



AmericasBarometer Insights: 2008 (No.4)*

Citizen Participation in Municipal Meetings¹

By Daniel Montalvo
d.montalvo@vanderbilt.edu
Vanderbilt University

Former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Thomas Phillip “Tip” O’Neill, Jr. is well known for his aphorism that “All Politics is Local”; public opinion emerges from what citizens experience and see at their local levels of government, not in remote, national governments. This maxim is not surprising (especially in the U.S. context) since it is common for individuals to be more closely connected with their local authorities relative to their national governments. In turn, citizens tend to participate more actively in local meetings to solve their collective problems while participation in public institutions at the national level is usually far more limited.

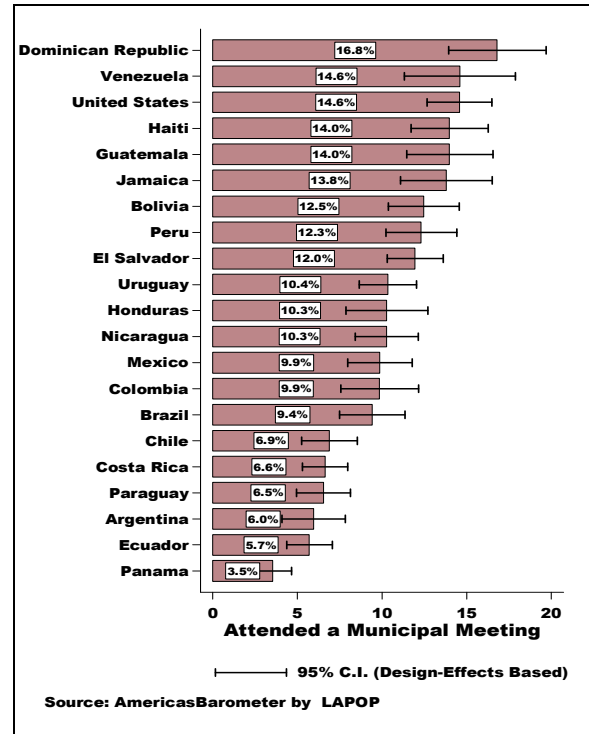
Citizen participation in municipal meetings has been widely advocated by many scholars as a means to strengthen democracy (see Almond and Verba 1963 ; Putnam 1993). Citizen

¹ Prior issues in the Insight series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/studiesandpublications>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/datasets>

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participation in municipal meetings remains, however, rather low especially in the Latin American context (see Seligson 1976, 2002, 2004). These low levels of citizen participation may be undermining the active civic engagement that a strong democracy requires from its citizens to endure (see Putnam 2000).

Figure 1. Average Participation in Municipal Meetings in the Americas, 2008²



What percentage of the population in the Americas participates in municipal meetings? What are the characteristics of these “publicly engaged” citizens? What are the implications of attending municipal meetings? This paper in the *AmericasBarometer Insight Series* attempts to answer these questions by querying the 2008 data base provided by the AmericasBarometer survey carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 22 nations in the Western hemisphere³. In this survey 34,469 respondents were asked the following question:

² The non-response rate for this question was 1.17 percent.
³ Funding for the 2008 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations

NP1. Have you attended a town meeting, city council meeting or other meeting convened by the mayor in the past 12 months?

Figure 1 shows national averages for 21 countries in the sample.⁴ It is striking to note, first, that on average, only 10.5 per cent of the total adult (voting age) population has attended a municipal meeting in the past 12 months in the Americas. Second, in this context of low participation, significant variation among countries is evident. Between 14.6 and 16.8 percent of the citizens of the Dominican Republic, Venezuela and the United States have participated; while at the other extreme, only between 3.5 and 6.0 percent of the citizens of Argentina, Ecuador and Panama have attended a municipal meeting during the 12 months prior to the survey.

Predicting Citizen Participation in Municipal Meetings

What explains variation in citizen participation in municipal meetings? Historical/contextual may be explaining some of the variation across countries, however, in this paper we concentrate on the variance that is explained by individual-level factors.⁵ We first consider socio-economic and demographic characteristics included in the AmericasBarometer survey: education, gender, age, wealth, and area size. To assess their influence on citizen participation in municipal meetings, we employ a binomial logit regression.⁶ Since citizens in the United States possess sharply higher levels of socio-economic characteristics, we exclude this country from the

analysis.⁷ In order to best determine the effects of education and area size, we divided the former into four cohorts (None, Primary, Secondary and Higher) and the latter into five sizes (Rural Areas, Small City, Medium City, Large City and Capital City).⁸ Results of the regression are displayed in figure 2.

Figure 2. Socio-economic and Demographic Determinants of Citizen Participation in Municipal Meetings in Latin America, 2008

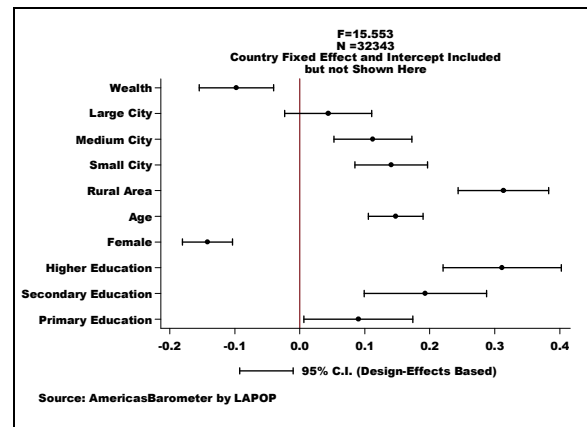


Figure 2 shows the effects of socio-economic and demographic characteristic on the levels of participation in municipal meeting attendance in Latin America. It can be observed that all five factors accounted for in Figure 2 are statistically relevant. Statistical significance is graphically represented by a confidence interval that does not overlap the vertical “0” line (at .05 or better). When the dot, which represents the predicted impact of that variable, falls to the right of the vertical “0” line it implies a positive relationship whereas if it falls to the left it indicates a negative contribution. In this model, the individual’s level of wealth (measured as capital goods ownership),⁹ the size of the city where the individual resides, the level of education, gender and age are statistically significant contributors. Holding constant all other of variables, poorer

Development Program (UNDP), the Center for the Americas (CFA), and Vanderbilt University.

⁴ The AmericasBarometer originally collected information in 22 countries. However, this question was not asked in Canada; therefore, the number of countries was reduced to 21.

⁵ We found no statistically significant relationship between a series of level-2 variables, such as per capita GDP, the Human Development Index, GINI coefficient, level of Democracy, etc. and citizen participation in municipal meetings.

⁶ All statistical analyses in this paper were conducted using STATA v10 and they are adjusted to consider the effects of the complex sample design.

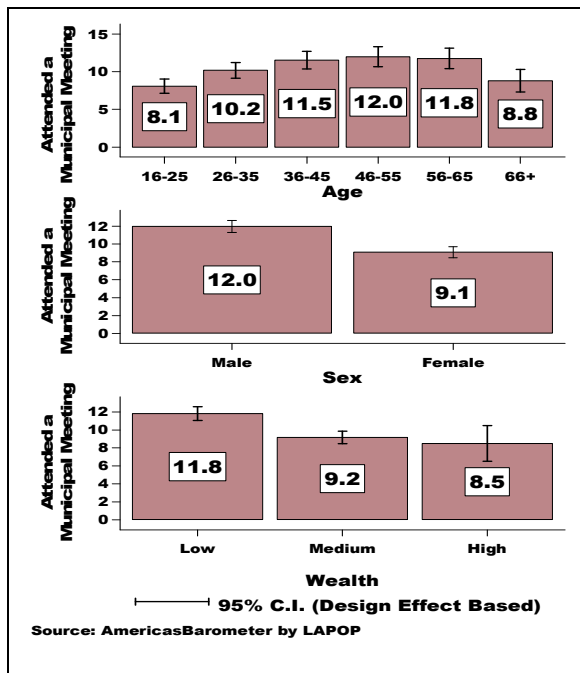
⁷ Given that levels of citizen participation in municipal meetings vary across countries, dummy variables for each country were also included in the model, using Uruguay as the base or reference country.

⁸ We use “None” as the base category for the “Education” cohorts, and “Capital City” for the “Area Size.”

⁹ For more information on how this index is constructed, please see Seligson (2006).

individuals in Latin America show a higher probability of attendance at municipal meetings. Additionally, people living in medium and small cities, as well as those living in rural areas have a higher probability of participating in municipal meetings than individuals residing in large cities or the nations' capitals. People with primary, secondary and higher education tend to have a higher probability to assist to a municipal meeting than those who have no education. Finally, we also see that, holding everything else constant, men are more likely to participate than women and so are older individuals. These results have important policy implications that will be analyzed in the final section of this paper. The relationship between age, sex and wealth on the one hand, and participation in municipal meetings on the other hand is shown in Figure 3, which shows average values for the sample.¹⁰

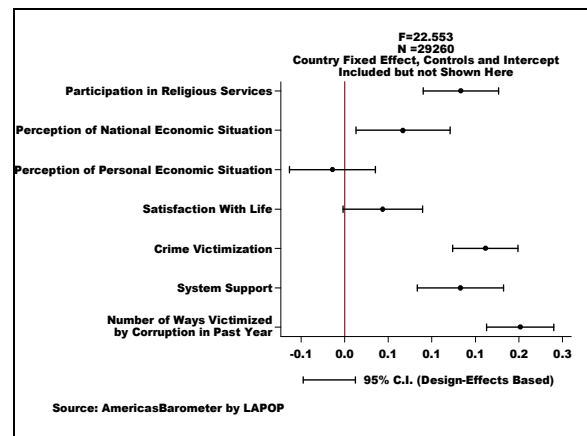
Figure 3.
Age, Education, Gender, Area Size, Wealth and Citizen Participation in Municipal Meetings in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



¹⁰ It is important to note that variables "Age" and "Wealth" are grouped into categories with the purpose of illustration. Both variables were inserted as continuous in the logit models.

The impact of socio-economic and demographic variables on the likelihood of municipal participation is statistically significant and substantively robust, as shown in both Figures 2 and 3. However, there are also several political tendencies and evaluations that drive individuals to participate in municipal reunions. In order to determine some of the political characteristics of the citizens who participate in local meetings, we added several variables to our analysis. Results from this new regression are depicted in Figure 4. It is worth noting that even though we included all the socio-economic and demographic control variables reported above, we display only the political evaluation variables in the Figure below (see the Appendix for the complete set of statistics).

Figure 4.
An Analysis of the Determinants of Average Citizen Participation in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2008



The results indicate that there are quite a few individual factors (in addition to socio-economic and demographic variables) that determine individual participation in municipal meetings. First, those individuals who have been victimized by corruption at least once in the last 12 months are more likely to participate in municipal meetings than those that have not been victimized.¹¹ Similarly, the probability of participating in municipal meetings increases when respondents have been victimized by

¹¹ The direction of this relationship could go the other way around as well. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct further research to try to determine the proper direction of causality.

crime in last the 12 months previous to the survey. These fundamental findings suggest that citizens may increase their participation in municipal meetings when they perceive that the government is failing to provide security and transparency. By exercising their right to voice, victimized citizens may be demanding better protection from their local government, but we would need to know more about the specific motivations of their participation to be able to support this claim. Additionally, our analysis shows that individuals who participate more often in religious services are also more likely to attend municipal meetings. This finding suggests that for these citizens, the solution to collective problems may be achieved through spiritual as well as political means, or that in the context of religious meetings in addition to formal government meetings they seek collective solutions to problems.

Second, the likelihood that citizens attend municipal meetings increases when they report a higher level of “system support,” that is, a higher belief in the legitimacy of the system of government¹². Concomitantly, as individuals’ positive perception of the national economic situation increases, the probability of attending a municipal meeting increases as well. Finally, some studies of the relationship between values and politics have pointed out that satisfaction with one’s own life is also important in explaining citizen’s engagement (Inglehart 2000). We found initial support for this theory, but as we added other theoretically important variables to the model, the effect of satisfaction with one’s own life on participation at the municipal level tended to fade away.

Policy Implications

¹² System Support Index is measured by the following questions (question numbers from original survey): B1. To what extent do you believe the courts in (country) guarantee a fair trial? B2 To what extent do you respect the political institutions in (country)? B3. To what degree do you believe that the citizen’s basic rights are safeguarded by the political system in (country)? B4. To what degree do you feel proud of living in the political system in (country)? B6. To what degree do you think the political system in (country) should be supported?

This report has shown that in the Latin American context, citizen participation in local governments is rather low. If Putnam (1993) is right, then these low levels of participation may be contributing to the endurance of “immature,” “incomplete,” or “illiberal” democracies in the region. As we have shown, those individuals that have been victimized by either corruption or crime in the past, report higher probabilities of participating in municipal meetings than those who have not been victimized. This crucial finding suggests that what may be encouraging individuals to participate in municipal meetings is their desire to change municipal policies in order to increase security and transparency. Additional analysis of this hypothesis will emerge when the *Insight* series study is released on the factors that determine demand-making on municipal government. The problem that decision-makers face is to determine how to prevent crime and corruption victimization and, at the same time, encourage citizens to exercise their right to voice their needs and complaints. Only by becoming responsive to citizens’ claims can municipal authorities improve the provision of services that can in turn help consolidate Latin American democracies.

Finally, studying particularly the socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals who are more likely to participate in municipal meetings, we found at least two strong, positive and substantive relationships that are policy-relevant. On the one hand, individuals living in rural areas are much more likely to participate in municipal meetings than people living in large cities or at the national capital. This finding suggests that governmental decentralization may have a more pronounced impact in rural municipalities relative to municipalities in larger cities. Taking into account that poorer individuals tend to live in rural areas,¹³ relative deprivation of private goods may foster participation in formal, local governmental institutions in order to gain access to public goods. On the other hand, higher levels of education increase the likelihood of participation in municipal meetings. Hence, it may be important for municipalities to carry-out

¹³ The correlation coefficient for “Wealth” and “Size of City” is .43.

programs to encourage civic participation by individuals with lower levels of education. Only by knowing the necessities of the lower-educated cohort can municipal governments improve the allocation of public goods and services among all of society.

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Appendix: Results from the logit model
 Dependent Variable: Attended a Municipal Meeting

Variables	Coefficients	(t)
Corruption Victimization	0.193*	(10.10)
System Support	0.157*	(6.54)
Crime Victimization	0.168*	(8.92)
Satisfaction With Life	0.061*	(2.59)
Perception of Personal Economic Situation	-0.027	(-1.08)
Perception of National Economic Situation	0.064*	(2.31)
Attendance to religious services	-0.121*	(-5.55)
Education	0.166*	(6.19)
Sex	-0.138*	(-6.30)
Age	0.177*	(7.86)
Size of City/Town	0.245*	(8.31)
Wealth Measured by Capital Goods Ownership	-0.181*	(-6.27)
Constant	-2.234*	(-81.77)
F	38.64	
N. of Cases	29260	

* p<0.05