} = 6.5 + 1.05 * \text{fh2010}$, with a coefficient standard deviation of .29 and an intercept coefficient of 3.79. The residual standard deviation equals 2.47 and the R^2 equals 0.64.

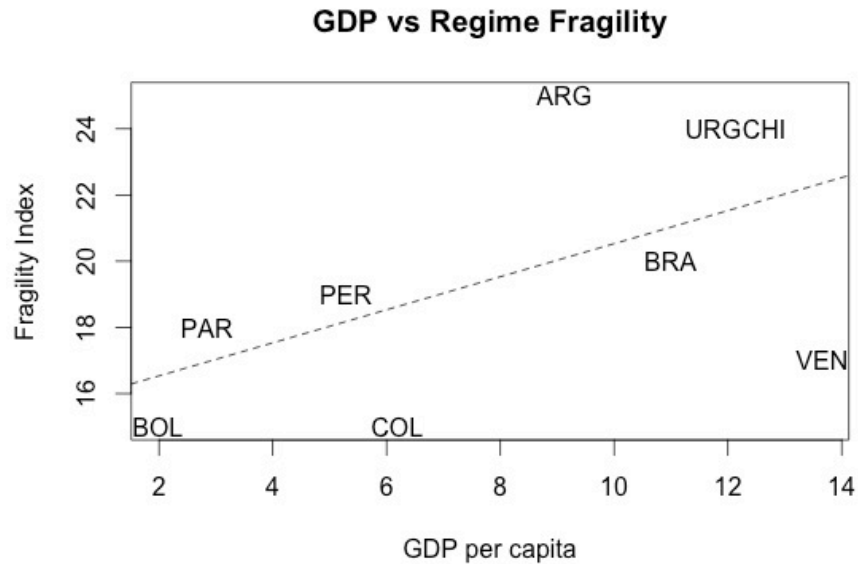


Figure 6: Gross domestic product per capita using figures from 2010 and regime fragility as measured by the State Fragility Index 2011. A higher score on the y-axis indicates *less* fragility. GDP is measured in thousands.⁶

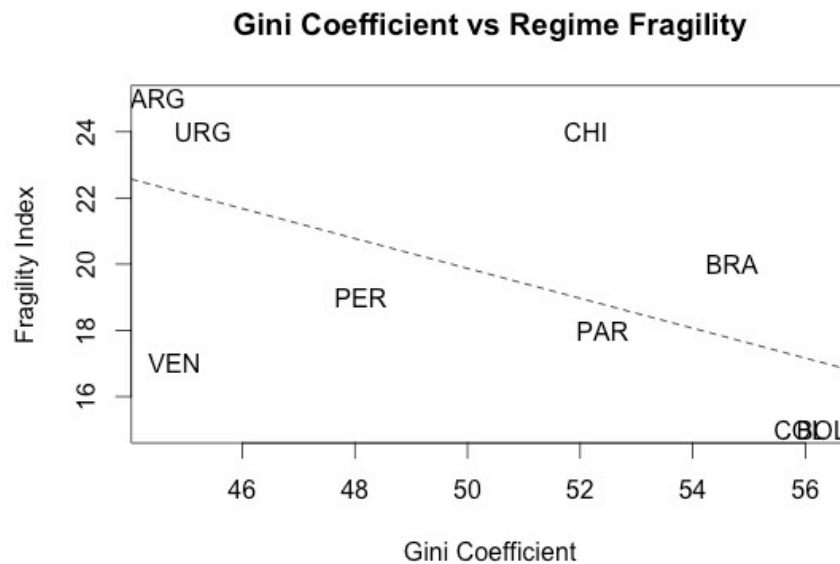


Figure 7: Gini coefficient using figures from 2010 or most recent before that year and regime fragility as measured by the State Fragility Index 2011. A higher score on the x-axis indicates higher inequality, and a higher score on the y-axis indicates *less* fragility.⁷

⁶ The regression formula is $\text{fragility.index} = 15.54 + 0.5 * \text{gdp2010}$, with a coefficient standard deviation of 0.28 and an intercept standard deviation of 2.58. The residual standard deviation equals 3.43 and the R^2 equals 0.31.

⁷ The regression formula is $\text{fragility.index} = 42.45 - 0.45 * \text{gini2010}$, with a coefficient standard deviation of 0.25 and an intercept standard deviation of 12.63. The residual standard deviation equals 3.42 and the R^2 equals 0.32.

8. Conclusion

This paper sought to establish a causal link between the ability of citizens of Latin American countries to participate in politics with the amount of democratic consolidation those countries demonstrated. Given that the existing literature on the topic seemed to indicate two possible outcomes for this question, an empirical study was undertaken that compared numeric indicators of a country's willingness to allow its citizens to participate in politics and its level of democratic consolidation, using data collected from several Latin American countries with varying levels of each indicator both statically and across a short time span to do so. Additionally, similar regressions were run using other possible indicators of democratic consolidation in order to establish causality between the initial two variables once a strong correlation was established.

The results showed evidence in support of Hypothesis I, which claimed that an increase in the ability of citizens to participate in politics would lead to an increase in the democratic consolidation of a country. It is reasonable to assume that this link exists due to the reasons which gave rise to this hypothesis, namely that participation is an integral component of any solid democracy, that participating allows citizens to effect change and see that their preferences are considered, and that participating has some sort of intrinsic value to citizens, all of which prevent discontent and the likelihood that existing democratic systems might devolve into some other type of government.

It might also be possible to take this information as an indication that many Latin American countries, despite some concerns, are indeed heading towards becoming fully consolidated democracies and perhaps just need more time in order to achieve such an impressive goal. Many countries have implemented countless new and revolutionary ways to

increase the involvement of citizens in politics and are still continuing to do so into the present. If some of these newer participatory institutions are allowed the time necessary to gain sufficient traction in their respective constituencies, it is likely that they will be able to fully institutionalize and support their democratic foundations.

It will be interesting to see in the future if certain governments choose to head in the opposite direction of current trends and instead decrease the amount of political participation allowed of their citizens. One such country might be Venezuela, which is currently at a critical juncture that will likely see major changes to the existing political regime in the country. If they take this alternate route, it would be interesting to test the results of these changes in a manner done similar to the analysis in this paper.

Further research might also test other possible contributors to democratic consolidation besides participation, be able to establish more quality indicators of political participation and democratic consolidation, as well as include a more longitudinal study that can show trends over a longer period of time, although such a study would surely find difficulty in accounting for the host of confounding factors that would arise from studying such a large time span. Whatever the case, the recent trends in Latin American politics are likely to have a profound impact on its population and governmental institutions, and political scientists are sure to retain interest in the region as the continent's historic political ups and downs are sure to continue.

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