

RESEARCH INSIGHTS



Are Young Latin American Voters Politically Engaged?



Data on political engagement of newly eligible young voters in 34 countries during 2004-2016 indicate that voting eligibility is associated with higher political engagement, casting doubt on the view that voters are rationally ignorant.



Voting eligibility is associated with higher political interest, more discussion of political issues and attendance of political meetings, and more political knowledge. These effects are stronger in countries with enforced mandatory voting.



The increase in political engagement is larger closer to the prior election, and it is driven by the engagement of eligible voters, implying that young voters acquire political information in anticipation of elections rather than ex post.

CONTEXT

In democracies, citizens can vote to express their policy preferences by selecting policymakers that represent them, but to choose appropriately citizens need to learn candidates' positions and how the electoral process works. One prominent hypothesis asserts that voters may choose to remain "rationally ignorant," as the expected benefit of making an informed decision is very small due to the low chance that a single voter can change the outcome of an election. As young voters have historically voted at lower rates, we consider how much effort young citizens choose to exert to be informed participants in the democratic process and what factors can stimulate their political engagement.

PROJECT

The paper investigates young voters' level of political engagement in three dimensions: political motivation, political activities, and political knowledge. The main empirical challenge in this study is finding a comparison group that captures how these individuals would have behaved if ineligible to vote. To test how voting eligibility motivates voters to engage in political activities, and whether this translates into political knowledge, we focus on newly eligible voters surveyed after general elections. Some were eligible to vote in the most recent election, while others were not due to minimum voting age rules. The data come from the AmericasBarometer surveys covering 34 countries biannually between 2004 and 2016.

Key Concept



POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Social behaviors that indicate that the individual is informed and participates in the democratic process.

Key Concept



RATIONAL IGNORANCE

A deliberate choice to remain uninformed about political matters, based on a rational assessment of the cost and benefits of becoming informed.

RESULTS

The results show that voting eligibility increases young voters' self-reported interest in politics, an effect that appears with three different empirical strategies and holds up to a battery of robustness tests. Additionally, consistent evidence indicates that newly eligible voters also report talking about politics more frequently and attending political meetings more regularly than their non-eligible peers. Some evidence suggests that increased political socialization translates into increased political knowledge. Interestingly, however, there is no evidence that consumption of news is a mechanism for acquiring knowledge.

The data point to enforced mandatory voting laws as a potential factor in young eligible voters becoming more politically engaged. While the mechanism is not clear, and more research is needed to draw a more definite conclusion, this finding is consistent with arguments by political scientists that the act of voting itself stimulates other civic behaviors.

As the surveys were conducted at varying lengths of time after a general election, the paper exploits this feature of the data to study the dynamic element of becoming eligible. As expected, the gap in civic engagement between eligible and non-eligible is greatest at the time of the most recent election. The gap shrinks as the previously ineligible respondents become eligible and closes, on average, about four to five years after the election. This convergence is due to the previously ineligible group increasing their engagement levels to match the eligible group by the time the next election takes place.

Key Concept



POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Social activities related to elections, such as discussing political issues with others, participating in political events, or organizing political groups.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The evidence in this paper suggests that young Latin American voters do take advantage of their right to vote to engage politically. A potential policy measure to leverage this incentive is to make sure that most young citizens are aware of their newly acquired right to vote well in advance of the first election in which they can vote. Another is to reduce the costs of voting registration. Based on related research, behavior in the first election is critical to establishing a habitual pattern of voting and political engagement.

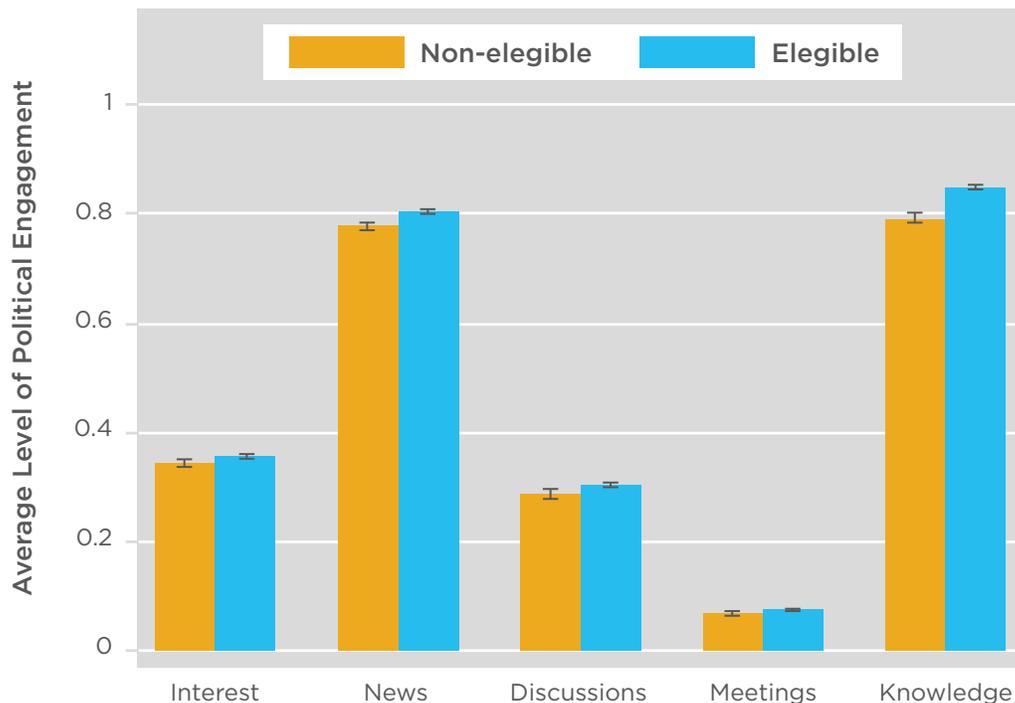
A possible threat to young voters' engagement is the recent declining trend in trust and satisfaction with democracy. A loss of trust in democratic institutions can undermine the behaviors identified in this paper, as young voters become alienated and disconnect from democracy or adopt extra-electoral modes of participation, such as protests and demonstrations. Elected officials can prevent these outcomes by upholding democratic institutions, guaranteeing the freedom of the press, and protecting fundamental civic liberties.

The analysis also points to mandatory voting as a possible mechanism for encouraging political engagement. While other research has found little impact of mandatory voting rules, our data suggest that, as long as these rules are being enforced properly, they can serve as a catalyst of political engagement. Many Latin American countries currently have mandatory voting provisions, but the degree of enforcement varies across countries.

IDB RESEARCH ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

This project was carried out at the IDB Research Department with data provided by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University.

Figure 1. Political Engagement by Voting Eligibility Status



Notes: Graph shows for each group of 18-25-year-old voters (eligible, non-eligible) the average level of political engagement across five dimensions: Political Interest, News Consumption, Political Discussions, Political Meetings, and Political Knowledge. Data are from AmericasBarometer surveys 2004-2016. Ranges at the top of the bars are 95% confidence intervals.



FULL STUDY

[Scartascini, C., and R. Vlaicu. 2018. "Civic Engagement in the Americas."](#)

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