

Apathy or anger? How crime affects individual vote intention in Latin America and Caribbean

 psa.ac.uk/psa/news/apathy-or-anger-how-crime-affects-individual-vote-intention-latin-america-and-caribbean

Sarah Berens and Mirko Dallendörfer

28 February 2019

Crime victimization, an event that comes with severe consequences for individuals and society alike, is a highly common experience in many regions of the World and particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Between 10.8 % of the society in Chile and 25.2% in Ecuador have been affected by crime victimization according to the 2013 development report of the United Nations Development Programme. Widespread crime not only has effects on democratic institutions since criminal acts by definition undermine the law but also affects citizens directly through the consequences of victimization. The pervasiveness of the crime problem in the region has the potential to impact on democratic quality by suppressing electoral participation, showing the necessity to study the effects of individual criminal victimization on political behavior.

Previous research has documented negative effects of victimization on democratic attitudes of citizens as well as the potential for distress and trauma that crime victimization entails. On the other hand, research on war victims as well as research on non-electoral political participation of crime victims revealed that victims actually become politically more engaged. Against this background, in our recently published study, we ask how crime victimization affects the most basic and common act of democratic participation: the act of voting. The competing directions of previously found effects show the need to further disaggregate the phenomenon of crime experience. Not all crime-victimization is alike. War violence is a collective experience and specifically witnessing of violence appears to have a positive effect on electoral participation. In contrast, findings from psychology found that victims, and victims of violence in particular, severely suffer from these distressing and traumatic events which can lead to withdrawal from social bonds and reduce the belief that own actions are meaningful.

Crime is often a very salient policy issue in many presidential elections in the region so that it is likely that expressing one's anger by punishing those responsible for the continuously high level of crime drives victims of non-violent crime out to vote.

Building a cognitive foundation of political activism based on the literature of voter turnout, we argue that different types of crime experience lead to different emotional and behavioral responses and that it is the level of distress that the experience entailed which should make a difference. Being the victim of theft and having one's wallet stolen while standing in a crowded place is not the same as having a knife at one's throat in a

lonely street. Becoming the victim of violent crime, such as armed robbery, assault or kidnapping can be severely traumatizing. We thus argue that becoming the victim of violent crime should lead to apathy and withdrawal, and therefore, victims of violent crime should be less likely to go to the ballot on election day. In contrast, non-violent crime experience such as theft or burglary is directed toward property and unlikely traumatizing. Thus, victims of non-violent crime should become angry about the breach of the rule of law, feeling opposition and outrage to this act of defection. Accordingly, we hypothesize that victims of non-violent crime are more likely to participate electorally in result of their anger.

We test our argument empirically by examining the vote intention of victims of violent and non-violent crime compared to non-victims with the use of the standardized public opinion survey (Latin American Public Opinion Project, LAPOP) for 24 Latin American countries and the Caribbean from the years 2010, 2012 and 2014. The results from the survey data show that victims in general and victims of non-violent crime, in particular, are significantly more likely to vote than non-victims. The observed effect is not large, but with an average marginal effect of 1.5% is not negligible in a region where turnout is already high due to compulsory voting. In contrast, victims of violent crime do not significantly differ in their vote intention from non-victims. We subsequently approach the mechanism that links the experience of non-violent crime with increased turnout. We test how far the victim of non-violent crime is motivated to vote to hold the incumbent accountable for security policy failure, thereby visualizing anger and outrage., We examine incumbent support for right-wing, center and left-wing and incumbents. While LAPOP does not include appropriate questions to measure emotions, punishing the incumbent can be seen as a way of expressing anger through the ballot box. Crime is often a very salient policy issue in many presidential elections in the region so that it is likely that expressing one's anger by punishing those responsible for the continuously high level of crime drives victims of non-violent crime out to vote. It is particularly plausible that right-wing incumbents should be held accountable since they own the security issue, however, we empirically find that victims of non-violent crime punish incumbents in countries with a center executive. This might indicate the demand for a hard-on-crime candidate who takes a harsher position on the crime issue than the center. While due to data restrictions we cannot disentangle for which opposition candidate crime victims vote, the electoral participation and vote choice of crime victims presents a fruitful avenue for future research.

Overall, our findings are rather encouraging: Victims of non-violent crime are more likely to vote supporting the view that these victims are motivated to participate electorally due to their experience. Victims of violent crime do not respond with significantly altered voting behavior. Even when experiencing a massive intrusion to physical integrity, voters do not fully withdraw themselves from the political arena. A negative effect of crime experience on electoral participation would endanger democratic quality in the long run and present an easy gateway to undermine the state from within. But despite the "epidemic of violence" in the region, voters seemingly hold on to democratic means.

However, the non-violent crime victim's mobilization might be driven by greater taste for hard-on-crime candidates, which needs further scrutiny. Based on this, particularly interesting questions arise for future research. Which types of candidates are victims of crime supporting with their vote? How do individual circumstances such as the reactions of local authorities (e. g. the police) interact with the effect? Such questions are of particular importance in a context where the majority of criminal incidents go unreported to authorities.

Sarah Berens is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics at the University of Cologne. In her research, she focuses on the micro-foundation of labor informality, social policy, taxation and the behavioral impacts of crime experience in low- and middle-income countries. Her work has been published in *Socio-Economic Review*, *Political Behavior*, *The Journal of Politics in Latin America*, and *Social Policy & Administration*. **Mirko Dallendörfer** is a graduate student at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics at the University of Cologne, working on crime and political behavior in Latin America, regional elections in Germany and voting behavior in ethnically divided societies in Europe. He is interested in public opinion dynamics, survey research and political psychology.