

Political Participation in New and Old Democracies

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This essay deals with the globalization of democracy, a process that provokes a comparison of the so-called “new” democracies with the established ones. The issue of voter turnout is discussed, followed by a report of selected empirical findings on political participation worldwide using the aggregate data approach. The essay critically evaluates the interpretation of comparative voter turnout data, emphasizing that the central issue is not national or regional differences in voter turnout ratios but the political significance of elections and citizens’ political participation in various countries. In this regard, issues such as country-specific social structures and political cultures are addressed, based on the premise that old and new democracies do indeed differ significantly in their understanding of elections and political participation. Even taking into account factors such as institutional arrangements that reduce the effects of macro-historical differences between old and new democracies, problems inherent to new democracies remain utterly important and affect their

consolidation. Finally, the essay concludes that the agenda for democracy at the turn of the twenty-first century can be characterized by two options: the diffusion of democracy into the remaining non-democratic corners of the world or the deepening of democracy resulting in consolidation. If so, consolidation, defined as taking steps to increase the significance of political participation by minimizing the importance of factors that undermine its significance, must be at the top of the agenda of the global democratic movement.

GLOBALIZATION OF DEMOCRACY

Since the mid-1970s, we have experienced a process of globalization of democracy. It began in Southern Europe in the 1970s, extended to Latin America in the 1980s, and culminated in the 1990s with the first democratic elections for national representative institutions taking place in 44 countries in Africa (22), Eastern Europe (19) and Asia (3). While the new democracies were spared authoritarian involutions in the 1970s and 1980s, military episodes against the democratic process were registered in 13 countries during the 1990s. As a result of independence and democratization the proportion of democratic countries compared to non-democratic countries rose from 27 percent in 1974 to 62 percent in 2000 (Linz, 2000; Freedom House, 2000).

This increase is important for the interpretation of political participation in the old and new democracies. First, as a result of the globalization of democracy, the heterogeneity of countries and regions that belong to the overall category of democratic countries

has increased. Second, while the group of old democracies has remained almost entirely identical with the Western industrialized world (except for Costa Rica, India, Mauritius and Venezuela), the group of new democracies includes Southern European nations, Latin American countries, East European nations, and some African and Asian countries. In other words, the composition of the group of new democracies has undergone substantial change. Third, the categorization as "old" or "new" democracy itself is subject to change. Since it is assumed that after 20 years of practice democratic institutions can be considered consolidated - and consolidated is synonymous with old - countries can switch from one category to the other. In the literature, cases of new democracies in Europe in the 1970s - Greece, Portugal, and Spain - are now considered consolidated and are therefore included in the category of old democracies.

International IDEA has always understood voter turnout to be just one dimension of political participation. It has emphasized that no linear relationship exists between voter turnout and democratic development. It is true that turnout is simply one indicator of political participation - which is indeed a very complex term - and not always the most suitable one. Election specialists have long considered turnout percentages to be a reliable measurement not only for electoral participation but also for comparisons across countries and regions. Other dimensions of political participation are less amenable to quantification, therefore presenting substantial difficulties for cross-national or regional comparisons. Whether voter turnout in countries or regions is high or low, whether

there are changes in one direction or another, whether these differ by country or by region or by old and new democracies is interesting data per se, but it does not reveal much about the state of democracy in the countries that are being compared. In other words, one can hardly extrapolate from higher or lower electoral participation to other characteristics of these democracies. In synchronic comparisons of countries, the limitations are immediately evident when consolidated democracies with relatively low voter turnout are compared to new democracies with relatively high voter turnout. Historical data of voter turnout for one country or region over time is a more meaningful basis for drawing conclusions or comparisons.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DATA AND ITS INTERPRETATION

Aggregate data analysis of electoral participation elucidates differences among countries and regions over a period of time. The correlation of specific characteristics of democracies with their participation rates can yield further comparisons depending on whether the selected phenomena correlate positively or negatively. Using this method, various factors that have an impact on voter participation figures can be identified. However, a number of questions remain which for various reasons, particularly the difficulty of translating the concepts operationally as well as their measurability, cannot be evaluated statistically.

Because the survey data approach is not very helpful in explaining voter turnout, current research strategy uses qualitative analysis to identify other factors, particularly contingent factors, which might explain variation

in voter turnout. In the following analysis, the central theme will not be the differences between ratios of voter turnout, but rather between data and context. This approach rests on the premise that the voter turnout in a particular country or region is almost identical with any other country or region compared. The question is no longer what the difference in data explains, but what hides behind the data regardless of whether it differs by country or region. The basic premise is that voter turnout figures across nations conceal extremely diverse historical contexts, even if their numbers are equal. The difference dealt with is not voter turnout itself, but the conditions under which it was attained. For this differentiation among voter contexts, which can be applied to every single case, the classification of old and new democracies is critical.

DIFFERENCES OF CONTEXT

The distinction between old and new democracies represents fundamentally different social conditions which have a profound impact not only on the development of a democracy, but also on the meaning of elections and electoral participation. Generally speaking, four variables make a difference in voter participation and can explain the various meanings of voter turnout.

- Levels of social equality. High levels of social inequality in a society usually result in a greater bias against the political participation of socially deprived groups, regardless of voter turnout. Furthermore, when the level of poverty and social injustice is high, elections are not seen as an act of political empowerment by the majority of

voters, but rather as an opportunity to trade votes for material profit or favour. Thus, depending on the degree of social inequality, high electoral participation can be coupled with entirely different expectations of politics.

- Governmental or societal focus of the political culture. While this variable primarily applies to the rate of voter turnout - recall the societal focus on political culture in the United States (so poignantly described by Alexis de Tocqueville) and the extremely low voter turnout there - it at the same time relieves a democracy of the necessity of high voter turnout. Societal participation can compensate for low political participation during elections to a great extent. When voter turnout figures are equal the question of coinciding governmental or societal focus of the political culture is an essential factor in interpretation.
- The centrality of a representative system of government in relation to other decision-making arenas, whether judiciary (formal), administrative or societal (informal). Whether a society has other means of enforcing its interests against veto powers than through traditional (violent) political conflict or via representational systems which lack democratically represented political power is a significant factor in interpreting voter turnout.
- Confidence in the political institutions. It makes a big difference whether constitutionally guaranteed political participation is based on trust and on a high level of political accountability, or whether distrust and low levels of vertical and horizontal accountability exist. Not only is the meaning of voter turnout strongly influenced by

this factor, but so is the quality and legitimacy of democracy as a whole.

Certainly, these criteria alone do not allow for a distinctive classification of democracies as old or new. Nevertheless, a detailed look at the new democracies alone shows, despite some exceptions, the following common patterns:

- a comparatively high degree of social inequality;
- a distinct focus of the political culture on the government, although with considerable inconsistencies (resulting from an uneven modernization process) and social disparities (as in the post-socialist countries);
- lack of democratic governability and rule of law; and
- a comparatively strong distrust of political institutions and low accountability.

The validity and importance of each characteristic for the meaning of political participation (aside from voter turnout only) vary. Having discussed contextual differences between old and new democracies and similarities within the group of new democracies, let us now turn to the similarities across categories and to institutional factors.

Institutions and Voter Turnout

Regardless of whether a democracy is old or new, intervening factors tend to strengthen or weaken the importance of each pattern, partly by compensation. Such intervening factors are often results of the country-specific political culture or of the institutional design. An important factor is the presence of other forms of participation such as direct democracy, that is, referenda or political participation on various levels of political repre-

resentation (local, regional, supra-national) that allow for multiple arenas for political participation, or intra-party elections (e.g., primaries). The more channels of political participation are available to voters the less important the central avenue of participation might be. In countries with elements of grass-roots democracy, voter participation in national elections is often valued far less. It is important to note that in new democracies forms of participation based on common cultural traditions, such as institutionalized political discussions in bars and cafés, are present, which deviate from the Western understanding of political participation.

Additionally, the following institutional factors previously identified as criteria for the evaluation of electoral systems are important:

- Parliamentary representation that mirrors the party preferences of the voters can very well increase turnout.
- The concentration process in the sense of reducing the number of parties in parliament as well as a majority-building system can have the opposite effect; this is often indicated by low electoral participation in the strongholds of parties where electoral campaigns are not fought with the same intensity as in marginal constituencies.
- The chance to select not only among preferred political parties but also among preferred candidates in an election can draw voters to the ballot box.

However, if all of the previously mentioned functions are built into the institutional engineering of an electoral system, the simplicity of the election system can suffer substantially and voters may be discouraged

from voting by the complexity of the electoral process. No one wants to admit that they have difficulty understanding the ballot sheet.

- The legitimacy of the electoral system as a whole: doubts that the electoral system is “fair” and fear that one’s political preference cannot be channelled in a subjectively satisfying way can decrease voter turnout.

Old and new democracies cannot avoid choosing an election system. Their similarities reflect similar institutional rules and regulations. Since electoral systems affect political parties in various ways depending on their context, they also affect the competition between parties, by means of fragmentation, polarization and patterns of interaction among parties, which in turn affects voter turnout. Differences and similarities are closely related.

FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

Now we turn to the difference that draws the most attention. Old democracies experience fewer problems with the electoral system, fewer irregularities in election procedures and fewer doubts regarding the election results. I would like to emphasize that this difference is relative. It is not true that old democracies have no problems with irregularities or electoral results. The United States presidential election of 7 November 2000, especially the dubious events in the state of Florida, have recently highlighted this assessment. Although there is surely a higher degree of acceptance of the democratic system and its rules and regulations in old democracies, nevertheless, the relative

difference reflects varying degrees of trust in the political institutions and players. Mistrust of one's fellow citizens is more deeply ingrained in Latin America than in Europe, so that the deeply ingrained distrust of political institutions in Latin America is not surprising. Greater distrust leads to more elaborate institutional requirements to guarantee political participation through elections. To mention just one example, in most old democracies electoral administration is performed by a branch of the executive power, while in new democracies public distrust in the incumbent state authority has led to the establishment of independent electoral commissions. It is unimaginable what problems might arise in most of the young democracies if elections were organized by institutions similar to those responsible for elections in the old democracies. But even if elaborate election systems try to secure free and fair elections in the new democracies, it is not certain that they achieve their goals, even if international advisers and experts supervise the election process; it is also not certain that the voters would be convinced that their elections were free and fair. In Latin America, in spite of the fact that the organization of election procedures in the new democracies has been essentially improved, quite independent of voter turnout, more than half of the voters still claim that their elections are manipulated and election results are forged. This certainly does not mean that all election results are not trustworthy, but rather that voters misunderstand the meaning of elections and communicate to their parties that the candidates have fulfilled election promises, that

voters did not receive anything in return for their votes, or that "fraud" is taking place.

OLD DEMOCRACIES AS MODELS FOR NEW DEMOCRACIES?

The preceding reflections indicate that simply imposing models of government adopted from old democracies cannot solve the problems of political empowerment in new democracies. Many attempts at political advising have failed because the suggested measures were based on the experiences of the old democracies and because the recommendations were too general. The institutional design must take into account that:

- there is no best system;
- there is no general institutional solution; and
- there is no way to impose a design-solution.

Furthermore, in order to improve political participation, constitutional design in new democracies must be fundamentally concerned with the specifics. It begins with the problems and issues of the specific social, cultural and political conditions of these countries that form the group of new democracies.

DEMOCRACY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the future of democracy must be seen in the context of a twofold process: first, a process of expansion of democracy in terms of an increase in the number of democracies in the world; and, second, a process of consolidation of democracy in the new democra-

cies. The great wave of democratization in the first sense is almost complete. The expansion of democracy will continue, though not as explosively as in the recent past. New democracies will arise, while others will break down. In regions of the world that would profit from democratic forms of government, such as Africa and Asia, almost equally frequent relapses into dictatorial regimes will affect the trend. Thus it seems likely that deepening of democracy in the new democracies will be at the top of the agenda in the decades to come. Although this process may be less spectacular, it is actually more important for the future of democracy in the world. Strengthening of democracy, i.e., qualitatively higher degrees of participation combined with institutional reforms to improve its political efficiency, is the essential precondition to consolidate the new democracies. Age alone will not turn new democracies into old democracies. The new democracies must prove themselves able to solve the economic and social problems in their countries, particularly that of extreme poverty and extreme social inequality. To the extent that they achieve this, they will be able to overcome the other funda-

mental discrepancies that separate new democracies from old democracies, such as political participation as social participation, a system of representation and a justice system, and greater trust in political institutions. The understanding of the meaning of elections and of voter turnout will improve.

Both dimensions of the development of democracy require the commitment of all members of a society, particularly the intellectuals who would rather deal with the democracy of the future than with the future of democracy. The international community must continue its unflagging support for democracy worldwide: development and peace depend on it. Democracies maintain peace internally and abroad, and they uphold individual rights of freedom as well as human rights. Despite traditional development theories that claim modernization can best be achieved by authoritarian regimes, democracies too are efficient in achieving these goals. Indeed, citizen participation in the development process has proven indispensable for long-lasting sustainability. Democracy, peace and development - these goals all contribute to a vision of a better world.

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