

Critical Dialogue

Voice and Inequality: Poverty and Political Participation in Latin American Democracies.

By Carew Boulding and Claudio A. Holzner. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 264p.

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At the heart of democracy is the principle of political equality. All citizens, regardless of race, gender, or social class, are supposed to have not only equal voting rights —“one person, one vote”—but also the same right to influence government through speech, protest, and organized groups. Conventional wisdom, however, has it that this principle is more often honored in the breach than in the observance, with lower levels of electoral participation by the poor in countries like the United States being only the most obvious manifestation of political inequality.

But is this pessimism justified? In their illuminating study of political participation by poor people in Latin America, Carew Boulding and Claudio A. Holzner argue that the answer is “no.” Drawing on survey data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project’s (LAPOP) AmericasBarometer for 18 countries between 2006 and 2014, they find that the poor participate actively in politics. Although there is considerable variation across countries and types of political participation, they conclude that “conventional patterns of political participation in which the affluent participate more than poor people are the exception rather than the rule in Latin America” (p. 69). Indeed, “the overall pattern for Latin America is clear: to the extent that a participation gap exists between the rich and poor people, it is poor people who are most active in politics” (p. 70).

To arrive at this surprising conclusion, the authors make two important decisions, which they explain in detail in chapter 3. First, they focus on relative rather than absolute poverty, which they define in terms of wealth rather than income. On this basis they divide the population up into quintiles to create a dichotomous variable: the bottom quintile is coded as “poor,” and the rest are coded as “not poor.” Second, they use a broad measure of political participation based on three activities: voting, protesting, and contacting local government officials.

They find that the poor vote and protest at lower rates than the nonpoor, but they contact local officials more. Much of the book’s argument hangs on this latter fact, with the authors asserting that “although participation gaps in protest and turnout persist, contacting activity acts as an important political equalizer” (p. 65).

What drives the poor in Latin America to participate in politics, and why do they participate more in some places than others? Boulding and Holzner argue that three factors are especially important: civil society, political parties, and the quality of democracy. They lay out this theoretical framework in chapter 2, discussing each factor in detail in chapters 4, 5, and 7. Grassroots organizations facilitate participation by providing the poor with information and other resources. Mass-based parties operating in a competitive party system have both the capacity and the incentive to mobilize the poor. The quality of democracy, which the book defines expansively as “how well the formal democratic institutions are working and how well rights are protected” (p. 40), also has an impact, albeit indirect: where associational rights are violated and electoral competition is limited, civil society and political parties are less likely to mobilize the poor.

There is much to admire about this book. One strength is its focus on poor people rather than functional groups. There is a long tradition of studying how groups such as industrial workers and peasants in Latin America are incorporated into politics, with Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier’s *Shaping the Political Arena* (1991) being perhaps the most celebrated example. These categories, however, often overlap with normatively charged concepts like “the working class” in ways that are not always helpful and that can also impede cross-national comparisons; for example, a factory worker in Bangladesh and a factory worker in Germany have little in common. An alternative formulation with a long pedigree in the study of Latin American politics—the “popular sectors”—has an even bigger shortcoming: it is vague to the point of meaninglessness. There is something refreshing about Boulding and Holzner’s clear-eyed and unromantic focus on the simple fact of whether people are poor or not.

Another strength is the book’s multidimensional understanding of political participation. Although voting is the most obvious form—and the easiest to measure—it is far from the only way that citizens can influence government

in a democracy. To get a fuller picture of political participation, Boulding and Holzner make good use of data from LAPOP's AmericasBarometer, which asks questions about a range of different activities. Yet although this made it possible to measure nonelectoral forms of participation, the book arguably relies a bit too heavily on survey data. (The way the book assembles this data into its Political Participation Index also raises questions, as discussed later.) The inclusion of case studies would have been useful for bringing the material to life and teasing out causal mechanisms. As a book titled *Voice and Inequality* and concerned with the diverse forms that political action can take, it also should have at least mentioned Albert O. Hirschman's classic, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970).

In addition to shedding light on how the poor participate in politics, the book has implications for several other literatures. One is the literature on clientelism. Although it has long been assumed that the granting of particularistic goods or favors in exchange for political support is harmful, recent works have offered a more nuanced perspective. The authors share this revisionist take, arguing that clientelism "can be an important source of political voice for poor people" and "may, under some conditions, be a positive force for democracy" (pp. 17–18). The book also makes an important contribution to our understanding of the "left turn" in Latin America, the topic of chapter 6. Boulding and Holzner show that the election of radical leftists led to lower rates of participation by the poor relative to the nonpoor than the election of moderate leftists, a result that they attribute in large part to radical leftists' tendency to undermine civil liberties and electoral competition.

Despite the book's many strengths, it also has some shortcomings. The biggest one, in my view, is how the authors assemble their Political Participation Index. This is at the heart of the book's main finding—that the poor in Latin America participate in politics at roughly the same rate as the nonpoor—and so it is not a minor issue. As they explain on pp. 53–54, this index is constructed from an additive scale that looks at three types of participation: voting, protesting, and contacting local government officials. Yet even though one might expect that this would result in a scale of 0–3, with each type of participation corresponding to one point, in fact the book uses a scale of 0–4. This is because contacting government officials is separated into two components—"Contact local government" and "Petition local government"—with each given a point of its own. In other words, 50% of the Political Participation Index seems to be based on just one type of political participation, with the other two assigned only 25% each.

I was persuaded by the authors' argument that contacting government officials constitutes an important—and often overlooked—form of political participation. It was not clear to me, however, why this form of participation should be given twice the weight of voting or protesting.

One possible reason is that contacting and petitioning government officials are very different activities. The questions from the LAPOP survey that the book uses for its two measures of contacting government officials, however, do not correspond to very different activities. Here is the first question: "In order to solve your problems have you ever requested help or cooperation from a local public official or local government: for example, a mayor, municipal council, councilman, provincial official, civil governor or governor?" (p. 54). Here is the second question: "Have you sought assistance from or presented a request to any office, official or councilperson of the municipality within the past 12 months?" (p. 54). The authors acknowledge in appendix 1 and in an endnote on p. 217 that the two questions are similar and claim that they collapse the two into a single dichotomous variable. However, they do not actually seem to do this in their Political Participation Index. At best, this was confusing. At worst, it left me wondering whether the book's main finding would still hold if this form of political participation were given the same weight as voting or protesting, since it is the only one of the three in which the poor participate more than the nonpoor.

Nevertheless, this book is a welcome addition to the comparative politics literature. It addresses an important and understudied topic, is well written, presents a wealth of survey data, and makes a number of conceptual and theoretical contributions. It will no doubt serve as a touchstone for future research on the relationship between poverty and political participation, both in Latin America and beyond.

Response to James Loxton's Review of *Voice and Inequality: Poverty and Political Participation in Latin American Democracies*

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— Carew Boulding 

— Claudio A. Holzner

Our book and that by James Loxton approach important questions in Latin American politics with very different research strategies. We are glad that Loxton saw the value of our work and how it might reshape scholars' understanding of who participates in politics and how. We also appreciate this conversation that highlights the contributions of quantitative and qualitative research.

Loxton's main critique focuses on how measurement choices related to our Political Participation Index might undermine the book's main finding—that poor people are overall more politically active in Latin America than the nonpoor. Luckily, this is an easy matter to resolve empirically. During our analysis, we estimated models using a version of the index that gives contacting the same weight as voting and protesting, and we can report that the substantive findings are very similar to the ones in the