

Carew Boulding and Claudio A. Holzner (2021). *Voice and Inequality: Poverty and Political Participation in Latin American Democracies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 244 pages. ISBN: 9780197542149. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197542149.001.0001

Rosario Aguilar

Newcastle University

There is so much to like about *Voice and Inequality*, an example of conscientious and systematic research looking at the level and factors that explain poor citizens' political participation in Latin America. Carew Boulding and Claudio A. Holzner embark in a detailed analysis to disentangle whether there is a gap in the level of political participation by different levels of wealth in the region and by types of participation. The contribution of this book is major: It shows that poor citizens tend sometimes to participate more than better off individuals, while it looks at contextual and individual factors that explain participation in a truly comparative enterprise. The theory and evidence presented advance our understanding of the way citizens participate in young and unequal democracies while providing a framework to study other regions of the world.

The book presents a comprehensive approach to the study of political participation. First, it looks at three different activities that citizens can engage in: voting, contacting government officials, and protesting. Secondly, it looks at a range of different factors that can explain different levels of political participation, both political and non-political. Thus, the theoretical framework builds on, and advances, key studies of political participation that had looked beyond politics to understand people's political engagement from a comparative perspective by seriously evaluating the impact of civil society in the health of citizens' participation (e.g., Verba et al., 1978). Moreover, the theory problematizes the effect of political parties in mobilizing voters by looking at the incentives these parties might have depending on their characteristics and context. Finally, the quality of democracy will influence people's ability to engage in politics, and it will be greater for those with less resources (i.e., poor citizens.)

Boulding and Holzner test their theory using data from the Latin American Public Opinion's (LAPOP) AmericasBarometer, a study that has been carrying out

surveys every two years in the Americas since 2004/05. The authors rely in surveys for 18 Latin American countries between 2006-2014 to evaluate patterns of political behavior among poor citizens and compare them to non-poor individuals.

The book not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of the topic, but it also advances methodological approaches to the study of participation. For example, the authors propose a statistical model of political participation that relies in a multi-level approach allowing to look at both individual and contextual characteristics. The authors run separate models for poor people differentiating the social process that poor and non-poor individuals go through their lives an approach that was firstly introduced by the analysis of gender differences in political participation (Burns et al., 2001). That method allows the researchers to test their argument by looking specifically at lower-income respondents and compare them with the rest of the sample, strengthening their conclusions.

A key issue is the differentiation of poor and non-poor citizens for the analysis. Boulding and Holzner discuss the inadequacy of relying on self-report income levels, as there are many respondents who do not answer the question or whose answer might not be accurate. Moreover, the poverty line might vary from country to country, so it is crucial to rely on a comparable measurement of poverty across the 18 polities. The authors take advantage of the surveys' inclusion on questions of asset ownership to calculate each respondents' wealth, based on an index developed by Abby Córdova (2009), and divide respondents in quintiles concentrating on the lowest quintile to understand the patterns of political participation of the poorest people in the region. The decision to focus on the lowest 20% of the population in terms of wealth is backed by reports from international organizations on the level of poverty through that period (i.e., World Bank). Moreover, limiting the analysis to the lowest quintile guarantees that the analysis captures people living in conditions of poverty across the region. The authors also run robustness checks by including either all the sample in the analysis or modifying the measure of poverty to include the bottom 40% respondents in terms of wealth.

Boulding and Holzner conceptualize political participation as «those activities that are intended to influence the selection of government officials and to influence the decisions and actions they take» (25). This definition allows them to look at voting and other activities, such as contacting politicians or government officials and protesting. As the authors explain the selection of types of participation is constrained by the survey instrument, as the questions had to appear in the questionnaire through the duration of the study. The study shows the importance of including diverse types of activities independently, as citizens face different obstacles and incentives to engage in each activity, as well as creating an index following the tradition of previous participation studies (i.e. Verba et al., 1995).

There are several important findings that advance the comparative research in political behavior, in general, and participation, in particular. For example, by

looking at types of participation and at the index a puzzle arises: poor people tend to participate at the same level or more than better off individuals, except for voting. Furthermore, poor people tend to contact more government officials and there is no difference in terms of the probability of protesting. The difference in voting behavior disappears when we consider potential clientelistic relationships. Latin America is a region where patron-client relations have been more the norm than the exception and it has been widely researched (e.g. Auyero, 2001; Gay, 1998; Hilgers, 2012; Magaloni, 2006; Nichter, 2018; Stokes et al., 2013; Szwarcberg, 2015, etc.) Voice and Inequality shows that clientelistic relations can have a positive outcome on poor individuals' engagement with politics, as they become socialized and learn how to contact government officials to solve their problems. In polities where electoral competition is high, clientelism can be beneficial for poor citizens as they have more bargaining power. Moreover, the survey evidence shows that clientelism not only reaches the 20% poorest individuals but those who in higher quintiles and sometimes the percentage of non-poor individuals who report being offered something in exchange for their vote is higher than among the poor (i.e., Chile, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.) This is a counterintuitive finding, as the literature general agreement is that the most likely targets of vote buying practices are the poor.

Boulding and Holzner problematize the approach to study the effect of political parties' mobilization efforts by considering that parties will mobilize poor voters if they have incentives to do so (i.e., stiff electoral competition) and the organizational capacity to do it. Moreover, the authors differentiate between mass-based and elitist parties and show that, regardless of the parties' ideologies, the former will tend to engage more often their supporters than the latter, which will engage them during elections. The impact of parties' mobilization strategies is stronger in cases where there is not compulsory vote. Therefore, the participation gap in terms of voting between the poor and the non-poor diminishes where elections are competitive and there is a presence of mass-based electoral parties, which have the networks and motivation to mobilize the support of the poorest in society. Parties work with community organizations, which are crucial to decrease the costs of engaging in politics by providing relevant political information to their members and serving as nodes of contact between candidates, parties and government officials.

There are two fascinating findings in term of ideology. First, the lack of relationship between social class and ideology as poor and non-poor respondents' ideological distribution is similar in terms of support for the right and left. The authors discuss the difficulties in measuring ideological preferences in the region (e.g., in some countries people could suffer tough repercussions if they supported the left, parties' ideological shift, etc.) in contrast with established democracies. Research has shown that it might be useful when studying Latin American to include other type of questions to organize voters ideologically, or to rescale the survey items, when

such questions are available in the survey (e.g., Saiegh, 2015; Zechmeister, 2006, etc.) This is a challenge for studies of ideology in developing democracies, where the meaning of labels are not widespread shared as in consolidated democracies.

Furthermore, the second intriguing ideological finding has to do with the left turn in Latin America since the late 1990's with the electoral triumph of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Previous research would expect that left-leaning governments might increase the level of participation of the poorest citizens. The problem with this expectation is that it is based in developed democracies, polities that count with established political party systems in which left parties tend to have strong connections to labor movements and unions.

The authors distinguish the Latin American political parties by ideology by using and updating the classification developed by Baker and Greene (2015) in which ideology goes from 1 (extreme left) to 20 (extreme right.) The authors classify the governing parties in the region in three categories: extreme left (1-4.9), moderate left (5-9.9), and right of center (10-20.) The findings are surprising, while poor people are more active in polities governed by a populist/radical-left party, better off individuals are also quite active, thus a gap remains related to wealth and political activities. The scenario for polities governed by left-center or right-center parties is the opposite, wealth is negatively correlated to levels of political participation.

Why is wealth and participation positively related in countries with a populist/radical-left government? The authors argue and show the effect of different factors to explain this finding. First, populist/radical-left parties tend to be more personalistic than mass-based. Second, in these countries the quality of democracy tends to diminish, which means a decrease in opportunities for citizens to organize and participate, an executive that has more unchecked power, as well as less competitive and regulated elections. In this scenario, the costs for the poor to participate increase, as the ability of community organizations to influence parties and the government decreases, political parties become weaker and have less incentives to mobilize the poor as elections are less competitive. In contrast, better off individuals have the resources to protest and vote in these regimes, which means that their participation is higher than that of the poor. It would be interesting to find out if there were any differences between moderate and extreme right parties, although the hypothesis was about left-wing parties. This research opens a new area to explore both the effects of ideology and party organization on citizens' political behavior.

This book is a must read for scholars of political behavior regardless of the region of interest. Even for researchers interested in developed democracies, this book debunks beliefs that used to be unquestioned, like the political apathy of the poor. The book shows that the poorest citizens can be more engaged in politics if the conditions are suitable. This book also warns about what can happen when popular, left-leaning politicians come into office and threaten democratic institutions

therefore potentially increasing the gap of political participation by wealth, as participation becomes more costly. The case of Mexico came into mind, as we can see many of the elements the authors find when populist/radical-left governments come into power. First, the new government came into office with a wide-spread support, as López Obrador received the most votes from each social class in comparison with his opponents (Aguilar, 2019). Second, we can see the weakening of political parties, weakening of democratic institutions, increase protests from better off citizens, etc. The framework of Voice and Inequality help us to understand what can happen and why it could happen in this case and others.

In sum, Carew Boulding and Claudio A. Holzner propose and evaluate a holistic theory of political participation focused on the poor, with the potential to apply it other segments of society. The authors carry out a meticulous and rigorous analysis to test their arguments, taking advantage of an ambitious public opinion project, the AmericasBarometer, to produce an outstanding piece of research. Voice and Inequality expands and challenges our knowledge of the relationship between the contextual and individual factors that explain the political participation of the poor while setting a high standard for research to come on the topic in the future.

REFERENCES

- Aguilar, R. (2019). Las coaliciones electorales de López Obrador a través del tiempo: Variaciones sociales y políticas. In A. Moreno, A. Uribe Coughlan, & S. C. Wals, *El viraje electoral: Opinión pública y voto en las elecciones de 2018* (pp. 57-74). CESOP.
- Auyero, J. (2001). *Poor people's politics*. Duke University Press.
- Baker, A., & Greene, K. F. (2015). Positional issue voting in Latin America. In R. E. Carlin, M. M. Singer, & E. J. Zechmeister (Eds.), *The Latin American Voter: Pursuing Representation and Accountability in Challenging Contexts* (Vol. 7, pp. 173-194).
- Boulding, C., & Holzner, C. A. (2021). *Voice and Inequality: Poverty and Political Participation in Latin American Democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Burns, N., Schlozman, K. L., & Verba, S. (2001). *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation*. Harvard University Press.
- Córdova, A. (2009). Methodological Note: Measuring Relative Wealth Using Household Asset Indicators. *AmericasBarometer Insights*, 6.
- Gay, R. (1998). Rethinking clientelism: Demands, discourses and practices in contemporary Brazil. *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe/European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 65, 7-24.
- Hilgers, T. (2012). *Clientelism in everyday Latin American politics*. Springer.
- Magaloni, B. (2006). *Voting for autocracy: Hegemonic party survival and its demise in Mexico* (Vol. 296). Cambridge University Press.
- Nichter, S. (2018). *Votes for survival: Relational clientelism in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.

- Saiegh, S. M. (2015). Using Joint Scaling Methods to Study Ideology and Representation: Evidence from Latin America. *Political Analysis*, 23(3), 363-384. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpv008>
- Stokes, S. C., Dunning, T., Nazareno, M., & Brusco, V. (2013). *Brokers, voters, and clientelism: The puzzle of distributive politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Szwarcberg, M. (2015). *Mobilizing poor voters: Machine politics, clientelism, and social networks in Argentina*. Cambridge University Press.
- Verba, S., Nie, N. H., & Kim, J.-O. (1978). *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven-Nation Study*. Cambridge University Press.
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.
- Zechmeister, E. (2006). What's Left and Who's Right? A Q-method Study of Individual and Contextual Influences on the Meaning of Ideological Labels. *Political Behavior*, 28, 151-173.