

# Voter Turnout and Income Inequality in Latin America



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*The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For full text, please visit [https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate\\_honors\\_theses/m900nv68b](https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/m900nv68b)*

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to gain some insight into the age-old question: Why is there income inequality at all in our modern world? I narrow this question down into a sub-question that I can investigate: what is the effect of voter turnout on income inequality? I narrow my regional focus to Latin America and add a temporal focus to the years from 2000 to present. I theorize that higher voter turnout leads to decreased income inequality. This is because, as theorized by Lijphart (1996), low voter turnout is by and large a result of the people in low economic groups' failure to turn out to vote. Therefore, the alternate hypothesis of this thesis is that high voter turnout leads to more equal income distribution in Latin America from 2000 to present. I discover that I cannot reject my null hypothesis. There is not sufficient statistically significant evidence to believe that, based on a multivariate ordinary least squares regression analysis, increased voter turnout leads to increased income equality. This paper has implications for future researchers studying the effects of voter turnout in Latin America and for researchers interested in answering macroeconomic questions about this region.

## Introduction

Favelas in Brazil are neighborhoods that are ravaged by severe poverty. There are some favelas that are directly bordered by some of the

most expensive high-rise apartments complete with swimming pools, gardens, and tennis courts (see Appendix C). Why is there such a large difference between the rich and the poor in Latin America? There are countless potential reasons for high income inequality, but this paper examines the effect voter turnout has on income inequality.

The political science community has a longstanding understanding that there is a relationship between income inequality and voter turnout. Theoretical arguments, such as Lijphart's Presidential Address to the American Political Science Association (1996), provide a theory that higher voter turnout decreases income inequality. Lijphart argues that when turnout is low, it is due to an absence of people in low-income groups at the polls. Therefore, when turnout is high, more poor people turn out to vote and vote for candidates that will improve their economic standing. Boulding and Holzner (2020), however, find that in Latin America, one of the poorest and most unequal regions of the world, "poor people are just as politically active as more affluent individuals" (p. 98). The contradiction between these scholars is particularly interesting. This project empirically tests our current understanding of Latin American inequality and provides a quantitative ordinary least squares regression multivariate test of the effect of voter turnout on income inequality in Latin America.

I would like to understand the causes of

income inequality in Latin America, so I measure the impact of voter turnout on income inequality. I investigate the effects of voter turnout specifically because of the theory behind Arend Lijphart's Presidential Address to the American Political Science Foundation in 1996. In his address, Lijphart (1996) argues that "unequal turnout...is systematically biased against less well-to-do citizens" (p. 1). This is because unequal voter turnout usually means that those of a lesser economic position account for the missing votes. Therefore, if more low-income people voted, there would be less inequality because, according to the rational actor theory, they would vote for candidates that would improve their economic standing. An improvement in economic standing could be done with various political measures such as social welfare programs and tax benefits for the lower classes. Lijphart (1996) studies the United States for his conclusions presented in the Presidential Address, but I use the same principles and apply them to Latin America. I study Latin America specifically because it is an outlier in the world for high inequality and for high voter turnout. However, there is no significant relationship between voter turnout and income inequality in this region.

Based on Lijphart's Presidential Address (1996), one might conclude that a region as unequal as Latin America could significantly improve its income distribution by encouraging low-income individuals to turnout to vote. Boulding and Holzner (2020), however, find a different conclusion in Latin America. They find that when low-income people participate in community organizations, they participate in politics at high levels (Boulding & Holzner, 2020). This participation takes the form of political protest, contacting the government, and, most importantly for this project, voting. They argue that "community organizations help mobilize poor individuals both through the resources they

provide for mobilization and because they serve as sites where political parties target individuals for mobilization" (Boulding & Holzner, 2020, p. 98). Though Boulding and Holzner (2020) focus heavily on the effect of community organizations on political participation, their research has strong implications for this study. I study both work by Lijphart (1996) and by Boulding and Holzner (2020). Using an ordinary least squares regression test I find that there is no relationship between turnout and income inequality. This result, however, could be due to several causes that will be explored in depth later in this paper.

It is especially important to understand the determinants of income inequality in regions like Latin America because so many people live in poverty. In fact, 209 million people in Latin America live in poverty today (ECLAC, 2021). The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2021) explains that this is a result of the economic distress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, but this is an alarmingly high number of impoverished people. This project is important to political scientists and law makers so that they understand the reality of the Latin American experience and can explore effective solutions to widespread poverty in the region.

Other scholars such as Lijphart (1996), Boulding and Holzner (2020), Carreras and Castañeda-Angarita (2014), and Carey and Horiuchi (2017) explain voter turnout and inequality on different levels and for different countries, but this gap in the established literature validates the theoretical impact of this project and the importance of the results.

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