The Social Origins of Electoral Participation in Emerging Democracies

1 The Stakes of Electoral Participation in Emerging Democracies

In many developing countries, unelected and unresponsive governments have often failed to provide the goods and services their citizens need to survive, let alone to thrive. People have turned to their communities – extended family and neighbors – to meet needs, from gathering funds to buy a child’s school uniform to hitching a ride to a rural health clinic. Such informal ways of working together make survival less precarious for much of the global poor.

In recent decades, democracy’s spread across developing regions has offered new pathways for people to improve their livelihoods. Democratic regimes formally allow citizens to demand public services beyond what they and their communities can provide for themselves, and to hold leaders accountable for the provision of those services. But to actualize democracy’s potential and secure rewards from elected representatives, these communities – accustomed to self-reliance – must now mobilize their members to participate in elections.

Therein lies a dilemma: while residents individually and collectively benefit from living in a community with robust voter turnout, electoral participation takes time and effort, and those costs are borne individually. Any one person has incentives to free-ride on others’ participation, even at the expense of the group’s welfare. How citizens and communities overcome this predicament – central to democratic participation and consolidation – forms the focus of this Element.

Reconciling the costs and rewards from voting is far from straightforward, however. Motivations for and observed rates of turnout have long perplexed scholars. The time, energy, and opportunity costs associated with any single person voting are sufficiently large relative to the probability that their ballot proves decisive that a pure cost-benefit analysis would prompt few to turn out (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). In transitioning democracies particularly, inchoate institutions, burdensome administrative procedures, challenges due to the electorate’s sociodemographic profile, intimidation, and violence could all reasonably impose significant hurdles that deter participation.

Nevertheless, across democracies with different institutions and histories, citizens routinely show up on election day and often by wide margins compared to those who stay home. In fact, evidence shows that electoral participation is especially vigorous in new democracies, persists over time (Kostelka 2017; Kuenzi and Lambright 2007), and is often equivalent to or higher than in wealthier and more established democracies (Kasara and Suryanarayan 2015), where voting is easier. Figure 1 displays global turnout averages across legislative elections and demonstrates the vibrancy of participation in recent democratizers in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Moreover, within
developing countries, research shows that groups of voters that might otherwise find it hard to organize, like the poor (Boulding and Holzner 2021) or rural inhabitants (Kuenzi and Lambright 2011), often participate at higher rates than those for whom voting is less demanding. What factors influence individuals’ decision-making to overcome participation barriers, and how might their communities shape that decision?

1.1 Psychic and Material Explanations: Some Puzzles

While voting requires effort, resolving the puzzle of turnout would nonetheless seem straightforward: by showing that positive inducements eclipse any constraints, costs, and disincentives. Indeed, a rich scholarship from new democracies documents many such possibilities, focusing on a mix of psychic (intrinsic) and material (extrinsic) rewards. Psychically, individuals might experience joy by participating from an innate duty to democracy because of its newness (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2005); likewise, they might experience intrinsic desire to vote to express their social identity (Dickson and Scheve 2006), an especially salient consideration in ethnically diverse countries with histories of sectarian conflict (Horowitz 1985). Materially, voters perhaps receive (or expect to receive) extrinsic incentives, such as gifts or cash, delivered by political agents in exchange for support (Kitschelt and Wilkerson 2007). Such vote-buying may prove especially effective in developing countries because much of the electorate remains poor; parties are believed to promise personalized benefits via patronage at the expense of broad programmatic policies (Chandra 2004).

These insights appropriately stress various positive influences on any potential voter. But under closer scrutiny, they fall short in fully explaining the
impressive turnout observed across developing countries, and variation across voters within those countries. The logics underpinning these studies often point to radically different participation scenarios but lack clarity as to why.

Consider psychic benefits. That voters turn out to uphold democratic principles must be weighed against the possibility that citizens transitioning from dictatorship may not yet have significant knowledge of, or reasonable cause to signal support for, democracy. Expressions of duty also indicate levels of turnout will be highest in founding elections and then level-off as they become routine. Evidence supports this claim in older democracies (Franklin 2004) but does not appear to hold for newer ones (Kostelka 2017). The novelty of democracy could suggest either positive or negative turnout scenarios, depending on whether and in what ways duty affects the electorate. Psychic potential for expressive identity-based voting is similarly nettlesome. Although many developing countries are diverse and voters with strong social attachments are often the easiest to mobilize, citizens’ reported feelings of in-group affinity are low. Only 16 percent of Afrobarometer respondents across more than a dozen countries expressed closeness to their ethnic group (Robinson 2014).

Or take material benefits. While vote-buying may counterbalance participation costs, the scale of payments candidates would need to make are likely unreasonably high to be feasible in poor countries, where weak parties, unconsolidated party systems, and a plethora of often disorganized coalitions mean that aspirants often do not have resources for extensive quid pro quo exchanges. In total, 82 percent of Round 5 Afrobarometer respondents said they had “never” received a gift from a candidate or party in the last election. Parties that succeed at evolving into hegemonic machines that dominate the electoral landscape (e.g., Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party and India’s Congress Party) would appear to buck this trend by establishing expansive networks of village elites and party operatives who garner turnout through localized appeals to material incentives. But even where formal party structures attempt vote-buying by co-opting elites and leveraging informal networks, efforts are still highly targeted and do not often trickle down to the grassroots level (Stokes et al. 2013). Participation at the scale needed to win an election indicates recruitment and material drivers above and beyond what most candidates and parties, even machines, typically manage. Furthermore, contingent strategies based on material promises require politicians or their agents to monitor not merely whether a person voted but also how. Despite politicians’ attempts to influence the process in other nefarious ways, survey evidence from Africa (Ferree and Long 2016) and Latin America (Nichter 2018) shows voters typically perceive their individual ballots to be secret.
In environments with unusually contentious elections, citizens confront an additional set of psychic and material considerations related to intimidation or realized election violence. Threats and attacks can arise from the actions of the government, opposition parties, and even insurgents. While violence should intuitively deter turnout, evidence shows prior exposure to it can increase political engagement and participation (Bauer et al. 2016), galvanizing disaffected citizens into meaningful action, like voting.

As a citizen weighs these costs and benefits, how do they decide whether to participate? Depending on how they calculate rewards, predictions on whether and why people vote point to different projections, and extant measures of psychic and material motives appear limited in explaining turnout likelihood. If those incentives do not tell the whole story, what does?

1.2 Social Sanctioning

We hope to resolve some of these puzzles by focusing on the social origins of electoral participation in emerging democracies. Most citizens do not make personal decisions about behavior in public life absent their social context, particularly when they lean on their communities for survival. We argue that social sanctioning, a combination of community-based pressure to vote and mechanisms to monitor turnout, alters the calculus of individual participation in ways not previously captured.

While voting is an individual action strictly speaking, we relate participation to the social problem of collective action. Voting represents a person’s investment in both individual and collective goods (Popkin et al. 1976). People make this investment by showing up and casting ballots on election day, delegating to politicians the provision of those goods; once in office, leaders reward communities that supported them. Communities therefore signal enthusiasm via high turnout to make it more likely they obtain the collective benefits flowing from elected representatives – public services, club goods, and clientelism – compared to communities that participate at low rates. But locally targeted services help all in a community such that any resident has incentives to free-ride on others’ participation. Because casting a ballot carries important implications for the citizen and their community, turnout is a cooperative dilemma that communities must overcome to support their collective interests.

If robust turnout indicates successful collective action, how have communities in transitioning democracies navigated coordinating behavior in new political waters? Answering requires examining whether and why individuals either free-ride (by staying home) or gain net positive benefits by turning out (participating) through “selective incentives” (Olson 1965). To identify the sources of
these incentives, scholars have typically looked to how formal, institutionalized aspects of electoral competition map onto psychic and material rewards – for example, parties that mobilize voters with ethnic appeals or promises of bribes. But we suggest the introduction of competitive elections need not always rely exclusively on actions formally linking politicians and voters, especially where candidates are resource constrained, nor do they replace completely the many informal institutions and mechanisms that shape citizens’ behavior. Instead, we propose to broaden the scope of selective incentives grounded in the practicalities of communal life by focusing on avoidance of negative punishments, which we term “social sanctioning,” perceived by potential voters if they fail to engage in the community collective action of casting a ballot. Unpacking the social origins of selective incentives to prevent free-riding may resolve some perplexing aspects of participation.

Our conceptualization of social sanctioning has two broad components. First, communities in poor countries that regularly depend on self-sufficiency and mutual support have reasons to exert strong participatory expectations. While parties vary in their embeddedness in the political fabric, social networks and informal governance structures are often strong. As we demonstrate, there are many mechanisms that may reward and punish community members who conform (or not) to socially acceptable behavior that involves the community’s welfare. Such norm enforcement follows actions of a variety of actors and institutions often overlooked in the study of campaigns and elections: household members, kinship groups, mutual aid organizations, and traditional, religious, or other thought leaders who often play a role legitimizing formal state institutions. The actions they adopt to compel norms of participation may work not only via positive inducements like vote-buying, but also by sanctioning through communal pressure – everything from a proverbial finger wag to denial of service at a local business or exclusion from government-provided resources.

Second, the electoral environment in emerging democracies facilitates these social dynamics of participation, if inadvertently. Administrative procedures aid communities in enforcing expectations to vote by providing opportunity and capacity to monitor turnout. Whether in cities or villages, communities are clustered tightly around schools, houses of worship, and market centers that serve practical purposes and provide social meaning to people’s lives. On election day, such locations also serve as polling precincts. Voting often requires long, public queuing, and area residents can – and do – observe who votes, even if individual ballot choice is secret. Moreover, voters’ fingers are often marked with ink. While inking has been employed to prevent fraudulent double-voting, this easy verification also facilitates monitoring efforts on election day and for days after.
Asserting strong expectations to vote in combination with the ability to monitor participation allows communities to solve the cooperation problem and achieve higher turnout by creating the perception that people should vote, and that those who do not will face sanctioning. Candidates and party agents certainly remain important for both mobilization and monitoring, but they improve these efforts by coordinating with other local, often informal, actors. And individuals certainly confront the possibility of other psychic and material incentives, but communities also apply a new type of incentive through social sanctioning to voters who might otherwise stay home.

By focusing on the social origins influencing individual behavior, we explore an extension of our theory specifically applied to countries suffering significant violent conflict: whether variation in social capital influences the degree of social sanctioning necessary to induce cooperation. Social capital, determined by community levels of trust and perceptions of reciprocity, shapes the degree to which coordination on community action – like voting – strengthens or attenuates. But perpetual fighting and political instability, characterizing the most vulnerable democracies, plausibly improves or degrades those levels of trust. Leveraging data from an active conflict setting, we postulate that where individuals express more trust in their neighbors, communities need not provide as many inducements to generate cooperative behavior compared to areas where trust is weaker. That is, more trusting individuals are more likely to vote in the absence of social pressure, whereas less trusting individuals require more pressure. In this way, violence and instability may play roles affecting participation in fragile democracies less as a result of their direct effect on voters’ behavior, and more from how trust mediates social sanctioning and cooperation in communities that experience ongoing conflict.

1.3 Testing the Argument

We explore electoral participation in contemporary emerging democracies. Decolonization in Africa and Asia, cycles of dictatorship and democratization in Latin America and Southern Europe, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War all catalyzed a so-called “third wave” of democratization across much of the developing world by the late twentieth century (Huntington 1993). This wave has continued into the twenty-first century due to factors such as violent regime change from foreign intervention or state collapse, the Arab Spring revolutions in the broader Middle East, and internationally supported state-building in weak states. Across these diverse settings, turnout certainly varies given the enormous challenges voters face, but it nonetheless persists. While our theoretical intuition reflects features that many developing countries
share, cases from third-wave African democracies (Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda) and a fragile state (Afghanistan) are especially pertinent to explaining the emergence of electoral participation and its social origins.

First, these countries broadly share many institutional and economic features, as well as social dynamics, that differentiate them from older, industrialized democracies. In the former, lacking sustained economic development, residents of many communities require public services to meet basic survival needs; the transition to democracy plausibly provides new channels. Voters frequently select leaders on the basis of expected distributive action, particularly with respect to local public goods. But because politicians face tight budgets, they often confront stark trade-offs regarding where to apply such spending to increase the likelihood of electoral victory. Unlike consolidated democracies or countries with class-based mobilization, voters in many third-wave democracies cannot align themselves with candidates or parties based on long histories of programmatic performance or ideological orientations; similarly, there are limitations to individualized rewards politicians can credibly deliver. This does not make programmatic actions impossible nor suggest patronage is altogether absent in new democracies, but it does indicate that they are not the only material considerations for voters – the extent and quality of local services also matter and form a basis on which to pick and judge leaders.

Second, in selecting recent democratizers that confront a variety of institutional weaknesses, our cases provide rich portrayals of local environments through which social sanctioning could operate. These include identifying the breadth and depth of an array of actors and mechanisms, which often predate democratic transitions, that support community-based collective action to assist citizens’ well-being. The density of social networks suggests capacity – latent or extant – that could be plausibly put in service of electoral aims. Considering the prevailing belief that the salience of ethnicity and pervasiveness of vote-buying largely determine electoral behavior in third-wave countries, ours are particularly suitable and “hard test” contexts to evaluate our predictions alongside alternatives. We also chose cases with prior sporadic histories or expectations of voter intimidation and/or election violence, and a fragile state where election attacks are frequent, the regime unstable, and there is ongoing conflict that may have eroded social capital. To further underscore participation’s social origins, the countries share plurality electoral rules but vary in party systems, since the number and types of parties affects turnout, at least to a degree, given the organizational strategies of formal political actors. However as we explain, our aim is not to leverage party system variation but rather to show that the social drivers of turnout can be found across institutional settings.
Last, our theory applies well in third-wave democracies because of how they administer elections, informed by our experiences observing them (including in our four country cases). Voting is a public act organized around area focal points that carry important political and social meaning in citizens’ lives. Beyond the hassle of long queues and communal nature of voting, finger inking allows turnout verification.\(^1\) Compared to industrialized democracies, community members can more easily and consistently monitor participation.

After unpacking our theoretical components in Section 2, we examine their empirical implications in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda in Section 3. We combine new quantitative survey data with other administrative, qualitative, survey, and ethnographic data to assess the plausibility and breadth of the role of social sanctioning alongside expressive ethnic voting, vote-buying, and violence across three party systems. Section 4 presents Afghanistan, whose democracy had been dangerous, hard-fought, and fledgling over the past two decades, before evaporating after the Taliban’s takeover in 2021. Afghanistan represents perhaps the hardest assessment of electoral participation in a weak and conflict-prone country of the type that is subject to twenty-first century state-building. Section 4 includes improvements to survey-based empirical measures from Section 3; Afghanistan also permitted an examination of legislative elections with no party system and investigation into how trust and social capital condition the effects of social sanctioning.

Section 5 generalizes and relates our findings to scholarship and policy on political behavior, campaigns, and elections in developing democracies, where representative institutions and electoral participation are newer, less studied, and voting costlier, relative to established democracies. It also expands on the role that the social origins of participation can play in conversations about growing concerns regarding global democratic backsliding.

2 A Theory of Social Sanctioning

2.1 Participation as a Problem of Collective Action

A pure cost–benefit analysis would suggest few reasons to vote, yet many people do, including and especially in emerging democracies. Scholars have focused on an individual’s expected utility calculation to weigh how variation in psychic and material factors change participation propensity.\(^2\) But such approaches may point

\(^{1}\) At least ninety countries mark voters with ink (Darnolf et al. 2020). Inking is particularly common in Africa, South/Southeast Asia, and the Middle East/North Africa, but less so in Latin America (Ferree et al. 2020), although some countries like Bolivia and Brazil allow checks of individual turnout from administrative records.

\(^{2}\) Adopting Riker and Ordeshook’s (1968) classic model of turnout calculus, psychic and material motivations can be modeled as parameters entering an individual’s utility function, with a positive
to low or high turnout, or a mix, depending on various individual and contextual factors. On balance, what ultimately pushes individuals to the polls?

To answer, we look at citizens who might consider staying home due to costs they may incur (e.g., time to queue, potential for violence). But departing from studies that focus on the decision to participate as solely arising from shifts in an individual’s utility resulting from changes to psychic or material payoffs, we locate our theory within an Olsonian collective action framework to examine participation’s social origins. Specifically, we are interested in the role that a previously overlooked type of selective incentives – social sanctions imposed by communities – play in generating turnout.

Our theory assumes that a citizen’s vote constitutes a personal investment in individual and collective goods. Communities better able to participate through voting are more likely to benefit from elected representatives. “Community” refers to the locale in which a person lives and the spatial designation for clustered voters with shared interests, including immediate and extended families and other area residents. Who and what constitute these environments is highly contextual and undoubtedly varying, even within countries; but such clustering often corresponds to how voters are distributed near polling centers – like schools, market centers, and houses of worship – in both cities and villages. These focal points provide both practical and social meaning to people’s everyday lives; on election day, they serve as polling centers. Because lawmakers legislate and distribute goods to locales (e.g., constituencies, districts) as rewards that will benefit some at the expense of others, turnout signals grassroots enthusiasm; without representation, a community receives little government largesse. Turnout therefore requires collective action.

Like all collective action problems, members enjoy shared goods whether they pay the personal cost to participate, creating incentives to free-ride on the contributions of others. Communities’ ability to impose negative incentives (social sanctions) to prevent free-riding is critical; as we demonstrate, accounting for individual- and community-level benefits can shift an individual’s utility and therefore behavior, but also the behavior of others.3 Because participation

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3 Distinguishing between individual and community is important because modeling voting as a problem of individuals’ utility maximization focuses on parameters that increase likelihood of turnout – like C, D, DI, or DE – that are act and not outcome contingent: individuals would